



WORD and SPIRIT COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

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Introduction

Authorship

Church tradition has always affirmed that the apostle Paul is the author of Colossians and Philemon, and even today Paul is universally viewed as the author of Philemon. Some scholars, however, have raised doubts about the authorship of Colossians, giving as reasons the different style (in Greek), vocabulary, and theology when compared to letters such as Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians. For example, some of Paul's favorite vocabulary terms, such as "law," are missing from Colossians. On the other hand, there are clear similarities between Colossians and Ephesians (for example, the language about "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" in Col. 3:16 // Eph. 3:19; the household code in Col. 3:18–4:1 // Eph. 5:21–6:9; the "mystery" [*mystērion*] in Col. 1:26–27; 2:2; 4:3 // Eph. 1:9; 3:3–4, 9; 5:32; 6:19), but some scholars also doubt whether Paul wrote Ephesians. Many insist that if Paul did not write these letters, the author was in the "Pauline circle" and likely knew Paul and/or the content of his other letters well.

Many scholars today do affirm Pauline authorship of both Colossians and Philemon, insisting that questions of style, vocabulary, and content should be evaluated with at least two factors in mind: scribes and context. First, it was typical in the ancient Mediterranean region, even for persons who could read and write, to use a scribe (also called an amanuensis) to write letters. Paul's letters contain references to scribes who helped with them, sometimes directly (in Rom. 16:22 Tertius says that he "wrote down this letter") and sometimes indirectly (Timothy is listed as a coauthor in both Col. 1:1 and Philem. 1, which could indicate his role as scribe).¹ Because scribes often were given permission to shape

1. Timothy is not listed as a coauthor in Ephesians.

letters rather than just copy what was dictated, it makes sense that, for Colossians, Timothy would have participated in the content, choice of vocabulary, and style.

Second, the context matters, as Paul is writing Colossians to a group of Christians in a specific place. Good communicators tailor their messages to different groups; they do not say the exact same thing in the same way every time. Paul, as a master contextualizer, would have had the wisdom and experience to shape the Letter to the Colossians (with Timothy's help, of course) in ways that made sense for people living in Colossae. It is also worth noting that Paul writes different letters at different points in his ministry, which means that the way in which he communicates ideas may have shifted a bit, depending on his own growth and exposure to new ideas. All of this means that Paul should still be seen as the author of Colossians. In fact, no one in the early church doubted the authorship of this letter.

Historical Context

Colossians and Philemon among the Prison Epistles

There are four New Testament epistles traditionally referred to as the Prison Epistles because they indicate that Paul was in prison while writing them. Prisons in the ancient Mediterranean world typically were not buildings (except in cases of house arrest [see Acts 28:30]) but rather were holes in the ground or caves that had been converted for such use. Prisoners were not often given food, water, or other supplies; they relied on family and friends for these necessities (see Matt. 25:36, 39). These sites also were used mainly as temporary holding places for prisoners awaiting official trial or punishment; they were not used as punishment in and of themselves (unlike their use in many contexts today). Prisons often were dark, smelly, and dangerous, as assault was common.

It is in such a place that Paul wrote both Colossians and Philemon (Col. 4:3–4, 18; Philem. 1, 9, 23); they are two of the four Prison Epistles, alongside Ephesians and Philippians (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; Phil. 1:12–14). Because Paul was in prison multiple times (2 Cor. 6:4–5; 11:23–27), there are questions about the location and timing for each of these letters. The traditional Christian view has been that all four were written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome in the early AD 60s, although other locations and dates have also been suggested, including Caesarea (Acts 23:33–26:32) and Ephesus (see 2 Cor. 11:23, written before the other imprisonments; also Acts 20:16; 1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8). This could push the date of writing for the letters earlier to the mid-to-early AD 50s.

Colossians and Philemon are often grouped and read together, at least partly because they address people who lived in the same city, Colossae. The city of



Colossae

Colossae is located in modern Türkiye, in the province called Asia Minor during the time of the New Testament. It appears to have been a fairly unremarkable ancient city in the first century AD, though its location in the fertile Lycus Valley was advantageous. Neighboring cities such as Laodicea and Hierapolis, along with Ephesus, eclipsed it in importance. At this point we have only historical descriptions as a basis for comparison, as the city of Colossae has not yet been excavated. The good news is that the archaeological work is scheduled to begin soon.

There was a significant earthquake in AD 60 in Colossae, and scholars thought for years that the city was destroyed and not rebuilt. If so, this would have affected the dating of the letters, as it would have given a firm end date. However, new evidence demonstrates that Colossae likely was restored.² The city had a substantial Jewish population, though the church addressed in the Letter to the Colossians appears to be primarily gentile/non-Jewish and uncircumcised (Col. 2:11, 13).

Philemon, the one addressed in the Letter to Philemon, is the master/owner of Onesimus, a slave (Philem. 16). In the letter, Paul appears to have been close friends with Philemon. The question is, then, whether the two letters were written at separate times or the same time. If the same time, they would have been sent together to Colossae. Is the slave Onesimus (if it is in fact the same Onesimus as in Philem. 10), along with Tychicus, bringing both letters (Col. 4:7–9), one of which tells slaves to obey their masters (Col. 3:22)—though stringent expectations are placed on masters as well with the command “provide your slaves with what is right and fair” (4:1)—while the other asks for Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother *rather than* as a slave (Philem. 16)?

2. Cadwallader, “Colossae.”

If Paul did indeed write Colossians, and did so before writing Philemon, then Onesimus would have carried the Letter to the Colossians first. Afterward Onesimus engages in some kind of problem or dispute with his master, Philemon (Philem. 11, 18). It is at that point that Paul pushes Philemon to respond differently to his slave, at least in terms of specific, personal instructions. If Philemon was written before Colossians, then Paul initially exhorted Philemon to welcome his slave Onesimus as a brother but then later reframed his comments regarding slavery in order to address a broader church—one that he did not know well and did not plant (Col. 1:7 [see comments there])—as his primary audience.³

My own view is that the exact dating and order of Colossians and Philemon do not matter all that much, as the specific recipients shape the argument in each letter. As just stated, Paul did not seem to know most people in the Colossian church very well, with a few exceptions. Philemon, whom Paul could have met in the neighboring city of Ephesus (where Paul did spend a lot of time [Acts 19:1, 8, 10, 21–22]), clearly was a close friend of Paul. In the context of that relationship Paul is able to speak very directly and even assertively regarding the situation with the slave Onesimus.

Primary Historical Issue: Slavery in the Ancient Mediterranean World

As already mentioned, slavery is a key historical issue for understanding both Colossians and Philemon. My primary context is the United States, which has its own history of slavery, but it is important to note that histories of slavery have both similarities and differences. The primary difference between the United States and the ancient Mediterranean world is that in the former slavery was racialized and based primarily on skin color, while in the latter it was not.

In Paul's context people became enslaved in a variety of ways. One was conquest, whereby one group conquered another and took slaves from their population. Another was debt, as people could sell themselves into slavery. This kind of slavery often was temporary, lasting until the debt was paid. Some people became slaves because they were kidnapped, including by pirates. Some children were born to slaves (and became slaves themselves), but some unwanted children also became slaves. Such children were abandoned, and slavers picked them up and raised them until they were old enough to be sold as slaves. Often the reason for abandonment was economic: children were more mouths to feed, which was challenging in a context where most people were simply trying to

3. Also, Paul stresses at the end of Philemon (v. 22) that he hopes to visit soon, which could indicate that this letter was written first. Paul seems to find a visit likely, whereas in Colossians a visit is not mentioned.

survive. Sometimes the reason was gendered, as boys often were preferred to girls. Sometimes disability was the reason. It was actually fairly common in the ancient Mediterranean world for *non-Jews* to kill or abandon unwanted infants; sometimes in major cities there were publicly known locations where people could leave children. Importantly, Jews and Christians were (in)famous in that world for opposing the practice of infanticide and child abandonment; their commitment to God's value on human life and humans as God's image bearers provided a different lens for viewing children.

In terms of similarities between slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world and in the United States prior to abolition,⁴ the main connection is that the institution of slavery was simply an everyday part of both contexts; it was a cultural norm in that many people seem to have assumed that it was simply how the world worked. In the Roman Empire the economy was built on it; that is true of other economies throughout history as well, of course.

In terms of percentage of population, perhaps 10–15 percent were enslaved in the outer edges of the Roman Empire and up to 30 percent in/near Rome itself. Everyone would have known a slave (or been enslaved themselves); there certainly were slaves in the church in Colossae, as Paul talks to them in Colossians (Col. 3:22–25 [see extended comments there]) and highlights the slave Onesimus in Philemon (vv. 10, 16). The distinction between slave and free was one of the most obvious in their context. People were separated into those who owned their own agency, labor, and sexuality, and those who did not because they were owned by someone else. This is another point of connection between ancient Mediterranean slavery and more recent versions, including in the United States. Many slaves (including male and female, young and old) were sexually abused by (male and female) masters, though both cultures often did not consider that to be abuse. Such sexual unions often produced offspring, and while slaves were not legally allowed to marry, many entered into informal unions with other enslaved people.⁵

In the Roman Empire some texts expressed opposition to extremely harsh treatment of slaves, but most ancient sources were not worried about what we (not they) would call abuse. Even the sources that opposed harsh treatment often gave as the reason protection of property (“property” as both the slaves themselves and the work that obedient slaves did to earn better profits for their

4. In the 1700s, most took slavery for granted in the United States, though not everyone did so, especially some Christians (including some Anglicans, Quakers, Methodists, and evangelicals). Their Christian conviction was the main reason slavery came to be seen as problematic in the United States.

5. For discussion of the complex relationships that enslaved people would have managed, see MacDonald, *Power of Children*.

masters) rather than the dignity and personhood of the slave. The most common cultural view was that slaves were inferior to free people both morally and intellectually.⁶

Slaves worked in every area imaginable, from acting as wet nurses and nannies, to agricultural laboring, to teaching, to managing. Some slaves owned other slaves, which indicates that there was stratification even within the slave population. Some slaves were relatively well educated (by or with the approval of their masters), whereas some were not. Sometimes enslaved people could find their freedom; masters sometimes manumitted slaves, though often there was still a cultural expectation that the former slave (now freedperson) would remain loyal and connected socially to their former master. The freedperson would then function as a client who owed honor (in the form of public praise or other public offerings) to the former master as the patron. Sometimes enslaved people could purchase their freedom.

Slavery in Colossians and Philemon

As the Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon make clear, enslaved people were part of the early church. The household code in Col. 3:18–4:1 contains instructions to slaves and masters (see detailed commentary there), and the Letter to Philemon discusses the enslaved man Onesimus (vv. 10, 16). The common view regarding Onesimus is that he was a runaway slave,⁷ but that is only one of the options. The situation is unclear because the letter itself does not explain the circumstances; Paul did not need to do so, of course, as he and Philemon and Onesimus all knew what had transpired.

If Onesimus was indeed a runaway slave, then he was in danger, both from the authorities (including slave catchers) and from his master if he returned. Public notices for runaway slaves often were posted; sometimes slaves were tattooed as evidence of ownership if they had run away and were recaptured. Severe punishments for disobedient slaves were expected and legal, though the possibility existed that a slave could seek legal protection from an overly harsh master. This matters because if Paul is sending a runaway Onesimus back to a potentially angry and shamed Philemon (Philem. 10–12, 18), Onesimus is being exposed to potential abuse or death. Many readers of the Bible have wondered

6. See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 220–21, including her sources.

7. This understanding goes back to the church father John Chrysostom, in the fourth century AD, in his *Homiliae in epistolam ad Philemonem*. Some scholars have doubted this option because it does not explain how Onesimus would have met Paul if Paul was in prison (and Onesimus was not). The answer might be as simple as a divine appointment, with Onesimus meeting or seeing a friend in the marketplace who was a Christian and knew Paul. The letter does not explain this background information; perhaps everyone already knew it.

about the justice of such an act. Should Paul have returned Onesimus if it endangered him, especially when slavery itself is unjust? This is a fair question in our contexts today, though Paul's context needs to be taken seriously as well. For example, there were penalties for harboring runaway slaves, so in this scenario Paul was also putting himself at risk.⁸

A second option is that Onesimus may not have been a runaway but instead have had some kind of conflict with his master, Philemon. Perhaps Onesimus was a manager in Philemon's business and made a poor financial decision. In this scenario Onesimus would have gone intentionally to find Paul and ask for his help in mediating the situation with Philemon; during the course of this interaction Onesimus became a Christian (Philem. 10). In this case Onesimus might not be in terrible physical danger if/when he returns to Philemon, and Paul's support of him (as evidenced through the Letter to Philemon) would encourage a positive reception. A related option is that Philemon sent Onesimus to help Paul in prison,⁹ and Onesimus became a Christian while there. In the letter Paul is encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus appropriately on his return and then send him back to help Paul (v. 11). This makes the question of debt a hypothetical rather than actual one (v. 18).

Two more options should be mentioned, though most scholars have not found these views to be persuasive. One is that the man Archippus—not Philemon—is the owner of Onesimus. Archippus is named along with Philemon and Apphia in the letter (Philem. 1–2), and in Colossians the church is instructed, “Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord’” (Col. 4:17 [see comments there]). This “ministry” could be the welcome (and possibly even the manumission) of Onesimus if Onesimus is his slave.¹⁰ The second minority view is that Philemon and Onesimus are in fact (blood) brothers involved in a dispute that is serious enough for one to be labeled a “slave” (Philem. 16); Paul is arguing in the letter for a full reconciliation between these brothers.¹¹

My own view is that the most important historical issue is not whether Onesimus was a runaway slave but rather the way in which Paul advocates for

8. There is also a question about how this text from Deuteronomy fits: “Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them” (Deut. 23:15–16 NRSV). This instruction is given to Israel, so the question is how it applies in a situation involving the church, where the boundaries between Israelites (like Paul) and non-Israelites (as apparently Philemon and Onesimus both were) have changed. For discussion, see Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 416.

9. Eric Barreto takes this view (“Philemon,” 615).

10. This view was made famous by Knox, *Philemon*.

11. See Callahan, “Paul’s Epistle to Philemon.”

someone who cannot return the favor. In a world where slavery is the status quo, both culturally and legally, how does a free person use their social capital for an enslaved person? A related question is whether Paul's advocacy was successful or not; this depends at least partly on the order in which we think the letters were written. If Philemon is first, is Onesimus's later arrival with the other letter (Col. 4:9) proof that Philemon did what Paul had asked? Also, the church father Ignatius, who died in the second century AD, mentions a man named Onesimus as the bishop of Ephesus.¹² If this is the same man, it indicates that Philemon was faithful in his response and even (apparently) manumitted his slave, who later became a leader in the church.

The church over the centuries has read the slavery texts in Colossians and Philemon in a variety of ways.¹³ In the early church the Letter to Philemon especially did not receive a great deal of attention; it was viewed as mundane and even unspiritual. Later, in contexts like the United States, these slavery texts were used by both pro- and antislavery advocates to argue for their positions,¹⁴ though pro-slavery authors often read biblical texts out of context (and appealed to secular sources like the Constitution), whereas antislavery authors discussed the ancient Mediterranean culture and pointed to the liberating trajectory of the Bible.¹⁵ For example, if we read the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, passed by the US Congress, we can hear the language that was shaped by Philemon, as it affirms that escaped slaves should be returned to their masters. Today scholars are reading Philemon and the slavery passage in Colossians more carefully than ever, contextualizing them with the best of what we know about ancient Mediterranean slavery and Paul's attempts to disciple people in the gospel.

Genre, Structure, Themes

The genre of both Colossians and Philemon is letter or epistle. There was a commonly accepted letter format in ancient Mediterranean culture that is largely followed by Paul, including in Colossians and Philemon. First, there are the introductory matters, which include the identification of the author(s) and audience, a greeting (typically Paul offers grace and peace), and a thanksgiving (to God and for the audience). Then the body of the letter follows; here it is important to pay attention to the development of Paul's argument. What is he

12. See Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*.

13. For a detailed and helpful summary of how the Letter to Philemon has been understood and used, see Williams, "No Longer as a Slave."

14. For many examples, see Bowens, *African American Readings*.

15. For details, see Keener and Usry, *Defending Black Faith*; Usry and Keener, *Black Man's Religion*.

saying and why? What is the issue or problem at hand, and how is Paul addressing it? Finally, Paul concludes with personal news, greetings, and a brief farewell that often functions as a benediction.

Colossians

Many have identified the heart of the Letter to the Colossians in the following verses: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Col. 2:6–7). Whether or not we see this as the heart of the letter, it is true that these verses contain key themes, including the focus on Christ, the need to stay rooted in him, and the practice of thankfulness.

The need to stay rooted is connected to the problem of false teaching and practices, as most of Col. 2 makes clear. Nowhere does Paul give a comprehensive description of who the false teachers are and exactly what they are teaching, but there are clues in the letter. There are elements that are Jewish in origin (as the comment about Sabbath in 2:16 makes clear), but other aspects could just as easily be non-Jewish. For example, some gentiles also stressed fasting practices in various religious settings (2:21–23). The church as a whole appears to be predominantly gentile, in fact (see 2:11, 13, and note the references to circumcision).

In other words, there appears to be a syncretism at work in the church that is combining various elements. We do not know of any overall system or religion that exactly matches this description, but that may be due to the fact that the city of Colossae has not yet been excavated. In light of the Jewish elements, we need to be careful here not to be anti-Semitic. Paul is a Jew, just like Jesus, and any critique of Jewish elements does not mean that he is excluding or demeaning his entire ethnic group. Rather, his argument is that Christ offers fullness and the true reality (2:9–10, 17), which means that Jesus ushers in the final goal and purpose for the world. This good news or gospel, then, is distinctly Jewish, as Paul argues throughout his letters.

The main themes in Colossians all respond to the false teaching by reinforcing this Jesus-shaped hope, with a primary theme being Christ’s cosmic fullness or even supremacy, in both creation and the renewal of creation (see especially 1:15–20, a highly developed Christology). This includes Christ’s defeat of the powers (2:15), which should shape the way that Christians live (3:1–4:6). The emphasis on Christian behavior and lifestyle is important here because it shows that the beauty of Christ’s work is already accomplished in one sense (this is called “realized eschatology”), but it is still awaiting final fulfillment in another sense (as it

needs to be lived, not just assented to). Many scholars have argued that Colossians teaches primarily a realized eschatology, and this may be true in the first half of the letter. However, the second half demonstrates that God's restorative project for the world—what Paul calls the gospel—is inaugurated but not yet completely finished.

Philemon

The primary theme of Philemon is also connected to the gospel as God's restorative project for all of creation. Here, however, that project is filtered through the relationships between Paul, a master named Philemon, and his slave Onesimus. Here God's plan to (re)create a human family through Jesus—where all are brothers and sisters (Philem. 16)—must not simply be accepted intellectually but be embodied. The cost of discipleship was high for an ancient Christian slave owner, and the cost is high for Paul as well, as he risks his friendship with Philemon in order to urge him to participate more fully in the kingdom of God through the way that he welcomes and treats Onesimus.

Narrative and Theological Relationship to Paul's Letters and the Entire Bible, for Ancient Colossians and for Us Today

The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon contribute powerfully to a broader understanding of the Bible. Like the rest of Paul's letters, they rely on an understanding of the Old Testament and how Israel fits into God's plan to restore creation,¹⁶ as they see Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of this plan. Jesus is thus the hinge of God's kingdom reality. In Colossians the focus is cosmic (as in Ephesians, a sister letter to Colossians that aligns in structure and content); in Philemon the focus is on the relationships between three individuals. More specifically, in both letters Paul does what he always does: discipleship. His task in this way is consistent, as again and again he works with real people in real life, persuading them to adopt a posture toward *the gospel as truly good news* that reshapes how they live their lives. These early Christians are in different places in their walks of faith, which is at least partly why Paul's directions to them are not identical. The instructions to slaves and masters in Colossians are different than what Paul encourages the master Philemon to do with his slave Onesimus (Col. 3:22–4:1; Philem. 16), but the goal is the same: move them forward, toward greater confidence and maturity, in Jesus.

16. This is true even if there are few direct references to the Old Testament in these letters. Subtle references do not necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge; rather, they can indicate a depth of knowledge, as an allusion will be caught by those who know the material well.

And what is our posture toward the gospel? Are we living as if God's restorative plan, with Jesus at the center of it, is truly good news? Is it reshaping our lives, our discipleship? Put differently: Are we hearing what the Spirit is saying to us through the text? Are we able to make the connection between what the Spirit said to Paul's audience and what that means for us today? Are we honoring the reality that the Spirit inspired Paul to speak to these ancient people first, and that the Spirit's message to us must be aligned with that ancient truth? All biblical books are shaped by their first contexts, of course. We are not the first of God's people, but we can and should see ourselves in the stories of discipleship that have preceded us in our sacred texts. The Spirit wants us to hear well so that we can walk forward, toward greater confidence and maturity, in Jesus.

Outline

Colossians

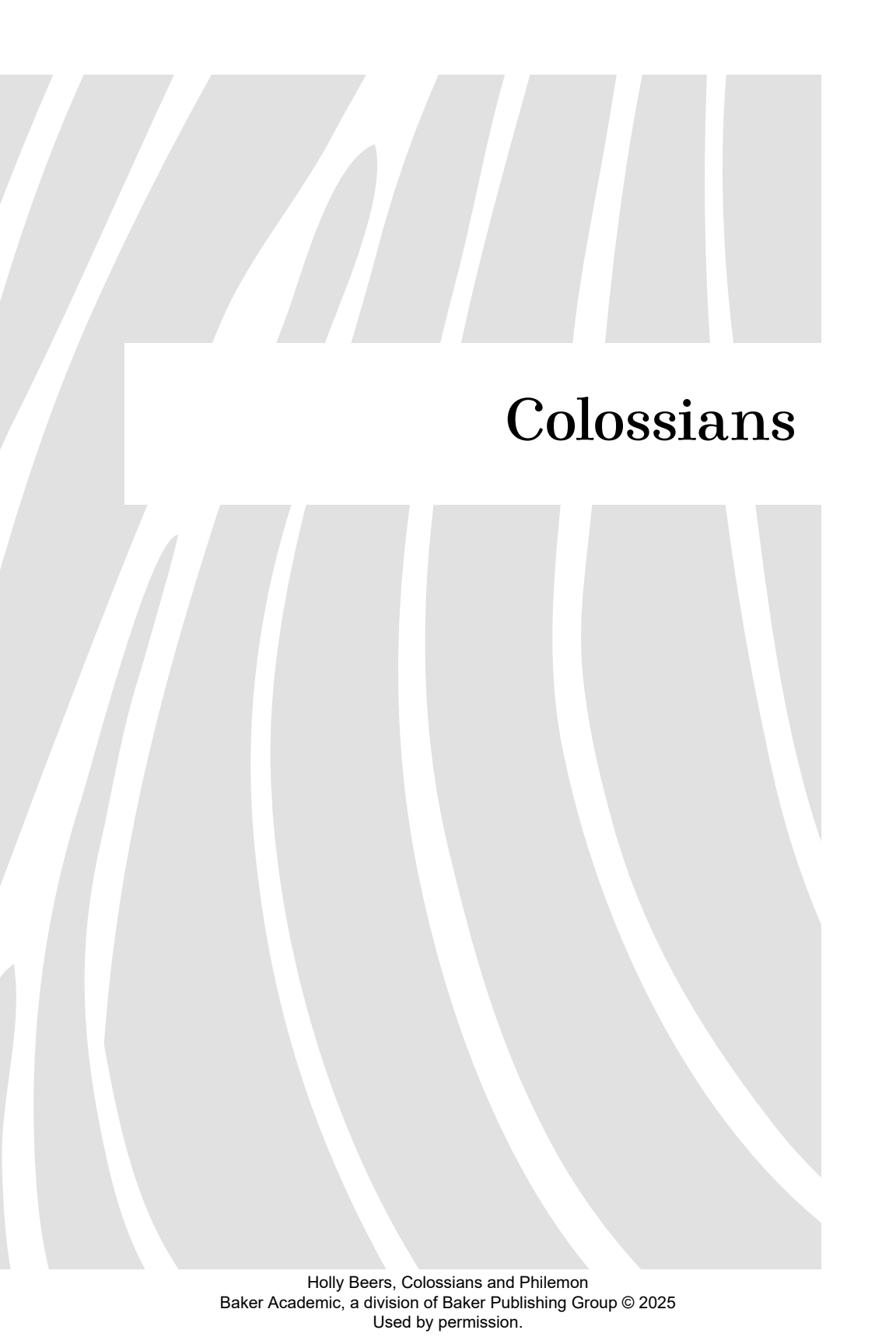
1. Greeting the Colossians (1:1–2)
2. Thanksgiving to God and praise for the Colossians (1:3–8)
3. Casting the vision for the reality of what is true in Christ (1:9–3:4)
 - A. Rescue and inheritance through Christ (1:9–14)
 - B. Christ as creator and redeemer of creation (1:15–23)
 - C. The mystery of Christ revealed to us (1:24–2:7)
 - D. Fullness in Christ as a challenge to idolatry (2:8–3:4)
4. Embodying the reality of what is true in Christ (3:5–4:6)
 - A. Resisting vices and embodying virtues (3:5–17)
 - B. Embodying Christ in the household (3:18–4:1)
 - C. Embodying Christ in the world (4:2–6)
5. Final greetings and blessing (4:7–18)

Philemon

1. Greeting Philemon and the church (vv. 1–3)
2. Thanksgiving to God and praise for Philemon (vv. 4–7)
3. Paul's appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8–22)
4. Final greetings and blessing (vv. 23–25)

Recommended Resources

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Colossians

COLOSSIANS 1:1–2

Greeting the Colossians

Colossians 1:1 begins in a manner typical of ancient Mediterranean letters, including Paul's own. Paul mentions himself as author, and then he includes his coworker Timothy as a dual author, which could indicate that Timothy was the secretary, having written the letter down, though he may also have contributed to some of the content. Timothy is listed as a coauthor with Paul elsewhere (2 Cor. 1:1 [see also v. 19]; Phil. 1:1 [see also 2:19]; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1), and beyond his role as author, Timothy is clearly a key coworker of Paul (Rom. 16:21; 1 Thess. 3:2 [see also v. 6]; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2), and he appears in numerous places in New Testament texts, often alongside others who labor for the gospel.¹ Acts describes Paul's first encounter with Timothy when Timothy joins the Jesus-movement (16:1–3), and Timothy remains a close part of Paul's circle throughout the New Testament.

These many references illustrate a key point regarding Paul's life and ministry that remains relevant today: he is not a lone ranger. His work as apostle and missionary is not a solo task but rather is undertaken within a team framework. The few instances where Paul is alone, such as in Acts 17 in Athens, are temporary and exceptions (due to persecution). The dangers of solo leadership today are well known, especially the lack of accountability and support, and Paul's example reminds us that even authors of New Testament books understood that God values communal leadership. This is consistent with the rest of the New Testament, which sees even local, permanent church leadership as group-oriented

1. See Acts 16:1; 17:14–15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:2; Heb. 13:23.

rather than singular.² The example often cited from 1–2 Timothy, where Timothy himself is understood by many to be the singular leader of the church, overlooks the way in which Paul describes Timothy's time in Ephesus as temporary. It is the local elders who will remain in Ephesus long after Timothy has departed (1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:9). The same is true for Titus (Titus 1:5; 3:12). This fits well with the broader picture of mutuality and service among followers of Jesus in the New Testament, who are to teach and warn one another (Col. 3:16) and address questions and issues in their local assembly together, as a group (for example, 1 Cor. 5:4–5; 11:17–14:40).

All of this raises questions for the ways in which many Christian leaders today operate. Even if there is a board of elders or leadership team in place, in reality one leader often dominates or greatly underutilizes the team that God has put in place around them. From a cultural perspective it may make sense, as the president or CEO of a business may operate similarly, but the people of God are not (primarily) a business when they gather. Many church leaders today are missing an opportunity to resist the cultural priority on individual leadership by embracing the biblical model of team leadership. It may be messier and less efficient, but the preference for efficiency may be more cultural than biblical. After all, collaboration exists even within the Trinity, as the Father, Son, and Spirit work together. Those of us in churches that focus on the Holy Spirit should and must find ways to live this biblical truth consistently, for the Spirit empowers not just a singular leader but all of God's people.

Paul describes his apostleship as coming about **by the will of God** (the same language appears in 2 Cor. 1:1). Some may understand this as highlighting Paul's superiority or authority, especially because Timothy is not described as an apostle. However, Paul's apostleship is an ongoing source of humble gratitude for him, an act of grace that is not deserved (1 Cor. 15:8–10). He is an apostle not by his own choice but by the gift of God's will; this shapes his life powerfully, including his many experiences of suffering because of it (for example, 2 Cor. 11:23–30). He likely adds the language of "God's will" here because he has not personally planted the church in Colossae, or even visited that community yet, though they likely would have heard of him because of his extended time in Ephesus, about 150 miles away. As he communicates with these brothers and sisters in Christ, he highlights the reality that God chooses apostles (beginning with the Twelve in the Gospels [see, for example, Mark 3:14]) and that the apostolic task is at least partly to communicate for and represent Christ, as Paul does in his many letters.

2. See, for example, Acts 14:23; 5:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5–7; Heb. 13:7, 17; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5.

Those of us in churches that focus on the Holy Spirit often see the apostolic gift as continuing today, and there is solid biblical evidence to support this view. While some have attempted to limit the gift to the twelve apostles and Paul, the New Testament itself extends the boundaries for who can be and is an apostle. For example, Barnabas is called an apostle in Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Cor. 9:5–6. Andronicus and Junia (a woman!) are identified as apostles in Rom. 16:7. Apollos is included as an apostle in 1 Cor. 4:6–9; and many seem to be included as apostles in 1 Cor. 15:7, as “all the apostles” appears to be a different group from the Twelve mentioned in verse 5. James, Jesus’s brother, is called an apostle in Gal. 1:19. Silas and Timothy are included as apostles in 1 Thess. 2:6 (see 1:1 for the identity of the “we”).

The point here is that apostleship clearly extends beyond the Twelve and Paul. Some opponents of this view have argued that *the* criterion for apostleship is that one has to have seen the risen Lord, because of what Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:1: “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?” It is more likely, however, that these are separate questions, not all qualifications of apostleship.

Also, in Acts 1:22 the qualification for the apostle to replace Judas is that he must have been with the disciples since Jesus was alive, “beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” This was true for the Twelve, but if this were the key criterion for apostleship more generally, even Paul would not have qualified. In other words, various criteria are given, and it is unclear how and whether all of the people actually called apostles in the New Testament actually fit the criteria. Because of the way in which apostleship seems to open up, to include a group that is less and less exclusive, and because it is included as a gift in lists that contain other gifts still operating today (see 1 Cor. 12:27–31; Eph. 4:11), those of us who emphasize the Holy Spirit often see the trajectory itself as the point: there were twelve apostles at first, but after the gift of apostleship was established, it expands to include many, many others even today, including women. The work of apostles is never described comprehensively in the New Testament, though those who are called apostles after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus appear to travel often, with the goal of such itinerant ministry being to envision how the gospel can find rootedness in a new context and then implement that vision. They are, at the very least, those whose Spirit-inspired gifts include the creativity to see how the restorative work of the kingdom of God can shape a new city or province and then begin that important kingdom work. In other words, the apostolic gift is at its core a *gift* offered in service to God and God’s kingdom and not primarily about power. This should caution us against abuses of power by those who claim to be apostles today.

In good form for ancient Mediterranean people, next Paul specifies the audience of the letter in Col. 1:2. He calls the Colossian Christians **holy** (*hagios*) and **faithful** (*pistos*). Both designations recall both God and the people of God in the Old Testament (for example, Exod. 22:31; Ps. 101:6), and both stress that such people *belong to* God and are dedicated to God's purposes. They thus should be faithful to God rather than to worldly leaders (such as the emperor Nero). What is most significant here is that Paul is using these descriptions for a church that appears to be largely non-Jewish rather than Jewish. Adopting Jewish language for the people of God formed in Christ, Jew and gentile, is a provocative and powerful statement regarding their identity, tying these new followers of Jesus into the larger story of the Bible and God's formation of a people to call his own. The divide between Jew and gentile is the primary ethnic and/or racial tension in the New Testament, appearing again and again across the books. The New Testament authors agree that gentiles are now included fully in the people of God *as gentiles* (without needing to convert to Judaism), and the ensuing tensions stem from the clash of various cultural and ethnic identity issues. But also, again and again, including in Colossians itself, the New Testament authors insist that these new churches must work through the tension rather than ignore it. They must learn to discern where to give space to those who are different from them racially while also resisting the easier and more efficient solution of separating into different groups on the basis of ethnic background and cultural practice.

Texts like this speak powerfully to our context(s) today. Christian unity must be maintained in local communities across differences of race and culture. Such

PENTECOSTAL INTEREST

The Multiethnic Reality of Holiness at Azusa Street

The modern pentecostal movement in the United States was birthed in the first decade of the twentieth century. Its gestation included various holiness groups and preachers coming together in revival meetings at Azusa Street in Los Angeles. William J. Seymour was a key Black leader, though the racial makeup was not just Black and white. The November 1906 edition of *The Apostolic Faith* writes, "Bro. and Sister Lopez, . . . who are filled with the Holy Ghost, are being used of God in street meetings and in helping Mexicans at the altar at Azusa street."^a

a. *The Apostolic Faith* 1, no. 3 (November 1906): 4.

unity comes at a cost for everyone, as no ethnic group, even the most dominant, can then assert its cultural standards as primary. This may include the choices of music, of preaching style, of food and drink (including when to fast), of when and how to celebrate festivals (see, for example, Col. 2:16–23 and the comments there). Jesus unites us; that is the central point. We learn to sacrifice and compromise and respect racial difference even (or especially?) when it is hard to do so on points that are not central to the gospel.

Paul describes the Colossians as being **in Christ** (1:2; see also 1:27 and comments there). At the very least this describes a deep union between Christ and his followers. Paul also calls the Colossians **brothers and sisters** (1:2). The Greek word *adelphos* here can be used to describe both men specifically and mixed groups of women and men, as the evidence from this time period demonstrates. When Paul writes to churches, it is clear that he is using the language to refer to mixed groups, as he often addresses women generally in a passage and sometimes even names women specifically, like Nympha in Col. 4:15. Because of this, the sense is **brothers and sisters**; Jesus, as their older brother the Son, has made them into one family. Neither race nor gender separates them; Jesus unifies them. Many charismatic and pentecostal contexts attempt to take this point seriously when they refer to fellow Christians as brothers and sisters. My coeditor for this series, Craig Keener, routinely signs his emails to me with “your brother, Craig.” Sometimes he even calls himself my big brother—a valid point, as he is older than I! I respond with the parallel “your sister, Holly.” This understanding of family, as determined primarily by Jesus and not the typical markers, finds its basis in the Gospels, as Jesus redefines the notion of family (for example, Matt. 12:46–50). Early Christians like Paul adopted that framework and started to call all kinds of people brothers and sisters, including Jews and non-Jews, slaves and free people. The opportunity for us today is not simply to use the label but rather to live as if we are truly family. In healthy families members sacrifice for one another; they share resources; they respect and speak the truth; they forgive. My husband and I attempt to live this way in our primary Christian community, which is our church small group. We offer childcare, and my husband fixes toilets and sinks. We challenge, when appropriate, in the context of committed friendships. We forgive when hurt comes, as it always does in long-term relationships. May our churches today become known for the way that we engage in our Jesus-family. What a testimony that would be to a watching world!

In his greeting Paul also extends **grace** (*charis*) and **peace** (*eirēnē*).³ A common Mediterranean greeting was simply “greetings,” but in his letters Paul moves

3. Although the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Colossians include only **from God our Father** here, the Textus Receptus (the basis of the KJV) and some others add “and the Lord

beyond the status quo to grace and peace, which for him are always tied to what God has done in and through Jesus. Grace is undeserved favor, and peace in this framework moves beyond just personal peace with God to include also the larger dimensions of interpersonal and even communal/corporate harmony in tune with the rest of the nonhuman creation, such as the fields and the rivers, as in the Hebrew understanding of *shalom* (see also 3:15; Num. 6:24–26).

Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God includes all of these aspects as well, from the individual to the entire created order. Those in Spirit-filled traditions have often emphasized the individual aspects of the Spirit's empowerment and indwelling to the neglect of the larger realities, but the time is ripe for a broader engagement with how wide and how far peace may in fact extend. Our world is desperate for a message of hope that includes not just a single person's experience of God but also the restoration of broken communities and even of creation itself.

Jesus Christ" (see the marginal reading in the NIV). This phrase probably was added to conform to Pauline usage elsewhere.

COLOSSIANS 1:3–8

Thanksgiving to God and Praise for the Colossians

The next section is the thanksgiving, another typical feature of letters in this time. After the thanksgiving, an author often commented on a pressing issue, which means that Col. 1:3–14 is helpful in framing some important topics in Colossians. Whereas other ancient Mediterranean people might thank various gods, Paul and Timothy appropriately direct their thanks to **God** (v. 3). Their thanksgiving is also connected to the prayers that Paul and Timothy (**we**) pray for the Colossian followers of Jesus. Paul and Timothy **always thank God when they pray for** the Colossians.¹ The specific reason for this thankfulness is given in the next verse: the Colossians' **faith in Christ** and their **love for all** other Christians (v. 4). The NIV translates this last phrase as **all God's people**, though the Greek word is the same as that in verse 2: "holy ones" or "saints" (*hagios*) (compare NRSV; see comments on 1:2). In other words, there is a shared identity among Christians; all are "holy ones" and thus are deeply connected to one another.

The label "holy ones" does not mean that followers of Jesus are fine as they are; the intentional path of discipleship means that this identity needs to be embraced through lifestyle choices in an ongoing way, as Paul will describe later in the letter (for example, 3:1–4:6). Said differently, God's people are holy

1. It is also worth noting that prayer in the New Testament is typically directed to the Father through the Son. This means at the very minimum that followers of Jesus can approach the Father as Jesus did. At a very early stage, however, Christians began praying not just to the Father but to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, which makes sense if Jesus and the Spirit are also God alongside the Father. See, for example, Paschke, "Early Christian Documents."

because God sets us apart for himself, but we also must act in ways that demonstrate that we are set apart for God and God's purposes. Paul typically casts a vision (more of a "theoretical/theological" move) first in his letters before later giving details about how such a vision may be lived (more of a "practical/discipleship" move).

At least part of the function of the label "holy ones" is to guard against the Colossians developing a superiority complex; they are part of the group of "holy ones," but only part. Others legitimately belong as well, even across areas of difference that may be racial/ethnic, economic, cultural, or otherwise. The same is true today, and the challenge may be especially sharp for those in charismatic or pentecostal traditions because of the legacy of marginalization that many have experienced by other wings of the church.² In response to such slights many in Spirit-oriented contexts have reversed, or attempted to reverse, the marginalization by treating noncharismatic Christians as lesser. Perhaps the time has come when more and more in the global church will embrace other followers of Jesus well, creating a new and bigger center and reducing or eliminating the size of the margin. This does not mean that significant areas of disagreement are ignored; it does mean that forgiveness and respectful conversation oriented toward understanding are paramount. How we treat one another as Christians is a powerful witness to a watching world, and it is sad that we have often squandered our opportunities to demonstrate Christian love to other holy ones. Love in the New Testament typically is characterized not by emotions or feelings but by sacrifice and commitment, and its goal is redemptive, in moving us toward God's purposes. It is this to which the Colossian Christians and Christians today are called.

The combination of thanks (to God) while praying for others also gives much to ponder. First, prayer for other Christians, including those whom we may not know personally (as Paul does not know many of the Colossians personally), is important. And such prayer, for Paul and Timothy, includes thanks to God. These two other-centered aspects to prayer can and should challenge much self-centered prayer in our own contexts. The thanksgiving to God is stimulated by what Paul and Timothy have heard about the Colossians' **faith** (in Christ) and **love** (for others) (v. 4). The noun "faith" (*pistis*) can have the sense of belief, trust, or faithfulness. Here it extends beyond mere belief at least to trust,³ for the Colossians have already been described with the related adjective "faithful" (*pistos*) in verse 2. Faithful people live what they believe; they respond to those they trust with appropriate behavior. In this way many Spirit-filled traditions

2. See, for example, Wacker, *Heaven Below*, chap. 12.

3. McKnight, *Colossians*, 92.

are correct in emphasizing holiness, or faithful living, as a marker of participation in God's people.

In verse 5 faith and love are said to be grounded in hope, the **hope** that is **stored up** in heaven.⁴ In other words, this hope is the basis for the ways in which they trust Jesus (faith) and love all the holy ones. This hope is sturdy, not flimsy, at least partly because it is stored **in heaven**. The word “heaven” (*ouranos*) is used in the New Testament in two main ways: for what we today would call the sky and as a description of God's dwelling place, God's sphere. The latter is the point here, for God is safeguarding this hope, defined in the rest of verse 5 as what they have **already heard in the true message of the gospel**. The “gospel” (*euangelion*, the base of our word “evangelism”), or good news, is what God has accomplished through Jesus, which includes the grace and peace mentioned earlier but is not limited to them. More broadly, in Paul's time the language of “gospel” was used by heralds as they brought “good news,” including when they announced that a new Roman emperor had taken the throne. Emperors such as Nero proclaimed that their gospel would unite the world under Roman culture and law.

This good news is **bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world** (1:6; see also v. 10). Agricultural metaphors are common in ancient Mediterranean culture, including in the Old Testament, such as in God's instructions to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen. 1:28) and when Israel's fruitfulness was a sign of their obedience to God.⁵ The culture of the Roman Empire used similar imagery as part of its claim that the fertility and the abundance that it provided were good news for the people under its rule. Here again emperors such as Nero claimed to be the ones who inaugurated a new age or kingdom. In line with what Paul and Timothy have already stated, the bearing of fruit is likely a reference not simply to belief but to a deeper trust that shapes behavior.

The **whole world** here is a common ancient reference to the broader Mediterranean and the Roman Empire, though obviously the good news is truly a global reality in the twenty-first century. This text offers an example of a figure of speech that must be properly understood. Taking the **whole world** language literally rather than from the perspective of an ancient Mediterranean person is to misunderstand Paul's reference point. At the same time, however, we can celebrate today the ever-growing global growth of the gospel.

The Colossians have **truly understood God's grace** (1:6). This true understanding is likely anticipating some of Paul's warnings about false teaching

4. For the connection of faith, hope, and love elsewhere, see 1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8.

5. See, for example, Isa. 5:1–7; 27:6; 37:31; Jer. 3:16; 23:3; Ezek. 36:11.

that occur later in the letter, and the notion of grace is what they now fully understand (also v. 2). Beyond the idea of undeserved favor, in ancient Mediterranean culture grace carried with it the connotation of a gift. In other words, God has graced/gifted Jesus (and what he offers through the

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Defining the Gospel

In the Old Testament the verb *euangelizō* (compare the noun *euangelion*, “gospel”) is used in the Greek translation of Isaiah to indicate the proclamation of the good news that God was restoring his people and bringing the kingdom (see Isa. 40:9; 52:7; 61:1). The good news of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus is the reality that, in and through Jesus, God is inaugurating a time of restoration. Many Jews expected that when God finally brought the kingdom, it would happen very quickly. Jesus’s inauguration, a term that means that the kingdom has begun but is not yet finished, was demonstrated through the entire “Christ event”: Jesus’s life and ministry (including his healings, exorcisms, feedings, acts of justice, teaching, etc.), death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit. All of these are signs that God’s final plan of restoration has begun. The challenge for followers of Jesus, from the first century to the twenty-first century, is to navigate the reality that the age of brokenness and sin is still present, but at the same time the kingdom of God has been inaugurated. Both brokenness and restoration are present, and we are called as God’s people to participate in the restorative project of God’s kingdom whenever possible until it is finished. The tension here leads many Christian traditions to overemphasize one aspect—brokenness or restoration—to the near exclusion of the other. In Spirit-filled contexts there can be a tendency toward overrealized eschatology, or the notion that full restoration now is always God’s will. This can be seen when Christians insist that everyone should be physically healed now, for example. The New Testament insists, however, that full restoration of everything broken will occur only at Jesus’s second coming.

This gospel hope, embedded in what Jesus has done, is secure, and thus it stimulates the trust and sacrificial actions (as the “love”) of the Colossians. The question must be asked: Is the security of our hope enabling us to trust in Jesus and our sacrifice for other holy ones today? Do we really value what Jesus has done and will do when the kingdom of God is completed and final reconciliation is accomplished?

inaugurated but not yet completed kingdom of God) to the Colossians. Gifts typically were thought to be deserved or owed to someone; what is compelling here is that the gift is undeserved. However, gifts were also reciprocal; if a gift was given and accepted, an appropriate response was expected, even necessary, for the continuation of the relationship. In other words, a gift given in Paul's day definitely had strings attached.⁶ In Paul's letters the appropriate response—the strings attached—to God's gift in and through Jesus includes a lifestyle of following Jesus and becoming more like him (as disciples of teachers were expected to do), a topic that Paul will explore further in chapters 2 and 3.

The day the Colossians **heard** the good news is the day that **Epaphras** shared it with them (1:7). We hear of Epaphras only in Colossians and Philemon (Col. 1:7; 4:12; Philem. 23). He is the one who shared the gospel with the Colossians, which means that he helped to plant the church. Epaphras is clearly another coworker of Paul. He is compellingly described with “slave” language in a way that links him to Paul and Timothy. Though often translated as **fellow servant**, the Greek word *syndoulos* can be translated as “fellow slave,” and in an ancient Mediterranean context, where slavery was a constant reality, the point would be powerful, as slaves were owned by others (for more discussion, see the comments on slavery in the introduction). Paul uses “slave” language elsewhere to describe his own labor for God,⁷ and he argues that everyone is a slave to something or someone (for example, Rom. 6:16, 19; this is also relevant for understanding the “redemption” language in Col. 1:14).

It is popular to talk about “servant leadership” today, and many would use this term to describe their own leadership, or at least for a reality they hope to embody. Because many of us do not live in contexts where we witness the daily realities of slavery, the language is not as meaningful or challenging. How might ministry be shaped if we truly lived as if we were owned not by ourselves but by God? How would we treat those around us, including family, church, and broader community? How would we speak or teach? How would we spend our time? Our money? How might we share, rather than hoard, power if it is not really ours anyway? What impulses toward fame would be curbed if the charismatic leader truly was a slave to God?

6. See Barclay, “Gift Perspective.” He explains, “Neither gifts nor the unexpected returns can be compelled (by law or force) without ceasing to be gifts, but they do carry expectations of reciprocity and usually are surrounded by moral sanctions (e.g., social disapproval of the ungrateful recipient)” (222). In other words, this critiques any view we might hold of “cheap grace” that allows us to live however we wish as Christians.

7. See Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1. Tychicus is described as a fellow slave in Col. 4:7.

Epaphras is also a **faithful minister**, *diakonos* (v. 7). *Diakonos* is the basis of the modern word “deacon” and can also be translated as “minister, servant, assistant, intermediary.” Epaphras told Paul and Timothy about what is happening in Colossae, including the dangers of the false teaching (which will be addressed later) and the **love** that the Colossians have **in the Spirit** (v. 8). The actual word “Spirit” (*pneuma*) appears only rarely in Colossians, though the Spirit’s presence and empowerment are often implied, as it is the Spirit’s work in us that enables us to live as God designed us to live.⁸ While the focus is on Christ in Colossians, for Paul, the Son and the Spirit are closely related.⁹ The love that the Colossians have **in the Spirit** is probably best understood as “love empowered by the Spirit,” a common Pauline notion.¹⁰ Even secular culture today encourages its citizens to love one another, but the New Testament argues that such sacrificial living is truly possible only when God’s Spirit sustains it (for example, Gal. 5:16–26); no other power, meditative practice, or act of self-will is able to do so. In other words, humans, on our own power, cannot love the way that we are called to love. When we pray, could we ask the Spirit of God to empower us not only to love well but more generally to live well? In other words, could we ask the Spirit to help us see what we might otherwise miss if he does not prompt us to notice it, and then to help us participate in what God is doing in that space? Even if it costs us? And it usually will.

8. For example, Gordon Fee sees the Spirit as enabling the “power” language in 1:11, 29 (*God’s Empowering Presence*, 637–38, 643–45).

9. Also helpful are the many references to the Spirit in Ephesians, which is the sister letter of Colossians and thus shares a great deal of structure and content.

10. See, for example, Wintle and Nicholls, *Colossians and Philemon*, 33; Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 638–39.