

BIBLE STUDY GUIDES: READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE MESSAGE

A SERIES OF NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

By Bob Young

COLOSSIANS

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PREFACE TO THE SERIES

A number of factors have converged in my life as influences on my method of Bible study and Bible teaching. My undergraduate training in Bible and biblical languages served as the basic foundation for 25 years of full-time preaching ministry. During those years in ministry, I took some graduate coursework in an effort to stay fresh.

When I decided to pursue graduate education, I already loved teaching from an exegetical viewpoint while paying special attention to the historical-cultural context and the grammatical-syntactical features of the text. I had seen the healthy way in which people respond to thoughtful efforts to explain and apply the message of the text. I had developed the habit of using the same kind of Bible study in my sermon preparation. For those reasons, I focused my graduate training in ministry dynamics and the integration of academic studies with practical applications. Because I did graduate work while continuing my full-time work in ministry, I was blessed to have a laboratory to apply and test what I was learning.

My years of teaching and administration in Christian higher education coupled with involvement in the world of missions have made me even more aware of the need to view the text, insofar as possible, outside one's own social, cultural, experiential, and religious backgrounds. My interpretative efforts today are influenced by my training and experience as I try to understand the biblical context, the historical-cultural context, and the literary context—vocabulary, genres, grammar, and syntax. I try to understand the original message of the author and the purpose of the text as first steps toward understanding the message of the text in today's world. I want to know what the text said and what it meant, so that I can know what it says and what it means today.

As I have prepared these study guides, I have constantly asked myself, "What would I want in a study guide to the biblical text?" I have been guided by this question, at times excluding technical details and academic questions, other times including such items because of their value in understanding and communicating the text. Above all, I have tried to provide a practical guide to put in clear relief what the text says as a first step toward valid interpretation of what the text means and how it should be applied in the world today.

I wrote these guides with multiple readers in mind. Preachers and Bible class teachers will find the detailed study of the text helpful, and Christians in the pews with an interest in the message of the Bible will also be helped by the textual jewels and the textual summaries that are included. May God bless you in your desire and your efforts to understand and apply the Bible!

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The Purpose of These Guides

To describe the publications included in this series as “Bible study guides” says something about their intended purpose. As guides, these books do not attempt to answer every biblical question that may arise in your study of the biblical text. They are not commentaries in the strictest sense of the word. The focus of these guides is distinct.

I have as a primary goal to encourage you to do your own study of the biblical text. This series of study guides is designed to assist the Bible student with preliminary and basic exegetical work, and to suggest some study methods that will enrich your study and help you identify the message of the text—whether in a specific verse or paragraph, a larger context, or an entire book of the New Testament. A primary goal of these guides is to help you maintain a focus on the purpose and message of the original author. The message of the original writer should inform our understanding of the text and its application today. One should not think that the message and meaning of the text today would be significantly different than the message and meaning of the original document.

The title also says that these guides are “helps.” I have tried to provide resources to guide and enrich your study, keeping the purpose of the original author in view. This desire has informed the content of these study guides. Many study guides exist and there is no need to write more books that basically have the same content. Generally, the information included in these guides is designed to help identify the purpose of the original document. In some passages, the information included in these guides is not readily available in other resources.

What Kinds of “Helps” Are Included in These Guides?

These study guides reflect how I organize and understand the biblical text, taking into account various exegetical factors such as syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. Along the way, I share some observations that may help clarify passages that are difficult to understand. I have not tried to write about every passage where potential problems or differences in understanding exist. I have not noted every textual variant in the original text. At times my notes may seem to be unnecessary comments on passages where the meaning is clear; that probably means I am trying to share insights to deepen understanding and appreciation of the text. In other passages, some may ask why I have not included more comments or explanation. Such is the individualized nature of Bible study. While I try to explain some difficulties, the overall goal of my comments is to help maintain a focus on the original author’s message and purpose for writing—the “what it said and what it meant” of the original author in the original context.

For each chapter, there is a “Content” section that usually includes a brief outline, followed by notes (“Study Helps”) about the biblical text. The content sections of the guides (including how the text is divided and how subsections are described) are drawn from my own reading and analysis of the text, and from a comparison of several translations. In only a very few cases does the outline provided in this guide vary from the majority opinion, and those cases are noted and the reasons given. In some chapters, there are a few introductory comments to help orient the student to the overall content of the chapter. The textual notes at times provide a periphrastic summary, but as noted above they are not intended to answer

every question. In several cases, I have tried to address topics that are not treated in detail in other resources. Texts that are easily understood and matters that are usually included in other resources are, for the most part, not treated in detail here.

A Useful Tool for Understanding the Message of the Bible

While the primary purpose of these guides is to assist in personal study of the biblical text, these guides will also serve the casual reader who wants to understand the basic message of Scripture. The guides are written in such a way that the reader can understand the general message of the text, along with some helpful details, simply by reading the guide. One might describe these guides as a kind of “CliffsNotes” to the Bible, but they are intended as helps and should not be thought of as taking the place of Bible reading and Bible study.

How to Use This Bible Study Guide in Personal Bible Study

This guide is not intended to take the place of your own Bible reading and study but is intended to provide insights and suggestions as you read the Bible, and to be a resource that will help you check your understanding. **No specific translation of the biblical text is included in this guide.** Two goals influenced the decision not to include a translation of the biblical text. First, it is hoped that the student will be encouraged to use his or her own study Bible. Second, these notes are designed to be helpful in biblical study, regardless of the version the reader may prefer for personal Bible study.

My primary purpose is to make it easier for you the reader or student to analyze and understand the text. Ultimately, you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible and you cannot simply follow what a favorite preacher or commentator says. Often the study of a chapter (or subsection of a chapter) contains a brief summary of the content, focusing on the message.

The suggested process for effectively using these Bible study guides involves five steps. First, you should first read the introduction to the book you wish to study. The introductions provided in these guides are for the most part briefer than normal and do not cover every detail. In some cases, one introduction is provided to cover several books, as in the case of the Thessalonian correspondence or the Pastoral Letters.

The second step in your study is to read the book through to understand the overall content. It will be helpful if this can be done at a single sitting. The student facing time constraints may have time for only one reading, but multiple readings will reveal additional details of the text being studied along with the opportunity to observe repeated words and phrases, the message of the book, how the book develops its message, and how various parts of the book are connected. You will find reading helps in the outlines of the books and the lists of themes that are provided in the introductions.

Now you are ready to begin your study of individual chapters or sections. The process is this: read a section of the text (probably a chapter) until you have a good understanding of it. This is not an in-depth reading to resolve every question but is a general reading to understand the content of the passage.

The fourth step is for you to write your own outline of the section or chapter, with paragraphing that reflects major thought patterns, divisions, and topics. The study guide for each chapter has a section with suggested paragraphing based on a comparison of various

translations. While it is possible to skip this step in which you do your own analysis and paragraphing, thereby moving directly to the paragraphing provided in the study guide, this is not the recommended approach. You will benefit from taking the time and investing the energy to do this work in initial reading and understanding.

Finally, the study guides have a section of study helps that will help you understand the text and keep the intent of the original author in mind as you do more focused study. In many chapters, a final section that summarizes the message of the chapter is included.

Initial Reading and Paragraphing

In other articles and publications, I have explained the importance of preparatory reading and personal study of the text. In the five-step process described above, initial reading and paragraphing occur in the second, third, and fourth steps. When the Bible student carefully works through these steps, it becomes clear that this is a “Bible” study and not just reading more background and commentary from a human author who is trying to explain the Bible. Although many students jump immediately from reading an introduction to the commentary, it is important that the student learn to do this part of the Bible study for herself or himself. Once the text is familiar, I suggest the student think about the themes that can be identified and how one would mark the paragraph divisions, based on the content of the passage and the subjects treated. Once this work is complete, it is good to compare the resulting paragraphing with that of several versions (or with the outlines in the content sections of these guides).

A Note About Paragraphing

Paragraph divisions are the key to understanding and following the original author's message. Most modern translations are divided into paragraphs and provide a summary. Ideally, every paragraph has one central topic, truth, or thought. Often, there will be several ways to describe the subject of the paragraph. Only when we understand the original author's message by following his logic and presentation can we truly understand the Bible. Only the original author is inspired—readers must take care not to change or modify the message. A first step toward integrity with the text is to develop the ability to analyze it and establish paragraphs.

Note: This introductory information is not repeated for each chapter. Students will find it helpful to return to this introductory section again and again to guide their study, especially before beginning the study of a new chapter of the text.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

A Word About Formatting

The format of the Study Helps in each chapter follows the outline that is provided for the chapter. The major points of the outline are used to begin new sections of the Study Helps. Biblical references that introduce sections or subsections of the Study Helps are placed in bold type to assist the student. These biblical references are placed in progressive order on the basis of the first verse cited (in the case of citations that cover multiple verses).

Standard abbreviations of biblical books are used. Verse citations that do not include a book (e.g. 2:14) refer to the book being studied. Other abbreviations that may not be familiar to some readers include the following: cf. = compare; e.g. = for example; v. = verse; vv. = verses.

The first time a translation is mentioned, the standard abbreviation is included. Subsequent references use only the abbreviation.

Greek words are placed in italics. Often, the corresponding Greek word, a literal meaning, and other translation possibilities are placed in parentheses immediately after an English word. Greek words are written as transliterations in English letters, using the basic lexical form of the word, to make it easier for the reader without a knowledge of Greek. Many readers will find these references interesting, especially in the repeated usage of the same Greek word. Readers can quickly pass over this inserted parenthetical information if desired. In a few cases, parentheses are used to indicate Greek verbal forms or noun forms, where this information would be significant to the student with some understanding of grammar. Again, the reader can pass over this information rapidly if desired. The Greek text used is the 27th edition of *Novum Testamentus Graece* which is identical with the 4th revised edition of *The Greek New Testament*.

Quotation marks are often used to call attention to special words or topics, and also to indicate citations or translations of the biblical text, many of which are my own. This is done to help the reader identify references to the biblical text, since no specific translation of the biblical text is not included in this Study Guide.

Parentheses are used liberally to enclose information and comments that would often be included in footnotes. It is hoped that readers will find this more convenient, both those who want to read the expanded explanation and those who wish to skip over the parenthetical material.

Comments concerning contemporary applications of the text are limited, but are included from time to time.

A summary of each chapter is provided at the end of the chapter. Some of these are written in first person, from the standpoint of the author, but the majority are written in third

person and are explanations of the content. These are not translations and are not paraphrases. They are an attempt to communicate the basic points and purpose of the original message.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Introduction to Colossians

Overview of the Letter

Colossians is unlike any other New Testament writing. While it is written by Paul and identified as one of the Prison Epistles, the purpose of the letter is unique. It bears similarities to Ephesians, but the content of Colossians puts it in a category by itself. Colossians is a warning about the dangers of integrating competing religious or philosophical views with Christianity, because such efforts fail to honor Christ's nature and work.

Colossians was written to address false teaching that was threatening the church in Colossae. It is possible that some of the teaching had already begun to spread in other parts of Asia Minor. The problem may be summarized briefly by saying that some in the church were wanting to try to add philosophy to Christianity. Colossians is occasional literature, written for a specific purpose at a specific time to specific people in a specific context. The applications of the book must begin with an understanding of the book in its historical context. Without an analysis of the historical and cultural context, it is impossible to understand the central message of the book. (Details of the Colossian problem, often called the Colossian heresy, are set forth in a separate section below and will be explained in more detail in the study helps and comments.)

The central theme of the book is the completeness of Jesus Christ. Jesus is presented as creator, sustainer, and redeemer (Col. 1:15-21). In the physical body of Jesus dwells divinity. Jesus is the head of the church. Jesus is Lord and therefore ruler of all creation. Colossians is the summit of New Testament Christology. Paul in Colossians shows why those who want to add something else to Christ are in error. Paul shows that those who want to integrate Christianity and philosophy have misunderstood the nature and the work of Christ. The focus is on the sufficiency of Christ.

The City

Colossae was a large commercial center. The Lycus River valley was known for its wool, especially its black wool and its purple and scarlet dyed wools. The area was characterized by volcanic activity and the city was destroyed several times throughout history, with the latest destruction being dated by Tacitus in A.D. 60 and by Eusebius in A.D. 64. The Lycus River was a tributary of the Maeander River that ran past Ephesus about 100 miles to the west on its way to the Aegean Sea. The Lycus Valley had at least three churches: Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Since the Roman road system largely bypassed Colossae, it eventually lost its prominence. Its population was largely Gentile, but there was a significant Jewish presence as well.

Author, Date, and Recipients

Author. That Paul is the author was unanimous in early literature. Timothy was with Paul at the time of the writing and is mentioned in the salutation (see also 2:19-24, Paul was planning to send Timothy to visit the Philippians). Timothy worked with Paul in the spread of the gospel and may have served as a secretary (amanuensis). Paul is also recognized as the

author of Colossians by Marcion, in the Muratorian Canon, and by various Church Fathers including Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria in the second century.

Date. The date of this letter is linked to one of Paul's imprisonments in Ephesus, Philippi, Caesarea, or Rome. A Roman imprisonment best fits the facts of Acts. The best educated guess for the writing of Colossians is Paul's first imprisonment in Rome in the early 60s. Tychicus, along with Onesimus, probably took the letters of Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon to Asia Minor.

Here is a possible chronology of Paul's writings with locations and notations concerning their relationship to the book of Acts.

Book	Date	Place of Writing	Relationship to Acts
Galatians	48	Syrian Antioch	Acts 14:28; 15:2
1 Thessalonians	51	Corinth	Acts 18:5
2 Thessalonians	51	Corinth	
1 Corinthians	55	Ephesus	Acts 19:20
2 Corinthians	56	Macedonia	Acts 20:2
Romans	57	Corinth	Acts 20:3
Colossians	early 60s	Rome	Acts 28
Philemon	early 60s	Rome	Acts 28
Ephesians	early 60s	Rome	Acts 28
Philippians	early 60s	Rome	Acts 28
1 Timothy	63 (or later)	Macedonia	
Titus	63 ??		
2 Timothy	64-68)	Rome	

Recipients. The recipients are identified as saints and faithful brothers at Colossae (1:1). Paul gives instructions that the letter be read in Laodicea (4:16, see also 2:1). The church in Colossae was likely begun by Epaphras (Col. 1:7, 8; 2:1; 4:12-13), who may have been converted to Christ during Paul's stay in Ephesus (Acts 19). It seems that the development of the churches in Asia Minor (several are mentioned in Revelation 2-3) may have occurred as a result of Paul's preaching and teaching in Ephesus, a city which served as a natural entry point to the region. Since Epaphras was with Paul in Rome (4:12), it is likely that Paul's knowledge of the problems in Colossae came through Epaphras.

Some studies suggest that the church was composed largely of Gentiles, that the letter was written primarily to Gentiles, and that the philosophical system Paul is combatting is Greek philosophy, possibly Gnosticism, or an early version of Gnosticism. Aspects of this understanding will be challenged in this study guide. While there were undoubtedly Gentiles in the church (Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles, 1:27; the recipients are described as previously alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 1:21), there is nothing in the letter that requires a mostly Gentile church. Much in the historical-cultural context, along with aspects of the literary context, suggests the possibility of a church with a significant Jewish membership. That membership, as well as the Jewish community in Colossae, was significantly Hellenized based on the context and the content of the letter.

The text of Col. 2:11-15 (where the recipients are described as dead in trespasses and fleshly uncircumcision, 2:13) is often understood as a reference to Jewish circumcision. When

these verses are read in context, these verses are not a reference to Jewish circumcision. The circumcision being described is the “circumcision of Christ.” This point is explained in more detail in the study notes on the paragraph.

The Colossian Heresy

Summary. The problem at Colossae was apparently the result of some teachers who wanted to integrate another religious or philosophical system with Christianity. They did not reject Christianity, but they were teaching that various add-ons or supplements were necessary to be a good Christian. Based on Colossians 2, their teaching seems to be a combination of Christianity, philosophy, and certain requirements from Judaism.

Aspects of the heresy that Paul combats. Paul specifically attacks the heresy in Col. 2:8-23. Based on the content of Paul’s assertions, we can identify the following problems with the teaching: denial that the fullness of the Godhead (Deity) could dwell bodily in Christ (2:9), denial that it was possible to be complete in Christ (2:10), suggestion that genuine Christian spirituality required additional supplements or add-ons. The higher level of spirituality involved other principalities and powers (2:15), various practices that appear to be rooted in Judaism (2:16-17), self-abasement or self-degradation (2:18), the worship of angels (2:18), and various aspects of asceticism (2:19-23). (See comments on Col. 2:8-23 for a fuller description of the significance of Paul’s teachings and how Paul’s declarations correspond to the false philosophical system.)

Based on references throughout the letter, the false teachers can be described with the following seven points.

- They offered a “fullness” spiritually that had not been experienced before, a new type of spirituality or a new way to bring believers to maturity. The original reception of the gospel had left the new converts as second-class citizens, and thus they needed this additional experience of “fullness.”
- They spoke of a new spiritual “liberty.” Paul describes this as a new form of slavery.
- They alleged a personal vision of the invisible evil powers, bringing special privileges to a select group of the spiritual elite.
- They practiced an impressive asceticism, but it had not been shown to be effective in the battle against self-indulgence.
- They offered initiation to a more profound “knowledge” of God and a greater experience of God’s power.
- They saw themselves as superior to, and were thus critical of, “ordinary” believers.
- They caused division in the church by their teachings and influence, a problem Paul combats with focus on Christian unity.

Failure to understand Christ. When some are wanting to add to the message and work of Christ, the problem is a failure to understand the person and work of Christ. To combat the false theological and philosophical teaching, Paul emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ’s person, the deity of Christ, the all-sufficient saving work of Christ, and the Lordship of Jesus. Paul shows the inadequacy of the alternative understanding. He describes it as hollow and deceptive (2:8) and notes that it is unable to restrain physical desires. Believers have fullness in Christ (2:10) so that nothing added can contribute to the salvation that Christ gives.

Is the philosophy in question Judaism? In the first century, Judaism was often referred to as a philosophy. The Jewish philosopher Philo (born c. 20 B.C., died 40-50 A.D., the exact dates are in question) described the Torah as the “philosophy of Moses.” He referred to Judaism as “the philosophy of our fathers.” Josephus wrote about three Jewish sects describing them as “three philosophies.” It seems this was done to add dignity to Judaism. (See below for more about how Philo helped shape Jewish thought in the first century, especially with reference to the desire to integrate Judaism and Greek philosophy.)

Against this background, Paul’s description (2:8) of the empty and deceptive philosophy takes on new possibilities. Paul is not objecting to philosophical thinking. He is objecting to the particular philosophy known to his readers, a philosophy that he calls a vain deceit. The most likely meaning of this phrase is this: “Let no one take advantage of you through the empty deceit of Jewish philosophy.” That Paul uses the article, “the philosophy,” is interesting for it indicates a specific thought system and not a generalized criticism of philosophy.

The heresy was about the need for spiritual supplements. The heretics were not denying the value of Christianity, they were saying that more was needed for salvation. (Think about the Galatian Judaizers who insisted on adding circumcision as a requirement to be genuinely Christian.) They were looking for spiritual supplements, ceremonial laws, an attitude of humility or self-abnegation, angel worship, and a form of asceticism. They were puffed up, no longer connected with the head. These false teachers were Christians, not outsiders. They held Christ, they had not rejected him; they were believers not unbelievers, but they wanted to place additional requirements on Christianity. They taught that additional requirements were necessary to reach authentic spirituality. Paul’s references to circumcision are often read to suggest that the teachers were Jewish, but there is no specific reference to Jewish circumcision in the text (see study helps and comments on 2:11-14).

The Influence of Philo in First-Century Judaism

That the false teachers at Colossae were likely Jews is supported by an understanding of how Judaism was developing in the time of Christ and shortly after. A major factor in this process was the influence of Philo, a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria. Philo spans the Greek and Hebrew cultures. When Hebrew thought with its focus on the invisible, mystical, and unknown, met Greek philosophical thought, it was natural to try to develop philosophical justification for, or at least explanations of, Judaism. Philo provided a synthesis of the two thought systems and influenced Hellenistic interpretation of Messianic Hebrew thought for the next two to three centuries.

For Philo, Greek philosophy was the natural development of the revelation given by God to Moses. He was not the first to try to describe the relationship between the Old Testament and Greek philosophy. Jewish scholars before him had made the same effort, especially in the two centuries before Jesus after the translation of the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (abbreviated, LXX). There was even a tradition that said the books of Moses were translated into Greek long before the LXX.

Purpose of the Letter

Theme. The theme of Colossians is Jesus Christ. Paul wants to show that Christ is adequate and no religious or philosophical system can add anything of value to the work of

Christ. A clear understanding of Christ is the antidote to false teaching that seeks supplements to the message of Christ. Paul's first line of defense against the heresy was to exalt Christ. Christ is the very image of God (1:15), the Creator (1:16), the sustainer of all things (1:17), the head of the church (1:18), the firstborn from the dead (1:18), preeminent (1:18), the fullness of deity in bodily form (1:19, 2:9), he reconciler between God and mankind (1:20-22). Christ is completely adequate for salvation. The word Christ is used 25 times in 95 verses.

Background. In this study, the purpose of the letter is seen through the following lens.

The church at Colossae was composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul had never visited that church, but as apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was concerned when teaching was introduced at Colossae that sought to add certain elements to faith in Christ, thus denying the sufficiency of Christ and the fullness possible in Christ. These additional items Paul describes as a philosophical system that is empty and deceitful.

In the first century, some Jews were seeking to integrate Judaism and Greek philosophy. The result was an understanding that described Judaism as a philosophy. Some at Colossae were thinking that if such an effort worked to better explain Judaism, it would also work for Christianity. The result was a complex conglomeration of Christian ideas, Roman philosophy (possibly including incipient Gnosticism), and Judaism.

To combat this effort, Paul sets forth the sufficiency of Christ, citing also his own calling to proclaim Christ. The heretical teachings would serve to enslave Christians in human traditions, human teachings, and worldly values. All such things were cast off by "the circumcision of Christ," which has nothing to do with the circumcision made with hands (Jewish circumcision) but has to do with putting off fleshly concerns for spiritual concerns.

The "circumcision of Christ" occurred at baptism, so that afterward God's power made it possible to be raised with Christ. The result was that those who were dead in sin (before the old man was cut away and cast off) were made alive with Christ and forgiven. The IOUs and legal demands that we had as a result of sin were cancelled. These were set aside by Christ's death on the cross, when he took away the power of all other authorities and rulers. He took away their reputation (shamed them) when he completely triumphed over them.

Do not let anyone judge you or exclude you on the basis of such requirements. You escaped such things when you died with Christ. Because you are risen with Christ, you can focus on things above and not on worldly things. Therefore, follow through on the "circumcision of Christ" by putting off the old self and putting on the new self. Christ is everything!

Let your life reflect the new self in attitudes, actions, relationships, and how you tell others about Christ.

Purpose. Paul wants to make clear why the false teaching that is being advanced is erroneous. To do this, Paul exalts Christ to demonstrate that the philosophy being advanced by the false teachers is in error. Paul describes Christ's saving work that separated us from worldly concerns in our baptism, and raised us with him to a new life. Paul describes the lifestyle of the new self because living a new life is what Christianity is all about.

The Literary Relationship between Ephesians and Colossians

The literary relationship between Ephesians and Colossians is best understood against the backdrop of the historical relationship between Colossians and Ephesians.

Colossians. Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12; Philemon 23) was apparently converted during Paul's Ephesian ministry (Acts 19). It is likely that he was instrumental in starting three churches—in Hierapolis, Laodicea and Colossae. When difficulties arose in the Colossian church (relating to the emerging desire to integrate worldviews and religious systems), Epaphras sought the advice of Paul who was at that time in prison in Rome (in the early 60s).

When Paul received information about the problem in Colossae, a church which he had never personally visited, he wrote a letter focused on the lordship and sufficiency of Jesus. The letter is brief and is characterized by short sentences.

Ephesians. At about the same time, Paul wrote a more thoughtful treatise on the same theme—the lordship of Jesus and the importance of this concept for a proper understanding of God's saving work in Christ according to his eternal purpose in Christ, to bring everything together under the headship of Jesus in the church which is the body of Christ, which is the basis for the unity of the church. This letter is known as Ephesians, and may have been a circular letter intended to be distributed to several churches. Ephesians is characterized by long sentences and theological development.

Relationship. Factors that are often cited in demonstrating a close relationship between Ephesians and Colossians include (1) related literary and theological themes and structure, dealing with the same general topics, (2) similar salutations and similar closings, (3) similar words and phrases (as many as 75 of the verses in Ephesians have a parallel in Colossians), (4) Paul's authorship, and (5) both were delivered by Tychicus.

These similarities may lead one to overlook the differences in the letters. Both are occasional literature, written to a specific location at a specific time, to specific people to address a specific situation. Ephesians focuses on God's eternal purpose, accomplished in the saving work of Jesus, resulting in the unified church that brings together all the saved regardless of ethnicity. Colossians focuses on Christ as divine, Creator, Sustainer, Savior, but the point is to show the adequacy of Christ and to demonstrate that any supplements are not only unnecessary but that they deny the spiritual reality of Christ. In Colossians one encounters teachings designed to combat dualism. Colossians focuses on the problem of syncretism—the integration of religious systems.

In summary, both Ephesians and Colossians are among Paul's four prison letters. Some of the themes of the books are similar, with similar wording and phrases. Colossians was written to combat specific Christological misunderstandings and to speak against false teachers who were trying to integrate Christianity and Jewish philosophy. Ephesians was written to encourage the Ephesian church (and perhaps other churches, if it is understood as a circular letter) toward unity and Christian living on the basis of God's eternal purpose in Christ and the church.

General Outline of the Letter to the Colossians

The book seems to divide naturally into two parts (as do many of Paul's letters). These are variously described as teaching and application, pedagogy and practice, explanation and exhortation. The common division is set forth here. (See the comments beginning at 2:20 for alternative outlining and divisions.)

Chapters 1-2, the sufficiency of Jesus

Chapters 3-4, how to live a life consistent with the new life in Jesus, who is all in all

A more detailed outline includes these major units.

- 1:1-14, traditional salutation, thanksgiving and prayer, theme statement about Christ
- 1:15-23, the nature and work of Christ
- 1:24-2:5, Paul's ministry for the cause of Christ
- 2:6-19, warnings and admonitions about the philosophy advanced by the false teachers
- 2:20-23, "having died with Christ" empowers Christian living
- 3:1-4, "having been raised with Christ" empowers Christian living
- 3:5-11, putting off worldly things
- 3:12-17, putting on Christ
- 3:18-4:1, relationships in Christ
- 4:2-6, instructions
- 4:9-18, final greetings

Gnosticism

While the influence of Gnosticism is most visible in the late first century and in the second century after Christ, some have identified evidences of the influence of an incipient Gnosticism as early as the 60s. Because it is possible that efforts to integrate Jewish thought and Greek philosophy were influenced by early forms of Gnosticism, a brief overview is included here.

Before 1945 Gnosticism was known only from counter arguments, but the Nag Hammadi texts, discovered in 1945 in a jar full of Gnostic books, have given new insights. Based on the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, it appears that the Essenes also cultivated some Gnostic ideas.

The Gnostics were dualists, seeing matter and spirit as antagonistic, and for this reason denied that Jesus could be both fully man and fully divine. Their conclusion was that Jesus was divine but not human. The Gnostics identified angelic levels (aeons) as steps between humanity and the good high god. Jesus could be no more than one of the gods. The Gnostics tended to be intellectually elite and emphasized secret knowledge as the path to the gods (or for Christians who accepted Gnostic thought, to God). This secret knowledge was the true key to fellowship with God rather than Jesus' atoning work to make possible forgiveness.

The problem at Colossae was that some teachers were advancing a hybrid version of Christianity. The false teachers were not absolutely rejecting Christ, and it is not clear that the specific false philosophy addressed in Colossians was Gnosticism. What can be said is that Paul was combatting teachings that sought to integrate Christianity and philosophy, and that the philosophy Paul addressed bore marks of influences from Greek thought, Judaism, and possibly an early form of Gnosticism.

After the more complete development of the concepts, second century Gnosticism reveals the following beliefs:

- Matter and spirit are co-eternal. Matter is evil, spirit is good. God who is spirit and therefore good cannot be involved with evil.
- There are levels (aeons, emanations) between matter and divinity. The lowest level of divinity is YHWH of the Old Testament because he formed matter as he formed the world.

- Jesus is higher than YHWH on the levels, closer to the true divine nature. Some Christians influenced by Gnosticism put Jesus at the highest level but could not accept that he was incarnate Deity. Remember: matter is evil; therefore Jesus could not have a human body and still be divine. The solution to the problem was the theory that Jesus only appeared to be human.
- Salvation is defined as passing through the various heavenly spheres, and comes through faith in Jesus plus special knowledge that is available only to a limited group.
- The Gnostics arrived at two opposite ethical systems. One said that lifestyle had nothing to do with salvation, and that salvation was available by the secret knowledge that allowed one to pass through the angelic spheres. The other said that lifestyle was essential. In Colossians, on the basis of the ascetic teachings (2:16-23), it appears that the false teachers were focused on lifestyle as an evidence of true spirituality.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Colossians 1

[Note: it is suggested that the student read the introductory materials on page 3-5 of this guide before beginning an individual preparatory reading and analysis.]

CONTENT

The paragraphing included in the Content section of each chapter are merely suggestions or guides. The student is encouraged to identify the paragraphs, and subsections within each paragraph, to assist in his or her own study. The division of the biblical text into paragraphs is usually fairly standard in modern translations.

Outline of Chapter

1:1-2, salutation and greetings

1:3-8, thanksgiving and prayer

1:9-14, the saving work of Christ

Note: vv. 13-14 are transitional, paragraphing could be 9-13, 14-23.

1:15-23, the preeminence and supremacy of Christ's reconciling work

[1:21-23, the result of Christ's work in the lives of the Colossians]

Note: vv. 9-20 are one extended sentence in Greek, so vv. 21-23 may be better understood as a separate section.

1:24-2:5, the sacrificial ministry of Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, his focus on the God's plan

STUDY HELPS

1:1-2. As he introduces a book designed to combat false teaching, Paul identifies himself as an apostle. This word is used in the New Testament in a non-technical way to describe those sent as representatives of another or of the churches. Here, Paul is using the term in an official way as evidence of the authority of his teaching. Paul strengthens his self-description as an apostle by adding "of Christ Jesus" (that is, he was sent by Christ, having personally encountered him on the Damascus road), and "by the will of God." The latter phrase he uses also in the salutations of 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 2 Timothy.

Timothy, Paul's co-laborer in the gospel, is identified as "our brother." Timothy is also included in the greetings of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. This indicates Timothy's presence with Paul. It does not mean that Timothy is a co-author of the book.

The recipients are identified as saints (holy ones) and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae. In a letter that will focus on correcting false teaching, it may be significant that Paul says he is writing to the faithful Christians in the church. "In Christ" is sometimes used in parallel to "in the church" since the church is the body of Christ (1:18). Grace and peace are characteristic of Paul's greetings. The textual variant that would add "and our Lord Jesus Christ" to the phrase "from God our Father" does not change the interpretation of the text.

1:3-8. Some outlines suggest that Colossians opens with two prayers of Paul (1:3-8 and 1:9-14), others think it better to understand the opening as one prayer with two parts. In this study, the

prayer of Paul will be analyzed as two separate paragraphs. The first part of the passage (vv. 3-8) is one sentence in Greek, representing one continuous prayer or thought.

Paul often mentions his prayers and thanksgiving for the churches in the salutations of his letters. As we read this salutation (and others in Paul's writings), it is easy to forget that Paul was in writing under difficult circumstances. Paul is constantly (always) praying and giving thanks for the Colossians. Paul is grateful for their faith and love. That is has only heard of their faith may reflect the fact that Paul had apparently never been to Colossae. Paul was receiving this news from Epaphras (v. 7) from whom they had learned the gospel.

Paul frequently uses the "faith, hope, and love" together (vv. 4-5). Paul has already described the recipients as faithful (v. 2). Here their faith in Christ (*en*, in contrast to the more common Pauline proposition *eis*) may refer to their faithfulness, or it may focus on the fact that at a time in the past they had recognized the truth of the gospel message about Jesus and had responded in faith. The second meaning would be especially important in view of the subject of the letter. They have put their faith "in Christ" (*en* is locative), not in "Christ plus various supplements."

Another basis for Paul's gratitude was their love for one another, or their love for the brotherhood of Christians. "All the saints" could have either meaning in the context, and foreshadows Paul's correction of the false teachers who were apparently drawing lines of fellowship that excluded some Christians or identified them as less than faithful.

1:5-6. The faith and love of the Colossians was "because of (*dia*) the hope laid up for them in heaven." Hope is something Christians have in the present tense; hope is also described as something that awaits the Christian, that is, hope that is reserved and will one day be fully realized. This goal is described as glory, salvation, eternal life, and inheritance in other New Testament texts. The Christian hope is the result of God's work (laid up for you) and cannot be altered by human declarations to the contrary, again anticipating the heresy Paul will address in this letter. The Colossians had heard about this hope through the truth of the gospel. The gospel is truth; when the gospel is proclaimed, truth is heard. The gospel had sounded forth and was bearing fruit and growing. "In all the world" in this context is hyperbole (overstatement), referring to the then-known Greco-Roman world. The gospel was to be preached everywhere (see the use of the same phrase in the Great Commission, Matt. 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-47; cf. Acts 1:8).

The Colossians had understood (*eipgnosko*, to fully know, to have intimate knowledge) the grace of God in truth (v. 6, the gospel). The intensified form of *gnosko* may anticipate the heretical emphasis on special knowledge (cf. 1:9, 10).

1:7-8. The role of Epaphras in the establishment of the church in Colossae (cf. Col. 4:12-13; Philm. 23) has already been explained in the introduction. Here Epaphras is identified as a faithful (note the repeated emphasis on faith and faithfulness) servant of Christ. He had reported to Paul and those with Paul the love "in spirit" of the Colossians. This is traditionally translated as a reference to the Holy Spirit (which would be the only reference to the Holy Spirit in the book), but it is also possible to understand a reference to the human spirit, thus "heart-felt love."

1:9-20. As reflected in the outline above, the paragraphing is difficult. Verses 9-20 are one extended sentence in Greek, with each thought building on the previous ones, thus making it

difficult to establish the thematic sub-sections. In vv. 9-12, Paul describes his prayer for the continued and future growth of the church. In v. 13-14 he summarizes the Father's redemptive work through the Son. He uses that summary as a springboard for vv. 15-20 which may be a hymn or poem describing the supremacy of Christ. This ends the long sentence. Then vv. 21-23 are parallel to and an expansion of vv. 13-14, again describing the result of Christ's nature and work in the Colossian church (so that vv. 13-14 and vv. 21-23 serve as parentheses around the poetic section).

Some see the poetic section as including only vv. 15-18 since v. 19 begins with "for" (*oti*). The continuation of the extended sentence makes it better to understand that the poetic section is vv. 15-20 (as outlined in the NET Bible). This section is one of the great Christological confessions of the New Testament.

1:9-14. Because of the things included in vv. 3-8, especially the faith and love of the Colossians that had been reported to Paul, Paul mentions in v. 9 the "without ceasing" prayer for the Colossians (either Paul using an editorial "we" or referring to himself and those with him). Paul is praying that the Colossians "be filled...to walk..."

To identify paragraphs and outline a section, often the first step is to diagram the sentences. In diagraming sentences, the first step is to identify the subject and the verb. This provides the skeleton of the sentence on which the other details depend. (The English translations we have access to often make this difficult.) "So that you will be filled..." (aorist passive subjunctive) is the main verb of vv. 9-12. The construction of the verbs related to the Colossians is this: "so you will be filled, to walk, bearing fruit, growing, being strengthened, giving thanks to the Father." The main verb is followed by an infinitive (to walk) and four dependent participles that show the method or results of being filled to walk. The "you" refers to the Colossians.

In vv. 12-13, the construction of the verbs related to the Father is this: the Father [is] the one enabling us, who rescued us, and transferred us.

In v. 14, Paul writes that "we have" redemption and forgiveness, including himself with the Colossians, extending to all Christians.

1:9. Paul prays and asks that the Colossians will be filled (*pleroo*) with knowledge (*epignosis*, the intensified form may mean full knowledge or intimate knowledge) in wisdom (*sophia*, see also 1:28; 2:3, 23; 3:16; 4:5) and understanding (*sunesis*, see 2:2) in order to walk (a metaphor that means to live) in a certain way. Notice the connection between what we know and how we live. It is impossible to live according to God's will if we do not know God's will, and the knowledge of God's will requires wisdom and discernment. This verse foreshadows the focus of the false teachers. They sought secret knowledge (2:3).

1:10-12. The Christian walk is described as worthy (*axios*) and pleasing, with four participial phrases following.

"Bearing fruit in every good work" (*karpophoreo*, this verb combines the words for fruit and to bring forth). The Christian lives in such a way that she or he bears fruit.

"Growing in knowledge" (*epignosko*, see 3:10) is a present participle indicating that this is a continuous process.

"Being strengthened with power" uses the same root word twice (*dunamis*, *dunamoo*, power or strength); literally, this is "with all strength being strengthened." "According to his

glorious might” uses a synonym for power (*kratos*, might). The Christian life is lived by God’s power that enables the believer. “With joy” can be understood as the last part of the phrase in v. 11, or it may introduce v. 12: joyfully giving thanks.

“Giving thanks” is the last of the four participles (see 3:17).

1:12-13. The Father is described with a participial phrase that functions as an adjective: “the Father, the one enabling (*hikanoo*, the root signifies being sufficient) us to share the inheritance.” Light contrasts with the use of darkness in the next phrase. The Father has done two things: he rescued us (*rhuomai*, to deliver) from the dominion (*exousia*, authority) of darkness and transferred (literally, to put in a new place, relocate) us to the kingdom of “the son of his love” (or “his beloved son,” referring to Jesus).

1:14. In Jesus, “we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

1:15-20. This poetic section (possibly a hymn or creedal statement) summarizes the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ as sovereign—reigning, redeeming, and reconciling. Catching the attention of the careful reader is the repeated use of the word “all” in this section. Another repeated construction is built around the prepositions preceding “him”—in him, through him, for him.

1:15. “...who is image (*eikon*) of the invisible God...” Jesus in his humanity makes the invisible visible (John 14:9). Jesus in his humanity, bearing the image of God, declares possible the restoration of the relationship broken by the entry of sin to the world (see Gen. 1:26-27; 3:1-5).

“firstborn of all creation...” This word can refer to time (first in order chronologically) or to rank. To be firstborn meant to have preeminence. The firstborn had privilege, possessions, and received the birthright. In Ps. 89:27, it has a Messianic sense as it described the anointed chosen king. Here the word refers to Jesus’ rank over creation. The phrase does not declare that Jesus was created or born, or that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. Jesus was uniquely the son of God, always existing, always Deity, even before creation (1:16-17). This is a declaration of preeminence over (before) all creation.

1:16. “for all things were created by him...” Jesus was the agent of the creation of “all things.” Included are things in the heavenly and earthly realms, things visible and invisible, and all power structures—thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers. Because Jesus is creator of all, he is before all and above all. Creation was in (*en*) him, by (*dia*) him, and for (*eis*) him. The idea of God’s involvement in the creation of the material world speaks against dualism, the philosophical view that separates spirit (God) and matter.

1:17. “He himself is before all things and in him all things are set together.” In this context, to be before all things refers to his preexistence as Deity. The noun is intensified (he himself), both here and in v. 18. In him all things consist (perfect active indicative from *sunistao*, or *sunistemi*, to be set together, to stand together). The action has been completed. All things have been set together in creation and Jesus is sustainer as well as creator.

1:18. “He himself is head of the body the church...” The metaphor makes clear the relationship between Christ and the church, as head of the body. Jesus is described as “head” of the church only in Ephesians and Colossians, although the church is also described as the body in 1 Cor. 12.

“who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, in order that he himself may become in everything ‘being first’.” Beginning is *arche*, the same word that was translated principalities in v. 16. This is most likely a reference to origin or source, with the primary reference being to the church. Firstborn (*prototokos*) is the same word as in v. 15. It is best understood as having the same meaning in both verses (v. 15 and v. 18). This is a reference to Jesus’ preeminence, not to his resurrection from the dead. Remember that there were resurrections during Jesus’ ministry prior to Jesus’ resurrection. The reference to rank rather than chronology is reinforced in the last part of the verse. All of this points to Jesus as “being first” (*proteuo*) and having supremacy or preeminence.

1:19. Because (*oti*) this is God’s will... That is, it pleased God for all the fullness to dwell in Christ. The purpose clause that introduces this verse also introduces v. 20. The fullness refers to the fullness of Deity (see 2:9). Jesus was fully divine. The use of the word fullness (*pleroma*) may foreshadow some of the false teaching in which “fullness” was used in a different sense.

1:20. “And to reconcile all things through him...” God’s purpose in Christ was to reconcile (*apokatallasso*, to reconcile fully) all things to himself through (*dia*) Christ. In the context, the phrase “all things” has previously been used to refer to all creation. We see repetition also in the phrase “whether things on earth or things in heaven.” Reconciliation is “to make friends again.” The relationship between God and human creation was broken by sin. With the entry of sin into the world, humanity became enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). The result of reconciliation is the restoration of fellowship resulting in peace. Peace is possible because of the blood shed on the cross. Jesus shed human blood to reconcile us to God. It is possible that the false teachers were denying Jesus’ humanity, affirming only his deity. Here ends the extended sentence in vv. 9-20.

1:21-23. In these verses is a brief description of the results of Christ’s work in the lives of the Colossians. Some authors suggest that the “you” of v. 21 and the accompanying description can apply only to Gentiles, that such words cannot be used to describe the Jews. However, since the alienation and hostility is mental and is a description of a separation to be mended with reconciliation in Christ, one can understand without much difficulty the possibility of such descriptions applied to both Gentiles and Jews. Certainly, the Jews were accused of evil deeds in the Old Testament, and during his ministry Jesus said that people rejected the light because of their evil deeds (John 3:19-20). In the context of John 3, this has a primary application to Jews. In v. 21, the condition of the mind is demonstrated by actions. The strongest evidence of the application of v. 21 to both Jews and Gentiles is that vv. 22-23 most certainly apply to all of the Christians at Colossae, whether Jew or Gentile.

One aspect of the Colossian heresy that Paul will address in detail in Chapter 2 involves the desire of some to require certain Jewish practices as evidence of success in Christian living (see my Introduction to Colossians). In various references in the first chapter, we can see that Paul is preparing for his argument. Every Christian, regardless of ethnicity, has been reconciled to God, thereby escaping alienation and enmity. This reconciliation God accomplished by making peace through Jesus’ blood shed on the cross (v. 20).

1:22. The reconciliation God accomplished in Jesus is the primary topic of vv. 20-23. God has acted to redeem all humanity. God has reconciled “in the physical body through death” to

present (aorist active infinitive) “you” holy, without blemish, and without blame. The past tense infinitive most likely refers to their salvation by Christ’s death, but can be applied also to their continuing state in Christ, showing that additional things are not needed to bring the believer to holiness and blamelessness.

1:23. The results of God’s reconciliation are not unconditional. To the reconciliation from God that presented the Colossian believers as holy in God’s presence, is now added a condition. “If you continue...” This is a first class condition which is assumed to be true. The Colossians will continue to stand before God holy, without blemish, and blameless if they persevere in faith (faithfulness) to Christ. This involves belief, action, and relationship. Paul describes the life of the believer in Christ—established (*themelioo*, to lay a foundation, to ground) and steadfast (*hedraios*, immovable) and not moved (*metakineo*, to remove) from the hope of the gospel. The gospel had been proclaimed to all creation, referring to the then-known world, or perhaps to the Roman Empire (see my comments on 1:6). Paul is himself a servant (*diakonos*) of this gospel.

1:24-29. (The paragraph continues through 2:5, but the comments on the paragraph will break at the chapter division and be continued under 2:1-5.)

1:24. “I rejoice in sufferings for you...” Paul saw that his suffering, perhaps a reference to his imprisonment although Paul had suffered many things for the gospel (2 Cor. 11:23-28), was on behalf of those who would hear the gospel. Paul’s view of suffering is not a popular message in churches today. Most do not understand rejoicing in suffering, and few are willing to suffer for others.

Paul’s next statement is difficult to grasp. “I fill up the things lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh on behalf of his body which is the church.” An adjustment of word order helps a little. “In my physical body I fill up (I complete), for the sake of his body the church, what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings.” Although some have theorized that Christ’s atonement was insufficient, from which Roman Catholicism developed a system of human merit, this is not true biblically, and would certainly not fit into the context of Colossians where Paul is attempting to show the total sufficiency of Christ’s person and work. Paul recognized his suffering as necessary to complete God’s work in Christ. Christ suffered for us and did all that was necessary for our reconciliation. We can also expect to suffer on behalf of the gospel and the building up of the church.

1:25. Paul was a servant (*diakonos*) of the church and a servant of the gospel (v. 23), through his proclamation of God’s word. He had received a commission (*oikonomia*, usually translated stewardship, referring to a task or obligation) from God. This commission called him to complete (*pleroo*, fully complete, perhaps in the sense of “to fully carry out”) the task of preaching the word of God.

1:26. Paul describes the message to be preached as the mystery now made manifest. In Scripture, “mystery” signifies something previously unknown but now revealed (see Eph. 3:3). With this declaration, Paul describes himself as recipient of God’s revelation, anticipating those false teachers who would claim access to special revelation and knowledge. The mystery has been made manifest to the saints (all Christians), denying the claim of the false teachers to have special knowledge of God’s mystery. What was formerly hidden has now been made known.

1:27. God wanted to make known to the saints the glorious riches of the mystery among the Gentiles. The mystery, as Paul describes it in Eph. 3:2-6, is the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles together in the church. God's eternal plan was to unite Jews and Gentiles together as heirs, participants and sharers in Christ, that is, in the church. God's eternal goal, formerly not revealed, was to provide glorious riches to all humanity: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." This is usually interpreted as Christ's indwelling (cf. Eph. 3:17), but grammatically it could also be translated "Christ among you," signifying the mystery of the gospel as it came to both Jewish believers and Gentile believers in Colossae. The verse has two parallel constructions: the mystery among (*en*) the Gentiles; Christ in (*en*) you. To be dogmatic in ambiguous matters seldom serves us well, but in the context, these seem parallel and "among" is perhaps the stronger translation option: Christ among you Jewish and Gentile believers is the source of hope (again showing that nothing else is needed).

1:28-29. Paul's goal is to proclaim Christ. His focus is on Christ. As Paul proclaims Christ, he does two things with one purpose in mind. He admonishes and he teaches to present every person complete in Christ. Admonish (*noutheteo*) is used of training children and of encouraging one another. "Every man" uses the word (*anthropos*) that refers to human beings irrespective of gender. The phrase is repeated for emphasis three times. Paul seeks to include all; the false teachers were trying to exclude and made it difficult to enter the "inner circle." Teaching (*didasko*) is to be done with all wisdom (anticipating the 'false' wisdom of the heretical teachers). Paul's goal is to present every person complete (*teleios*, mature) in Christ. Every Christian can reach maturity. In Christ, there is no place for special privilege and elitism.

This work that God has given Paul calls for labor (*kopiaa*) and struggle (*agonizomai*). Notice the root of our word agony. God's work is not easy, but it is done with the power (*energeia*) of God that is at work (*energeo*) within his people, literally the energy that energizes us.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Paul writes to faithful members of the church at Colossae, with thanksgiving and prayer, noting how their faith and love in Christ have developed since they heard and accepted the gospel message of hope. The gospel has grown and borne fruit everywhere it has gone in all the world, and it has done the same among the Colossians, according to the report of Epaphras who had proclaimed the gospel in Colossae.

Paul prays for their knowledge, wisdom, and insight of God's will so they will live lives that are worthy and pleasing. The evidence of such lives is seen in the fruit of good works, growth in knowledge, spiritual strength, and joyful gratitude to God. He is the one who has enabled their inheritance in the light; he has rescued them from darkness and has transferred them to the kingdom of God's beloved Son where they have redemption.

Considering what is known of Jesus Christ, this work of God that God has accomplished through his Son is significant and complete! Jesus is the image of God making visible things that are invisible. He is the firstborn preeminent one over all creation. In fact, all things were created by him, including whatever powers exist. Jesus existed first and he now holds everything together. He is head of the church, as well as the source or beginning, preeminent in all things. It pleased the Father for all divine fullness to dwell in the Son, to reconcile all things through the Son, to make peace. Jesus is supreme.

This changes everything! Before they heard the gospel, they used to think like strangers and enemies of God, and they lived the same way. Now God has reconciled them through Jesus' physical death, and they are no longer strangers and enemies—they are reconciled to stand before him holy, unblemished, and blameless. This change will continue to characterize their lives if they remain faithful, grounded firmly in the hope they have found in the gospel. Paul is a servant of this gospel as it is preached in all the world.

Paul rejoices in all his sufferings that have helped bring the gospel to them. Christ's sufferings are being fulfilled in his sufferings. The church is established only through sufferings—first Christ's, then ours. God commissioned Paul as a servant with them in mind, to proclaim God's word that was formerly unknown. Now the mystery has been revealed to Christians. This mystery brings glorious riches among the Gentiles. This mystery is Christ among you, Christ among us. This is the glorious message of hope.

All of this Paul wants to communicate when he preaches Christ. By preaching, instructing, and teaching everyone he is trying to present everyone complete in Christ. He is working and struggling toward this goal, but it is really the energy with which God energizes him.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Colossians 2

[Note: it is suggested that the student read the introductory materials on page 3-5 of this guide before beginning an individual preparatory reading and analysis.]

CONTENT

The paragraphing included in the Content section of each chapter are merely suggestions or guides. The student is encouraged to identify the paragraphs, and subsections within each paragraph, to assist in his or her own study. The division of the biblical text into paragraphs is usually fairly standard in modern translations.

Outline of Chapter

2:1-5, Paul's ministry and his concern for the Colossians described (1:24-2:5)

2:6-19, not philosophy, but Christ alone; warnings against false teaching

2:20-3:4, new life in Christ (or 2:20-3:17)

STUDY HELPS

2:1-5. These verses are the conclusion of the paragraph that began in 1:24. Notes and comments on that paragraph are continued here, honoring the traditional chapter division.

2:1-2. Paul's struggle (*agon*, conflict, fight, race) was spiritual, perhaps in prayer or emotional stress. Some translators refer to his hard work for those in Colossae and Laodicea, even though he had never been there. Others take this as a reference to his ministry to the Gentiles, assuming a largely Gentile church. The reason for Paul's struggle is described with a subordinate clause as in this more literal translation: "in order that their hearts may be comforted (aorist passive subjunctive, *parakaleo*), having been united (*sumbibazo*) in (*en*) love, and unto (*eis*) all the richness (cf. 1:27) of the full assurance (*plerophoria*) of the understanding (*sunesis*), unto (*eis*) full knowledge (*epignosis*) of the mystery of God—Christ..." The participle form "being united" controls the three phrases that follow it: being united—in love, unto all richness of confidence of knowledge, unto full knowledge... Analyzing the relationship between the nouns show the focus of Paul's conflict for the Colossians is "that their hearts may be comforted, having been united in love, resulting in the riches that come from full confidence of understanding, resulting in true knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ." Christ is the means of the mystery. In Ephesians 3:2-6, the mystery is explained in terms of its results so that the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church is the mystery. God's glorious riches are available in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16). Such riches are available to Christians because of their confident understanding and full knowledge of Christ.

As Paul prepares to address the teaching that suggests Christ alone is not enough and that supplements are needed, notice the focus. Unity and the richness of God are possible through understanding and full knowledge of Christ. Christ is the totality. Even in this paragraph where Paul is describing his ministry, he works in references to Christ's fullness and completeness as the fulfillment of God's purpose.

2:3-5. "In Christ are hidden all the treasures (*thesauros*) of wisdom and knowledge (*gnosis*)." This statement magnifies Christ and shows that in Christ all knowledge is available to

all Christians. Paul writes so the Colossians will not be deceived (*paralogizomai*) by persuasive words (*pithanologia*). The word translated deceived includes various deceptions, delusions, or distortions, false reasoning, and even fraud. In this context, Paul warns against philosophical reasoning, argumentation that sounds plausible on the surface, and persuasive words. How amazing it is that false teaching almost always appears logical and attractive. Paul assures them of his presence with them in spirit even though he is physically absent. Epaphras has reported to Paul that the church still has members who maintain orderliness and firmness in the midst of the threat of false teaching.

2:6-19. The importance of Paul's references in 2:1-5 is seen by remembering that the problem with false teachers included a mixture of Christianity and Jewish philosophy. Jewish philosophy incorporated concepts from Greek philosophy and Judaism, resulting in a religious and philosophical system that tended to measure success by factors such as legalism, asceticism, and various Jewish traditions and practices. These Paul will now address.

2:6-7. Paul begins with a positive admonition. The Colossians had received the gospel message, and in receiving the message had received (*paralambano*) Christ Jesus the Lord. Having begun with a focus on Christ as Lord, keep living that way. Jesus is Lord, in the sense of being supreme or preeminent, reflecting concepts from Chapter 1. Walk (present imperative, *peripateo*, to live or to conduct your life) in him. Christian faith leads to a Christian lifestyle; the lifestyle of faith is consistent and continuous. The admonition to walk introduces four dependent participial phrases that also have imperatival force: having been firmly rooted (perfect tense participle), being built up in him (present tense), established in faith (present tense) as you were taught, and overflowing (present tense) with gratitude.

2:8-15. These verses are one sentence in Greek, presenting one major idea, and therefore are treated together in these comments and notes.

Paul moves from the positive admonition of vv. 6-7 to words of warning: beware (present active imperative). Christians must be on guard. It is possible to be led away (*sulagogeo*, to lead away as the booty or spoils of conquest, to lead captives, to lead away in the sense of to seduce). In the context, seduce may give the best meaning, although false teachers are always seeking followers whom they can captivate, influence and control. The seduction is through philosophy and empty deceit that are according to (*kata*) human traditions.

Paul uses *kata* three times: according to human traditions, not according to Christ, according to the basic principles (*stoicheion*) of the world. Christians must constantly check to make certain their faith is based on the Bible and not on humanly derived understandings that arise over a period of time within a cultural context. Such human reasoning is a step removed from following Christ. The gospel depends on divine revelation and not on human reasoning. *Stoicheon* (plural, *stoicheia*) is something put in order as in a row or series. It was used to refer to the building blocks of the world (2 Pet. 3:10; these elements were air, water, earth and fire in first century understanding), basic teaching of a subject (cf. Heb. 5:12), basic principles that control children (Gal. 4:3), and basic principles to which the Galatians were being tempted to return (Gal. 4:8-9). Christians have died to the basic elements of the world in Christ (2:20).

Paul is not condemning philosophy but is warning against its misuse that results in deceptive arguments and conclusions. This is Paul's rejection of the philosophical system of the Colossian heresy.

2:9-10. The reason for rejecting the empty philosophical system is that the fullness of Deity (*theotes*, used only here in the NT) dwells in Christ even as he exists in bodily form. The honor or reverence due God as spirit is due to Christ, even though he came to earth in human form. The present tense form of "to dwell" suggests continuity. The deity and humanity of Jesus were not mutually exclusive. The basis of Paul's argument here has already been presented in 1:19-20. Jesus is the fullness (*pleroma*) and you are made full (*pleroo*, to complete) in him. He is head over all powers (1:16; cf. also 2:15 below). No rule or authority exists that can add to Christ.

2:11-15. Two introductory observations about this passage are important. First, Paul uses the Old Testament covenant sign of circumcision in a spiritual sense. This is figurative language. There is no reference to Jewish circumcision in the context, except the disclaimer of v. 11 that Jewish physical circumcision is not what Paul is talking about. The figurative circumcision Paul is describing must be understood by the contextual references. Second, in v. 14, God obliterates or erases the handwritten certificate of indebtedness (an IOU) that was against us, a document that was expressed in legal decrees and demands. He has lifted it out of the midst, nailing it to the cross. In the context, what is this document based on legal requirements that was in the middle? This must be explained keeping in mind the context of the passage. Many traditional interpretations of these verses have focused on Jewish circumcision and the Old Testament nailed to the cross. Paul's subject is the impact Christ has had in the lives of the Colossian believers. Whatever understanding we come to concerning these verses must have an application in the lives of the recipients, for both Gentile and Jewish believers in Colossae.

The construction of the text is that vv. 11-12, present a thought that is completed by v. 13. Then v. 14 presents a thought that is completed by v. 15. This construction is not maintained in some English versions, resulting in connections and readings that do not exist in the original text.

2:11-13. In vv. 11-12, Paul sets forth the situation of Christians "in him" because of what has been done "by him," because of what they have experienced "with him" and "with him." This leads to v. 13: and, you being dead in transgressions and without the circumcision of Christ, he made alive "with him" having forgiven all your transgressions. Christians, having been buried with him in baptism, were raised with him through faith, and are made alive with him. Observe how the focus of these verses is on Christ. In vv. 11-13, the Christian is described in several ways: circumcised figuratively because the body of flesh is removed by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried in baptism, being raised, formerly dead in transgressions and uncircumcision, made alive, having been forgiven.

The circumcision that the Colossian Christians had experienced was a circumcision "made without hands." The typical way of referring to Jewish circumcision was as a circumcision "done with hands." The circumcision Paul is describing is not Jewish circumcision. The circumcision Paul is describing is the removal of the "body of flesh." This does not refer to the literal physical body. The removal of the figurative "fleshly body" makes way for the "spiritual body." This is described as the circumcision of Christ. To remove the old fleshly body

in favor of a new body may remind us of the destruction of the “body of sin” in baptism (Rom. 6:6). This is also described in 3:5-11 under the figure of the “old man” and the “new man.”

2:12. Connected with this circumcision is an action described in a dependent participle: having been buried with him... The “circumcision of Christ” was experienced in the past action of burial (aorist participle) in baptism. The result described in v. 11 was accomplished by the action of v. 12. Baptism is the death of the old person and the birth of the new person. In 2:12-13, believers share with Christ in baptism, in resurrection, and in new life.

You were raised up with him. The result of burial in baptism with Christ is being raised with him. Baptism and resurrection to new life are linked here as in Rom. 6:4-6. To be raised with Christ is through faith in the resurrecting power of God, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (cf. Eph. 1:19-20).

2:13. This verse completes the thought of vv. 11-12. “You, being dead in transgressions and uncircumcision...” This is spiritual death, separation from God. The uncircumcision of this verse refers to a time before the Colossians had experienced the circumcision of Christ (v. 11). Before they experienced the circumcision of Christ, they were dead in sin. This refers to both Jews and Gentiles. To read this as only referring to the Gentiles misses the point, and is too much focused on Jewish circumcision as the subject of the text, which we have shown it is not. Both Jews and Gentiles were dead in transgressions without the circumcision of Christ that removed the “fleshly body.” Both were “uncircumcised” in the sense of this passage.

He (God) made you alive with Christ. The subject pronoun of this section through v. 15 is God the Father. Christians are buried-with, raised-with, and quickened-with. Christians participate with Christ in baptism, resurrection, and life. The main verb, made alive, is connected to the participle (having forgiven, *charizomai*) that follows: “made alive, having forgiven all transgressions.” God can forgive all sins on the basis of Jesus’ death on the cross. All things can be reconciled through the peace that comes by the blood of the cross (1:20-22). Just as the Christians at Colossae were circumcised with the circumcision of Christ, having been buried in baptism, also they were made alive, having received forgiveness. Baptism is the means of the circumcision of Christ that puts off the old body. Forgiveness is the means of life with Christ. It is impossible to have new life without forgiveness. Forgiveness is often seen as the result of the new life in Christ, but here it precedes new life, making new life possible. This is consistent with the teaching of Romans 6. The old person (the body of sin in Rom. 6:6, the fleshly body here) is removed in baptism. There is no new person before baptism. The new life is not possible without forgiveness. Again, forgiveness is not the result of the new life but the means of the new life.

2:14-15. In these verses begins a new sentence and a new thought. He (God the Father) erased (*exaleipho*, to smear out, to obliterate, to wipe out) what was against us, the handwritten certificate of indebtedness based in legal demands. Not only did God erase it, he lifted it out of the middle, out from the midst. In the first century, this document could be an IOU, a signed confession, or an indictment proving guilt.

Bear with me a short time as we explore what this document is in the context of Colossians 2 and Paul’s concern about the false teaching that was being advanced in Colossae. This must somehow relate to the false teachers. The point Paul makes is that no legal-based requirements can any longer stand between God and the Christian, because God in Christ has removed every possible basis for accusation. First, he erased the document, effectively

canceling any legal obligations that could arise from legal demands. Second, he removed it. For the Jews, this could possibly refer to the Mosaic Covenant that stood between God and his people, setting forth the Law and legal requirements that the Jews could not keep. However, the Gentiles were never subject to the Old Testament. The Old Testament was a covenant only between God and Israel, that is, the Jews (Ex. 34:27-28). Since the Gentiles were never subject to the Old Testament, what is the message of this text to them, especially if the reference is limited to the Old Testament? Is this text not true and applicable also for the Gentiles?

One possibility would be to say that also for the Gentiles God erased the certificate of their indebtedness that was based on legal demands, the record of their transgressions and obligations before God. The relationship between the Gentiles and God was also blocked by sin, and the record of that sin God erased and removed by attaching it to the cross, where the blood shed was sufficient for peace and reconciliation (1:19-20). For all people in all times, in Christ and the cross, God erased and removed all evidence of indebtedness. In this case, the certificate of debt would be figurative, just as was circumcision in the preceding illustration.

Another possibility is that Paul is addressing attempts to integrate various Old Testament Jewish practices with Christianity, using Jewish philosophical teachings as supplements to Christianity. In this context, the point is that such Old Testament practices cannot be required for either Jew or Gentile because that document and those legal decrees were erased and taken away by God when they were nailed to the cross. In this case, the reference is to the Old Testament, but with a specific application to those at Colossae who were attempting to add certain required practices to Christianity. Christ and his death on the cross makes it impossible to impose such demands.

2:15. This verse continues the thought from v. 14, but has its own main verb. The core of the sentence is here: God openly exhibited, or, God publicly displayed. The sentence begins with a participial phrase, “having stripped away rulers and authorities.” This verb, *apekduomai*, means to strip away, remove a garment, divest, or renounce. God in the cross showed the inadequacy of all other power systems, and destroyed spiritual powers that were hostile to humanity (Heb. 2:14 is a parallel text, although the specific Greek word is not used there). He declared all other powers powerless, and he put them on public display, having triumphed (*thriambeuo*, to conquer) over them. This is usually understood as referring to the triumphal parade of a victorious army (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14). God made clear at the cross the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ, and the adequacy of his work to accomplish God’s purposes. Nothing else is needed—Nothing But Christ!

2:16-19. In 2:16-19 Paul addresses the legalistic requirements that were apparently being added as Jewish philosophy was integrated with Christianity. In 2:20-23, he addresses tendencies toward asceticism. These appear to be two aspects of the false teaching, but the parallel constructions and thoughts in 2:20 and 3:1 suggest making 2:20-23 and 3:1-4 a single thought unit. Regardless, the frequently used outline of Chapters 1-2 as the doctrinal section and Chapters 3-4 as the practical section is not as clear as some would have us believe.

2:16-17. Do not let anyone judge (*krino*, condemn, criticize) you about food, drink, or in the matter of a feast, new moon, or Sabbaths. All of these appear to have to do with practices that were being carried over from Judaism. These things are a shadow (*skia*) of what is to come, but the body is of Christ. Since in the context, body is the antonym of shadow, translations such as reality or substance reflect the meaning better than the literal translation. What

matters is Christ. That Paul calls these things the shadow answers exactly to the teaching of the heretics that real substance was to be found in special knowledge and special acts of devotion that would set apart the spiritually elite.

2:18-19. Do not let anyone defraud (*katabrabeuo*, to act as umpire against, to decide against, to rule against) you. This verse is parallel to 2:16: to judge, to rule against. Those against whom Paul is warning are those who delight in humility and worship (*threskeia*, ceremonial observance) of angels. Because of the context, humility is often translated as false humility. If translated as self-abasement, it foreshadows the asceticism of vv. 20-23 as an evidence of religious devotion. Self-denial has often been seen as a sign of spirituality, a view that is still current today. The opponents are further described as those who depend on what they have seen, becoming proud (*phusioo*, inflated or puffed up) without reason because of their fleshly mind. These descriptions refer to those who claimed to see what others could not see, to have special revelations and special knowledge. They are proud, but their pride comes not from spiritual thinking but from their fleshly minds.

These no longer hold on to (*krateo*) the head. This refers to Christ. The metaphor of head and body was used earlier in the book and refers to Christ and the church. Those who are disconnected from Christ are missing entirely the only true source of strength that supplies, connects, and gives growth to the body.

2:20-23. This is the beginning of a new thought. The phrasing of 2:20 is parallel to 3:1, suggesting that they introduce two contrasting sub-sections within a larger literary unit. Colossians presents some unique problems in paragraphing as one looks at sentence structures, the presence of conjunctions, and contextual and thematic considerations.

2:20-22. “If you have died with Christ...” The first class condition is true, “since” you have died with Christ, or “because” you have died with Christ. Believers are dead to the basic principles (*stoicheion*, cf. 2:8) of the world because of their union with Christ (v. 19). The death mentioned here is specifically with reference to basic principles that guide the thinking of the world. The phrase “with Christ” may build on 2:12-13.

Why do you submit to decrees (same root as 2:14), as if you were still living according to (*en*, in) the world? Paul specifically mentions three examples of such decrees: do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. These have been frequently quoted out of context, as though they were Bible teaching to be obeyed. In the context, Paul is saying that these decrees are not sufficient guides for the Christian. These are given as examples of human rules. These have to do with perishable things and are based on human commands and teachings.

2:23. The problem with such things, as with much humanly devised teaching, is that they appear to be right, they look wise, and they sound good. Who can be against improving religious practice, having a little more humility, and self-denial? The word, *ethelothreskeia*, appears only here in the New Testament. The frequent translation is “self-made religion,” although the NET “self-imposed worship” also communicates the idea. Humility is repeated from 2:18, and again the context suggests false humility or self-abasement. In the context, neglect (*apheidia*) of the body refers to asceticism. The point is that the legalistic and ascetic teachings were not helpful in guarding against the gratification (*plesmone*) of the flesh.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Paul continues his description of his ministry in the gospel, calling special attention to the assurance, insight, and knowledge available in Christ, in whom is hidden all wisdom and knowledge. Although Paul is not with them, he is present in spirit and concerned about the deceptive arguments they are encountering.

Christ is everything. You received him, you live in him. You are rooted, built up, and firm in him. Be careful that you are not seduced by empty, deceitful philosophy that follows worldly thinking and human traditions, and does not follow Christ. Christ is the fullness of Deity, and you are fully complete in him as he rules over everything. Let me illustrate it for you. First, when you were circumcised with the circumcision of Christ (not Jewish circumcision), you saw how powerfully he removed your fleshly person. He did this as you were baptized with him, raised with him, and made alive with him, even though you had formerly been dead in trespasses and without the circumcision of Christ. His ability to forgive despite your past again shows his power. Second, he erased and removed your indebtedness from legal demands, nailing that to the cross. In the cross, he showed how powerless all other powers are, and through the cross he publicly displayed his triumph over all.

Now when anyone wants to apply new legal demands, you know that such is not necessary to prove the power of Christ in your life. Don't put up with requirements about food and drink and various ceremonies. Those are shadow, Christ is the reality. Don't let anyone rule you out, trying to show how much better they are than you on the basis of their humility, worship of angels, special revelation, or false pride that really comes from thinking like the world more than from thinking like Christ. Really, they are totally disconnected from Christ, and therefore unable to receive God's support, strength, and growth.

Since you have died with Christ to worldly thinking and worldly principles, why do you go on living like they matter? In fact, you are submitting to superficial rules about what you can handle, taste or touch. Don't you see that such things are not eternal and that such ideas are based on human commands and teachings. Oh, they look good, and wise, and right. The truth is that self-made religious rules, hypocritical humility, and self-denial do not really help us deal with the desires of the flesh.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Colossians 3

[Note: it is suggested that the student read the introductory materials on page 3-5 of this guide before beginning an individual preparatory reading and analysis.]

CONTENT

The paragraphing included in the Content section of each chapter are merely suggestions or guides. The student is encouraged to identify the paragraphs, and subsections within each paragraph, to assist in his or her own study. The division of the biblical text into paragraphs is usually fairly standard in modern translations.

Outline of Chapter

3:1-4, dying and living, life with Christ (continuation of paragraph that begins in 2:20)
3:5-17, the old life and the new life (vv. 5-11, vv. 12-17)
3:18-4:1, Christian duties of the new life

Introductory Comments on the Chapter

This chapter is the continuation of an extended literary section that began in 2:20. Four basic sub-units can be identified within the chapter.

In 3:1-4, the phrase “raised with Christ” contrasts with the phrase “died with Christ” in 2:20. The passage in 2:20-3:4 functions as a literary unit within a larger section.

In 3:5-11, the contrast of the old man and the new man points to Christ as everything.

In 3:12-17, Instructions for life with Christ together in the body show the importance of including others rather than excluding.

Finally, in 3:18-4:1, admonitions about family life show how Christ changes relationships in every part of life.

STUDY HELPS

3:1-4. “If then (*oun*) you have been raised with Christ.” The conjunction (*oun*) also appears in 2:6, 2:16, and 3:5. While the conjunction connects thoughts, and can also serve to connect literary sections, it is unlikely that here it serves to connect the first two chapters (doctrinal section) with the last two chapters (practical section). In the context, it is preferable to see its function as connecting 2:20-23 (if you died with Christ) with 3:1-4 (if you have been raised with Christ).

3:1-2. “If” introduces a first class conditional sentence (as in 2:20). “Since you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking (*zeteo*, present active imperative indicates continuous action) things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” To die with Christ separates the believer from the basic elements of the world; to be raised with Christ connects the believer to things above. These two phrases from 2:20 and 3:1 provide several corresponding contrasts. Raised with Christ repeats the concept from 2:12-13. The imperative of v. 2, think about (*phroneo*) the things above parallels v. 1 and repeats the words, things above (*ta ano*). We are formed by what we seek and think about. The alternative to thinking about things above is to think of things on the earth.

3:3-4. You have died likely repeats the thought of 2:20. The contrast within v. 3 is easily missed. You died so your life is hidden. That is, you died in order to live. Your life has been hidden (perfect tense) with Christ in God. Note the frequent repetition of the phrase “with him” or “with Christ” throughout the book. Christ is the source of spiritual life, but more is affirmed here. The idea that “Christ is life” has parallels in Phil. 1:21, to live is Christ, and in Gal. 2:20, Christ lives in me. When Christ is revealed, then also you will be revealed with him in glory. This is likely a reference to Christ’s coming again.

3:5-11. “Then put to death (aorist active imperative) your members that are of the earth.” The primary thrust of this section is that believers are to put off evil in order to put on the new man. The next section (3:12-17) will consider virtues to be included in the believer’s life. The list of evils includes fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and greed. Fornication (*porneia*) includes all kinds of sexual immorality. Impurity (*akatharsia*) means sexual immorality and moral uncleanness. In the context, the second meaning is more likely. Passion (*pathos*) can refer to suffering but here it refers to shameful passion (NET). Desire (*epithumia*) can be toward evil or toward good, but here is the former meaning is clear based on context. Greed describes a desire for things. Paul says such desire is idolatry.

Because of these things, the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience. A longer list of things that bring God’s wrath appears in Rom. 1:18, 29-31.

3:7-11. You once lived (*peripateo*, to walk) in these things, when you were living (*zao*) in them. The first verb refers to conduct, the second means to live. Formerly your conduct was characterized by such things when you were living in (*en*) them. Some have considered these sins so unlikely among the Jews that this must surely be a reference only to the Gentiles. Such a view fails to recognize the composition of the Colossian church where there were undoubtedly both Jewish and Gentile believers. Not every recipient of the letter was participating in all of the sins that are mentioned, nor is this list all-inclusive. Paul’s instruction is to put to death the worldly things in your life. In the text are some samples, but do not consider yourself acceptable before God simply because you pass the test with regard to the sins that are mentioned in the text. All worldliness in our lives is to be put to death. “Living in them” may mean “continuing to do them” or may mean “living among them” (cf. 1:27). The former seems to fit the context best.

3:8. But now put aside (aorist imperative) also all of these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy speech. In this verse and several following verses, Paul continues the idea of taking off and putting on garments, a common New Testament metaphor. Put off these things (v. 8), put off the old man (v. 9), put on the new man (v. 10), put on (v. 12).

3:9-11. These verses are one sentence in Greek. Do not lie to one another, since you have (literally, having, an aorist participle describing past action) put aside the old man with its practices. And have (literally, having, another aorist participle) put on the new (the word man is not in the text but is understood) who is being renewed to full knowledge (*epignosis*) according to the image (*eikon*) of the one creating him. The verb is passive, representing God’s work in renewal. This renewal makes us more and more like Christ (cf. 1:16, Christ as creator).

3:11. “Where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.” In the process of putting on the new and experiencing renewal that brings full knowledge of Christ, his nature and his work, there are no

distinctions. The barriers that the world honors do not exist in Christ. The application is to salvation in Christ, not to biblical roles and responsibilities. In Christ inequality is removed, which is in contradistinction to the efforts of the false teachers to establish superiority. Barbarian refers to the uncultured, and the Scythians were considered especially uncivilized.

3:12-17. This section of positive instructions is often seen as the other side of the mostly negative instructions in vv. 5-11. Paragraphing is difficult; some would begin the new paragraph at v. 9 on the basis of content, but the extended sentence in vv. 9-11 seems sufficient to justify the break between v. 11 and v. 12. As reflected in the chapter outline above, the best option seems to identify vv. 5-17 as a single unit, separated from 2:20-3:4 with the conjunction *oun*. Alternatively, one may see 2:20-3:17 as a unit with subsections in 2:20-23, 3:1-4, 3:5-11, and 3:12-17.

3:12. Paul's description of the church as elect, holy, and loved reflects Old Testament descriptions of Israel and are frequently used by Paul in his letters. "Put on" (aorist imperative) continues the metaphor of donning and taking off garments. This same terminology Paul uses concerning baptism (cf. Gal. 3:27, put on Christ). Just as he did with the evils to be put off, Paul provides a list of characteristics to be put on: tender-heartedness, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Tender-heartedness is literally "bowels of compassion" and is often translated mercy. Kindness governs relationships with others. Christian humility is genuine and not proud (cf. 2:18, 23). Gentleness was used of domesticated animals. Patience addresses again our attitude toward others and how we treat others. It may be safe to observe that these were largely lacking in the false teachers.

3:13. "Bearing with" (*anechomai*, to forbear, put up with, endure, suffer) one another. The participle form depends on the main verb in v. 12 (put on) and describes how one puts on these characteristics. Put on these characteristics by putting up with one another and by "forgiving one another." The word used here for forgiveness comes from the same root as the Greek word for grace. God's grace enables us to be forgiven by God, to forgive others, and to be forgiven by others. The forgiveness human beings extend to one another is the fruit of God's forgiveness of us. The phrase "if anyone toward any other has a quarrel (*momphe*)" belongs with the participles. The third class condition indicates probable future action. Christians will have disagreements, conflicts, quarrels, and complaints. It is precisely in the midst of such situations that it is essential to be forbearing and forgiving. Our model of forgiveness is the Lord himself. We follow his example in forgiveness, just as he forgave us.

3:14. "On top of (*epi*) all of this, put on love which is the bond (*sundesmos*) of completeness (*teleiotes*)." "Put on" is not in the Greek text, but is supplied as the continuation of v. 12. My preference to translate "bond of completeness" is "perfect bond."

3:15. "Let the peace of Christ rule (*brabeuo*, to govern) in your hearts, unto which you were called in one body, and be thankful." Christians are called to peace, and that peace is to be realized in one body, not in many separate bodies. Based on the context, peace here is most likely the peace between human beings in interpersonal relationships. An intensified form of the verb "rule" was used in 2:18, referring to the desire of the false teachers to pass judgment on others. The peace of Christ is the basis on which Christians see one another. The present imperative form indicates that gratitude is continuous in the Christian life.

3:16. “(You, plural) let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” Word of Christ is found only here in the New Testament. The reference is likely to the teachings of Christ. The subject matter in 3:12-15 easily reminds one of Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes. Whether Christ’s teachings dwell within us is our choice. The imperative form tells us that this is God’s will and God’s instruction for our lives. “In (*en*) you” can be translated “among you.” The difference in the emphasis would be whether the instruction is individual or corporate. The plural imperative may lead to the latter. “All of you should let the word of Christ dwell in your midst.” This verse is paralleled by Eph. 5:18, where the Christian life is made possible by being filled with the Spirit. Considering this parallel, letting Christ’s word dwell in us and being filled with the Spirit may refer to the same thing. Obviously, both empower the Christian life.

The main verb, to dwell, is expanded with a series of dependent participles: teaching, admonishing, singing. This is similar to the list in Eph. 5:19-21—speaking, singing, making melody, giving thanks, submitting. “With all wisdom” most likely goes with “teaching” and “admonishing.” Teaching (*didasko*) and admonishing (*noutheteo*, to warn, to call to mind) one another indicates a shared activity, even as the main verb is a plural imperative. Teaching and encouraging are not one-way streets. Every Christian is obligated to every other Christian. The third participle, “singing” is to be done with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with grace in your hearts to God. Singing with grace contrasts to teaching and admonishing with wisdom, providing as it were parentheses to open and close the verse.

This verse gives three ways we let the Word of Christ dwell in us: by teaching one another, by admonishing one another, and by singing to God. The first two participles are immediately followed by “to one another.” The last participle is followed by “to God.” Different types of songs are mentioned—psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. It appears all were known and were being sung in the early church. The last participle in this verse is specific—singing! The music Paul describes in this verse is singing. Whether “in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” modifies only the participle “singing,” or whether the phrase also modifies teaching and admonishing is not clear. The same list of musical types in Eph. 5:19 is connected to the participle “speaking to one another.” The speaking of Eph. 5:19 most likely refers to singing, based on the parallel. If “teaching and admonishing” are controlled by the list of musical types in this verse, these actions were also done by singing.

3:17. Every word and every action of a Christian is in the name of, by the authority of, the Lord Jesus, and is done with gratitude that is extended to God the Father through Him (Jesus). Here is a summary verse. Jesus is supreme. Jesus is Lord. Jesus has all authority. Nothing needs to be added to Jesus. Every aspect of the Christian life is measured by the word of Christ.

3:18-4:1. In the literature of the first century, it was common to enumerate the mutual responsibilities among members of a household, including slaves. In this section of the Colossian letter, Paul writes about the home from a Christian viewpoint and presents the mutual relationship between wives and husbands, between children and parents, and in even greater detail, the relationship between slaves and masters. The parallel passage in Ephesians is found 5:22-6:9. Such instructions are often seen in a negative light today, but in the first century, such was considered important and helpful. The focus is on the mutuality of these relationships within the home and family.

3:18-19. “Wives, be subject (*hupotasso*) to your husbands as is proper in the Lord.” In this passage, as in Ephesians, the one who in the cultural context was thought of as the weaker part of the relationship is considered first, but all are instructed equally, including those who had power in the cultural context. “As is proper” simply means that this is the right thing to do as a Christian.

The subjection in this passage, as in other New Testament passages, is between a wife and her husband, not in the relationships of men and women generally. The parallel in Ephesians makes clear that submission applies to everyone. Eph. 5:21 teaches mutual submission for all Christians. Jesus himself submitted to the Father, and every Christian submits to God and to Jesus as Lord. In our day of personal rights, submission is rejected. Even subjection to authority and governments is questioned. It goes against the individualism of our western worldview. It is, however, a valid biblical principle that has application in the life of every person.

“Husbands, love your wives, and do not bitter toward them.” A bitter attitude often results in harsh treatment. Husbands are to treat their wives right.

3:20-21. Children are to be obedient (present active imperative signifies continuous action). “Always keep on being obedient.” Again, a concluding phrase notes that this is the right thing to do: this is well-pleasing to the Lord.

“Fathers, do not provoke (*erethizo*, to cause to be resentful or angry) your children.” Children who experience constant tension with their parents will become disheartened (*athumeo*, to be dismayed).

3:22-4:1. “Slaves, obey in all things you earthly masters.” “Obey in all things” is a way of saying “obey completely” and does not extend to disobedience to God’s will. The obedience that slaves owe their masters comes from a sincere (*haplotes*, without hypocrisy, not self-seeking) heart and the fear of the Lord. It is not based on whether the master is watching or not. Christian slaves were different from those slaves who were “people-pleasers.”

The instructions to slaves continues in vv. 23-25, although the principles can easily be applied to every Christ. Whatever work we do is done for the Lord; Christians are always servants of the Lord first. We serve others because we are servants of the Lord Christ. This attitude causes the Christian to work with enthusiasm. The reward that we seek comes from the Lord, not from men. The reference to an inheritance in v. 24 was especially significant in the first century where slaves had in inheritance. A general principle that can be observed in all activities is this: one who does wrong will receive according to what he did wrong, without partiality. This is true of both human reward and divine reward.

4:1. This verse clearly belongs with the paragraph that began in 3:18, as it continues to treat the slave-master relationship. It appears that the masters being addressed are Christians who were slave owners. “Masters, give (*parecho*) justice and fairness to your slaves.” The reason given for the action is that the masters also have a heavenly master. Even in the slave-master relationship, mutuality and reciprocity are desirable, especially for Christians. It is often observed that the modern parallel to the slave-master relationship may be in the employee-employer relationship. Remember that this letter was sent at the same time the letter to Philemon was sent, and that Onesimus, a runaway slave, was accompanying Tychicus as he carried the letters from Paul to Colossae.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Because you have died with Christ to the things of the world, you are not obligated to follow traditions and human expectations that are based on worldly thinking. You can look around and see that such thinking looks good but does not improve morality. (2:20-23)

Because you have been raised with Christ, look at heavenly things, remember that you have died to earthly things, and look forward to authentic and glorious life in Christ. This will all be clear when he comes again.

Since you have died with Christ, put to death all of the things that belong to this world. These bring God's wrath. You remember that you used to participate in them, but now you have put off the old and all such actions and have put on the new that changes what you know and changes your very nature. All of this is possible because Christ is everything—in all, through all, for all.

Because you are God's elect, holy and loved by him, put on Christlikeness. That includes forgiveness, love, and peace. You can do this by putting Christ's word in your lives, in the wisdom of your teaching and encouraging one another, and in the grace of your singing to God. This is not a complete list of actions, so follow this principle. Whatever you do in words or actions, do it to the Lord Jesus. When you think of how he has changed your life, how can you not give thanks to God through Jesus!

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Colossians 4

[Note: it is suggested that the student read the introductory materials on page 3-5 of this guide before beginning an individual preparatory reading and analysis.]

CONTENT

The paragraphing included in the Content section of each chapter are merely suggestions or guides. The student is encouraged to identify the paragraphs, and subsections within each paragraph, to assist in his or her own study. The division of the biblical text into paragraphs is usually fairly standard in modern translations.

Outline of Chapter

3:18-4:1, Christian duties

4:2-6, Instructions and exhortations

4:7-15, Final greetings

4:16-18, Closing

STUDY HELPS

4:1. Comments on this verse are included in the Study Helps for Chapter 3.

4:2-6. The Colossian letter closes somewhat abruptly. This final section before the personal greetings and customary close is brief.

4:2-4. The instructions of this section are related to prayer and the advance of God's message about Jesus Christ. Be diligent (present active imperative, *proskatereo*, persevere, continue) in prayer, being vigilant (*gregoreuo*, awake, watchful) with thanksgiving. The dependent participle functions also as an imperative. Persistence and vigilance in prayer is crucial and Paul repeats himself. "Be diligent in prayer, praying...." Paul asks the Colossians to pray for him and those with him. He asks their prayers for three things: an open door for the word, to proclaim the mystery, to make it clear. The message is "the word" and "the mystery." Paul knew his obligation to preach the message of Christ and asks the participation of the Colossians in prayer.

4:5-6. The advance of the message is made easier when Christians live consistently with the message. Paul mentions behavior and speech. Walk (present active imperative, *peripateo*, metaphorically, to live) with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most (*exagorazo*, literally to buy up or to redeem, cf. Eph. 5:16) of the time (the opportunity). This admonition makes every Christian intentional in seeking opportunities for the gospel.

Christian speech is with grace and seasoned with salt. In modern language, salty speech often refers to vulgar speech, but in this verse the word is used in a positive sense. Here is a reminder that Christians are the salt of the earth. Christians who heed these instructions will be ready to respond when the opportunities come.

4:7-15. As is Paul's custom, he mentions several of his fellow workers by name in the closing greeting.

4:7-8. Tychicus apparently carried this letter (and the letter to Philemon). He is mentioned in Acts 20:4, Eph. 6:21, 2 Tim. 4:12, and Tit. 3:12. Tychicus would share information concerning Paul's state to comfort (*parakaleo*, also translated to encourage and to exhort) the hearts of the Colossians.

4:9. Onesimus was a runaway slave whose master, Philemon, lived in Colossae. The two letters (Colossians and Philemon) were delivered at the same time. Tychicus and Onesimus were together given the responsibility to explain the situation of Paul in prison.

4:10-14. Six co-workers send greetings: Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas. The same list of co-workers appears in Philemon, excluding Justus. Aristarchus is described as a fellow prisoner—either literally or metaphorically. Mark is John Mark (see Acts 13:5; 15:36-39). Paul notes that the number of Jews who have stayed with him as fellow workers in the kingdom is limited. They were a comfort (*paregoria*) to Paul. The inclusion of this phrase at the end of v. 11 likely suggests that those mentioned in vv. 12-14 were Gentiles.

Epaphras (1:7) had preached the gospel in Colossae. He was a prayer warrior on behalf of the Colossians. He was also connected to the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Luke was Paul's missionary companion and author of the New Testament books of Luke and Acts. A Christian named Demas would later desert Paul (2 Tim. 4:10).

4:15. Paul sends greetings to those in Laodicea, anticipating his request that the letter be read to the church there also (v. 16). The name Nympha is masculine or feminine based on the accent. (Accents were not included in the original text.) It appears the corresponding possessive forms (his, her, their) are based on the understanding of the scribe who was writing.

4:16-18. The letter to the Colossians is to be read in Laodicea, and Paul's letter that was read in Laodicea (a letter now lost, unless it is the letter of Ephesians as some have theorized) is to be read in Colossae. Archippus is also mentioned in Philemon 2 and was apparently a leader in the church in Colossae. The admonition concerning Archippus likely indicates that he was one of the leaders who had remained faithful in the face of the false teachers.

Paul often wrote a final greeting with his own hand (2 Thess. 3:17) as a mark of genuineness. He likely employed a scribe (*amanuensis*) to write the letters. "You" is plural. Grace be with all of you.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

To conclude, be vigilant in prayer with gratitude. Pray for me in my preaching, for open doors, for opportunities to proclaim, for clarity. Use the message to control your lives and your speech so that you will be able to use every opportunity to explain the gospel.

I am sending Tychicus and Onesimus to tell you about me situation, and lots of others here also send greetings. Greeting those in Laodicea, especially the church in Nympha's house. Share this letter with Laodicea and read the letter they have. Encourage Archippus to finish his ministry. Grace be with all of you.