

colossians

THE SUPREMACY AND SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST



colossians

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Welcome to Homegroups at SB Community Church

Homegroups have three essential elements:

- Bible study
- Prayer
- Community building

How to thrive in a homegroup:

To build community and trust, we all make every effort to **be prepared, be present, and be real.**

- Expect to spend 45 minutes to an hour preparing for your homegroup gathering. You can split this time up into shorter daily segments. Spend time reading and pondering the passage. Consider the questions and mark any that you particularly want to discuss during homegroup. Come ready to contribute and also to listen to others.
- Try to come each week—this honors the rest of your group and contributes to building the trust and connections that will help us all to grow. Arrive on time if possible. Set your phone aside. Notify your leaders if you won't be able to attend.
- We all long for authentic relationships, and homegroups can be a place where we are truly known and loved. Keep information shared by others confidential.
- If you're comfortable speaking out in a group, or talk a lot, regulate yourself. Leave space for others to talk. Ask questions to draw out others.
- Respect others' views, do not argue, do not interrupt. As trust grows, be willing to build relationships and to encourage each other.

The prayer of our pastoral staff is that each homegroup will grow spiritually, personally, and in community life as we study the Bible together. May you engage in and enjoy the riches of God's word each week!

Homegroups Serving in Children's Ministries



What Is Involved?

- Each homegroup is scheduled to provide childcare helpers 2-3 Sundays between September and June.
- This is strictly a helper role where you are assisting children's ministries leaders as they care for and lead the children.
- Be ready to be flexible and serve at a service time you don't normally attend!
- Helpers are placed in the following groups: Nursery, Toddlers, Preschool, and Elementary.
- You will be able to choose your service time and age group when you sign up.

Why Do We Do This?

Our philosophy is that everyone who regularly attends is part of our church family and the larger family of God. We believe it is our privilege and responsibility to care for one another, including the very youngest members. As you minister to SBCC's children, we hope that in the process you would:

- Meet people you might not otherwise meet.
- See God in unexpected ways and places.
- Find a role you may enjoy and in which you might like to serve more regularly.
- Enjoy yourself!

Substitutes:

- If you can't serve one of the Sundays your group is scheduled, you are responsible to find a sub for yourself. Use the emailed link you'll receive to choose another Sunday, make a switch, or sign up a friend in your place.
- Carolee Peterson is a great resource if you need help. (carolee@sbcommunity.org).
- All subs need to be someone who attends SBCC regularly and should be in high school or older.

- We really do need all scheduled slots filled every week!

The Day You Serve:

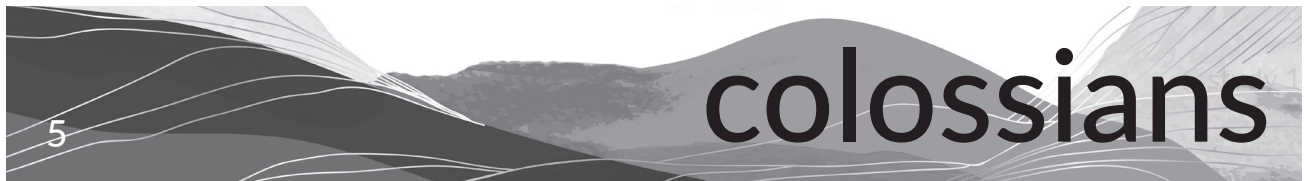
- MOST IMPORTANT! Please check in at the Info Table 20 minutes before the service starts.
- Report to assigned children's area right away. (Don't stop and talk.) Kids are arriving!
- Sick at the last minute? Call or text Rhonda DuPar at (805) 895-4274 or Carolee at (805) 895-4064.

Exemptions:

- Those who currently work as a regular Youth Leader or Children's Ministry Leader are exempt.
- Exemptions are not given for the important ministries of Worship, Sound/Projection, Info Table, Greeters, etc., since those roles do not require missing all of the adult service.
- We do give exemptions for health reasons or if there are other situations where it wouldn't be appropriate for someone to care for our children (psychiatric, felony, etc.). We ask that if you fall into this category, please let your homegroup leader know so we can exempt you.

CAROLEE PETERSON

Children's Ministries Pastoral Assistant
(805) 895-4064
carolee@sbcommunity.org



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Acknowledgements

This study guide was written by members of Santa Barbara Community Church. Introduction and Study 1: Erin Patterson; Studies 2, 3 and the Side Bar: Margaret Chapman; Studies 4 and 9: Tamara Erickson; Studies 5 and 8: Chris Comstock; Studies 6 and 7: Ken Hwang; and Study 10: Joel Patterson. Design and layout by Carolee Peterson.

Introduction

Saul of Tarsus was a devout Jewish leader who had spent considerable time and effort to punish, jail, and oppress the followers of Jesus in the years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. However, after an encounter with the risen Jesus while traveling on the road to Damascus, the man who would later be known as the Apostle Paul had his life radically transformed. (Read Acts 9 for this great backstory!)

After being baptized and spending time with the Christians in Jerusalem, he spent the rest of his life traveling throughout the Mediterranean world proclaiming the good news about Jesus, planting churches, and teaching, shepherding and encouraging these fledgling communities in their faith. Often he would communicate by letter to the churches he had relationships with, addressing concerns, answering questions, filling in gaps in their doctrine, and encouraging further growth.

This fall, we get to study Paul's letter to the church at Colossae, a city in what is now modern-day Turkey. Once a booming metropolis made wealthy through its wool and cloth industries, it was decimated by an earthquake around 60 AD and never fully recovered its size and importance. This letter is believed to have been written not long after this cataclysmic event.¹ Although the city was diminishing in economic and political status, the church was thriving through the past teaching and care of a man named Epaphras (1:7, 4:12).

Paul, in the company of his colleague Timothy, wrote this letter from a Roman prison as he was awaiting trial before Caesar (Acts 28:30-31). Even from prison, Paul's heart was with these young believers who had started out on the path of faith but needed further guidance. Their faith is vibrant and growing rapidly; he praises God for that in glowing terms! He is eager for them to have an even more profound and powerful understanding of the beauty and greatness and supremacy of Christ, whose work in creating and redeeming has tremendous implications for their lives.

As N. T. Wright says,

The main thing Paul wants to say can be summed up quite simply in terms of the gardening illustration [from 1:6]. He is delighted to hear that the wonderful new plant of the gospel has been planted in Colossae, and that it's bearing fruit and growing, as indeed it is doing in the rest of the world. Since Paul himself is responsible for bringing the plant to this part of the world, he wants them to know that he's thanking God that it's taking root with them, and he wants to tell them how to nurture it and help it to bear more fruit. (Wright 142)

Like any good gardener, Paul is looking out for pests, weeds and diseases that threaten the tender plants under his care. He warns the Colossians strongly about some damaging behaviors, beliefs, and cultural factors that could entrap these well-meaning believers back into spiritual slavery. Specifically, in Colossians 2:8, Paul mentions some popular ideas floating around in the culture of Colossae that he fears will captivate the believers' hearts. Although he doesn't give the philosophy a name, there are clues throughout the text as to what it entailed. It appears some were arguing that "more was needed for one to come to terms with the forces that ruled the world than simple adherence to Christ.

¹ Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, 407.

The ‘elemental spirits’ of the universe...had somehow to be appeased”². Combing through the text, for example, we can find references to angel worship (2:18, 2:20), self-abasement (2:18, 2:23), and dietary and festival adherence (2:16). Scholars point to these as elements of Jewish legalism, Greek philosophy, and mysticism.³

In summary, says one commentary,

Whatever the origin of this ‘heresy,’ it is clear that it argued that one needed to do more than just trust in Christ if one was to survive in a world dominated by powerful supernatural forces... Against this, Paul argues for the total sufficiency of Christ. By sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection in baptism, Christians are taken out of the realm in which the elemental spirits exercise dominion (2:20).⁴

Knowing and living in the confidence of Jesus’ power, supremacy, and dominion over all things gives all Christians the freedom to live joyfully in God’s good world. As Colossians goes on to explore some practical ramifications of this truth, we will explore how “discerning, confident, grateful, and ethical Christians...will bear fruit in a spiritually blighted world”.⁵

Colossians is for all of us! Whether you are reading the Bible for the first time, or whether you are very familiar with the Book of Colossians, we all have the challenge and joy of approaching the Holy Word of God on several levels. We want to read for **information**—to gain familiarity with the text, to understand the historical context, to know the themes. If these are God’s words and we are God’s people, it’s important for each of us to give our best efforts to knowing and understanding his Word and allowing it to shape our thinking and worldview.

And we also want to read for **formation**. Even though the Bible is rooted in a particular place and time, Christians believe that God’s Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), and that he still speaks through it by his Holy Spirit! We want to approach our study of the Word every time we open it as though we were on holy ground. Ask God for a soft and receptive heart; ask him to speak to you and guide you and convict you. Not all of us have a palpable “spiritual experience” every time we open a Bible, but

we can be assured that even when it feels mundane, daily exposure to God’s Word shapes us profoundly over time—particularly when we read, study, and pray it in community.



Take the time, either before your first homegroup gathering or the week after, to read all the way through Colossians. It should take you no longer than 15 minutes, but it’s worthwhile to read it all in one sitting to gain an overview of the main themes. Consider reading it aloud, or hearing it read via audio Bible while reading. And for a really helpful and creative thematic overview in video form, visit bibleproject.com/explore/video/colossians (or scan the QR code on the left).

² Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, 413.

³ Gundry, 395.

⁴ Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, 414.

⁵ NIV Application Commentary, 33.

And as we study and seek to allow Colossians to shape our thinking, we want to work hard together to get it into our hearts as well. One time-tested way to do this is to memorize some of it. Consider choosing a few verses to learn by heart so that they run through your mind and speak to your soul while you go about your day. We might suggest the beautiful Christological hymn of Colossians 1:15-20, or Colossians 3:12-17 as a powerful encouragement to our life together in the family of God.

Blessings on each one of you as you learn to delight in Christ and live according to your identity as beloved, holy, redeemed, and fruitful sons and daughters in the family of God!

Erin Patterson
Pastor – Homegroups
Fall 2023

4. Just from these few verses, we get an amazing snapshot of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus! What characteristics and distinctives are named here?

A noticeable phrase here is, “You learned it from Epaphras” in verse 7. It seems that Epaphras had been the first to preach the gospel in Colossae and to gather this little church together. He is mentioned twice in Colossians and once in Philemon 4:3, when it becomes clear that he is imprisoned along with Paul.

5. Read Colossians 4:12-13. What do we learn here about Epaphras’ role in the lives of the Colossian church?

6. Does “Epaphras” remind you of anyone? Hopefully there are people in your life who have helped you to learn the gospel, both in words and by life example, and who have prayed for you and worked hard to strengthen your faith. Name any who come to mind, and share stories with your homegroup as to their impact on you.

As we mature in faith and come to understand more deeply what God has done for us in Christ, and as the Spirit works in us, we naturally want others to experience the same. Increasingly, we begin to feel a sense of shared responsibility for the faith of those around us.

7. Who in your life is watching you and looking up to you for an example of faithfulness? List some names, and jot down some ways in which you are encouraging their faith in Jesus (or might do so in the future).

If you read these eight verses closely, you will notice the repeated mention of the Colossians' love for one another and for all God's people. It would appear from what we see here that Paul values this kind of love extremely highly as a sign of their true identity as disciples. He is, of course, echoing Jesus.

Read John 13:34-35.

For some of us Christians in 2023, the idea of intentionally investing ourselves in a local, in-person church community feels like it goes against the grain. It's certainly a counter-cultural concept, in a world where we can privately and easily access "content" online according to our preferences!

8. Describe your history with being part of a church, whether positive or negative or mixed. What does it mean to you to be part of SB Community Church and to seek to love the brothers and sisters of this particular body?

9. Let's be honest; loving our brothers and sisters in the local church can be a challenge sometimes! What would need to change in order for you to grow in this way, so that the words of Colossians 1:4 could be said of you?

Verse 6 is especially wonderful in the New Living Translation: "This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace."

10. How does knowing and understanding "God's wonderful grace" change a person's life?

11. Finally, look back on the verses we've read this week. Based on what you've read and considered, where do you feel prompted to pray for yourself and your faith as you head into this study of Colossians? Write down one or two things and come back to them in the weeks ahead.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Thank God for providing other believers for you to journey with. Praise him for your specific homegroup and for the wider body of believers at SB Community. Rejoice in the way the gospel is still bearing fruit and growing throughout the world in the 21st century.

Repent. If you struggle to love fellow believers, talk to God about that. Ask him to help you see them through Christ's eyes and love them as he loves them. If there is anything else in this passage that prompts repentance, lay these things before God.

Request. Try to name each member of your homegroup and ask God to help you love them. Pray for a lavish measure of faith and love among your homegroup. Ask that God would make the gospel bear fruit and grow among you, and flow out from the group.

Study 2

Colossians 1:9-14

Prayer is both something that is common to the human experience and something most of us feel we are not very good at. The concept is simple- talking to God! But what should we talk to God about, and how? What should we ask for?

1. Before jumping into our passage, consider your own prayers first. What names show up most often in your prayers? What kinds of things do you ask for on their behalf? What do you pray for yourself?

Paul often begins his letters by telling his readers how he is praying for them (you can see some examples in Philippians 1:9-11, I Thessalonians 1:2-3, and I Corinthians 1:4-9). Such passages serve as a model, for his original readers and for us, of how to pray. To imitate and practice praying like Paul might be the most productive way we can learn from his letters. This study gives us a chance to do that.

Read Colossians 1:9-14.

Although he may not have known them directly, because of their shared friendship with Epaphras, the Colossians were dear to Paul. He felt some responsibility for their knowledge of and growth in Christ. They were “his people.”

This passage has two parts: *requests* (vv. 9-11) and *thanksgiving* (vv. 12-14).

Requests

Paul starts by telling the Colossians that he and Timothy pray for them constantly (v. 9). He then tells them and us what they pray for.

His first request is that the Colossian Christians would “be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (v. 9).

In this verse Paul is employing multiple words to talk about the life of the Christian’s mind that come from ancient intellectual traditions:

- Knowledge – γνωση - gnosis
- Wisdom - σοφια - sophia
- Understanding - σύνεσις - synesis, from which we get our word *synthesis*

Paul prays that the Colossians would have this kind of knowledge so *that* (v.10) they “may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.” In other words, Paul is convinced that this kind of knowledge and understanding is essential for Christian maturity. N. T. Wright puts it this way:

[Spiritual knowledge, wisdom, and understanding are] characteristic of the truly human person who takes the humble yet confident place marked out for Adam in the order of Creation, under God and over the world. For Christians to grow up in every way will include the awakening of intellectual powers, the ability to think coherently and practically about God and his purposes for his people.¹

2. Discuss verses 9-10 and this quotation with your homegroup. Why do you think spiritual understanding and wisdom are vital for our growth as Christians?

3. Paul goes on to give us a beautiful picture of what it looks like to live a life pleasing to God. He lists four key attributes in verses 10-12. List them here:
 -
 -
 -
 -

4. Pause and pray for these characteristics for a group of people in our church—for example, seniors, youth, singles, staff, elders. What would it look like in practice if our lives looked more like this?

Paul wants the Colossians to have both endurance and patience. Again, we see him using two words together that have only a slight difference in meaning. N. T. Wright comments, “There is a slight distinction to draw between ‘endurance’ and ‘patience’. The former is what faith, hope and love bring to an apparently impossible situation, the latter is what they show to an apparently impossible person.”²

1 Wright, N. T. *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008. p. 58.

2 Wright, 60.

5. List a few “apparently impossible situations” and/or people in your sphere right now. How would a greater measure of God-given endurance and patience affect your thoughts, prayers, and actions?

In verses 11-12, Paul connects endurance and patience with joy and thanksgiving. Some commentators say that joy goes with the endurance and patience idea in verse 11—we should endure with joy. Others suggest it goes with the thanksgiving of v. 12—joy should issue in giving thanks. The Greek could mean either. The ESV opts for the former, “being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.” C. F. D. Moule writes, “if joy is not rooted in the soil of suffering, it is shallow.”³

6. Can you think of any times when God has given you endurance and patience in the face of suffering? How did joy and thanksgiving factor into the equation, if at all?

Thanksgiving

As Paul encourages the Colossians and us to be thankful, he focuses on three things:

- Spiritual qualifications we would otherwise not be able to earn or claim (v. 12)
- That God has brought (transferred) us into the kingdom of the Son (v. 13)
- Forgiveness through the work of the Son (v. 13)

Qualified, transferred, and forgiven—all of these things have already happened to and for the Colossians, and by extension, to us who are in Christ. The idea of being transferred into the Kingdom of the Son would be particularly evocative for Jews in the Colossian church, as the word used is the same as the word used when Israel was taken out of their own land and sent into exile by Assyria and Babylon.⁴ So in Christ, the promise of the reverse of the exile is opened to everyone.

³ Moule, C. F. D. *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon : An Introduction and Commentary* – Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary. Cambridge England: University Press. p.55.

⁴ Wright, 62.

7. Which of the things that Paul gives thanks for is the most meaningful for you today and why?

8. Now let's put it all together. Pick one of "your people" to pray for in the way that Paul prayed for his people in this week's passage. Slowly pray through Colossians 1:9-14, letting Paul's desires for the Colossians inform the desires you express to God for the person on your mind (Jot down notes below).

9. Reflect a bit on your time of prayer. How would your intercessory prayers look different from day to day if you modeled them after these verses? What things did the passage prompt you to pray for that you may not have otherwise?

Prayer Guide

- Rejoice.** God has forgiven our sins, rescued us from the dominion of darkness, and made us his heirs (vv. 12-13)
- Repent.** Confess the ways that we do not "live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way." Acknowledge before God areas of your life that are not pleasing to him.
- Request.** Ask for the characteristics that Paul requested for the Colossians here, especially:
- That you would be filled with the knowledge of God's will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding
 - That you would bear fruit in every good work
 - That you would grow in the knowledge of God
 - That you would endure with patience and joy

Paul often begins his letters by telling his readers how he is praying for them. Philippians 1:9-11, I Thessalonians 1:2-3, I Corinthians 1:4-9 provide a sampling of instances, but he breaks into prayer in all his letters.

Why do you think this is?

Modeling perhaps is a key reason Paul tells the people to whom he is writing what and how he is praying for them. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 he directly tells the Corinthians to follow him as he follows Christ. To imitate and practice praying like Paul might be the most productive way we can learn from his letters. The first two exercises in this study, therefore, will aim to help us do that.

Praying For People Near And Dear

The Colossians (at least some of them) were dear to Paul and people for whom he had some responsibility for their knowledge of and growth in Christ. They were “his people.” Pick one of “your people” to pray for.

As you read this passage slowly let ways in which Paul is articulating his desires for the Colossians inform the desires you express to God for your person. Also, let the concerns that are prominent in your thoughts for your person relate to the verses that you are reading.

For example: Verse 9 talks about Paul’s future hopes for the Colossians. This might lead you to pray for the future hopes you have for your person. Attend to your thoughts as you pray to see what you notice.

Did you happen to catch yourself praying, “Lord, would you please fill my person with a knowledge of my will through all the wisdom and understanding that my good advice and wise counsel gives... let him/her listen to my good advice and make the most of the suggestions, connections and directions that I give”?

It is a sign of a healthy prayer life if while praying, you feel the Holy Spirit chuckling at you and gently helping you see intentions of yours that aren’t necessarily congruent with the scripture you are praying. Perhaps you end up praying back, “Yes, Lord, I see that if you fill my person with knowledge of your will, it is likely to be something that I haven’t thought up yet. So probably if you actually answer my prayer that your Spirit would give him or her all wisdom and understanding, it is likely that he or she will come to us with ideas and plans that are surprising and challenging. Help me to be prepared for that and not get in your way.”

Perhaps some of your near and dear ones don’t share your spiritual enthusiasm. Praying Colossians 1:9 then might pick up themes like, “Lord, it’s hard for me not to try and pressure my people to be wise and devoted. So help me to be filled with wisdom and understanding and leave room for your Spirit to fill my person.”

For verse 10 you might think about all the ways that you frame “living a life worthy of the Lord pleasing him in every way.” What does that look like to you? As you turn over the pieces of this vision in your mind and before Jesus, ask, “Is that, Lord, part of your vision? If so, I pray that this or that piece of my vision would work out.”

Take some time to think about what you know of this particular person - what kind of tree is he or she? What would it mean for him to bear fruit? Ask yourself that question, reasoning from what you know of God and of what it means to be made in the image of God overlapping with what you know of the uniqueness of this person in front of you.

If it is the case, delight in the awareness that God has rescued this person from the dominion of darkness and brought him into the dominion of the Son he loves, letting it permeate your imagination. Then try to imagine what “bearing fruit in every good work” might mean for this person. If it is not the case, lament and long and let the assurance that God hears you permeate your imagination.

It’s helpful from time to time in prayer to consciously imagine Jesus observing your thoughts as you frame your hopes for your person. “Lord, you have just sat with me and seen all that I asked and imagined. And you know that some of those things don’t fit at all with your ideas and some of those ideas are actually from you. So again, help me and help my person.”

Keep going in conversation with Jesus - taking Paul’s prayer verse by verse and your person thought by thought and talking about it with Jesus, all the while giving yourself space to listen for Jesus to bring his response to your mind.

How did it go? What did you notice?

When could you feel it tending toward a dialogue?

When you allowed the question, “How would Jesus respond to that thought or request or idea?” to surface in your stream of consciousness, did you hear any gentle laughter or correction?

Praying For People At A Distance

Read the passage slowly again. This time, think of one person (an elder, staff person, missionary, someone whom you led to Jesus who is in a different city or place now carrying on with life in service to Jesus) who can you pray this for, and pray it.

What did you notice? Is it easier or harder to listen to Jesus and allow God to direct your thoughts as you pray for someone whom you know less well, in whom you are perhaps less invested?

Are there skills or habits of prayer that come easier when you are praying for more distant people that would help you as you try to pray for your close people?

Praying This Passage For Oneself

It takes time and work to pray thoughtfully for another. Perhaps after working through the exercises above you are thinking “Those Colossians (my people) were so lucky! They had the apostle Paul himself (or me) praying for them. I wish someone would pray this prayer for me!”

So write the prayer out on a card and put a sticky note on it saying “pray this for [fill in your name]” and leave it in a prominent spot for the people in your life to pick it up and pray it. Who would you leave the card out for?

Okay, maybe you won’t actually do this. But if the idea did have even slight appeal, then, rest assured, Jesus says to you “My dear one, I sit at the right hand of God the Father; I live to intercede for you. Don’t you think that if this is a good prayer, I am probably praying this prayer for you?”¹ If Jesus prays this prayer for us, it is probably worth studying this prayer just to get to know what Jesus might be praying for us right at this very moment.

¹ See Hebrews 7:25

Study 3

Colossians 1:15-23

Socrates is reputed to have said, “I know that I know nothing.” If pondering paradoxes in the passage for this week provokes that thought in you, do not be discouraged! That is probably a sign that you are on the right track—stretching wide the corners of your imagination to understand the massive things that Paul is saying about Jesus. That Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus and one of the most philosophically and rhetorically capable of ancient thinkers lapses into poetry, even hymnody¹ here, likely signals that he himself is stretching out to the extremity of his capacity to put into language what God reveals of himself in Jesus Christ.²

Because the Colossians’ thought-world has been informed by the presence of Jews in their region, Paul feels free to express some heady spiritual categories in Jewish language (e.g. Israel as God’s firstborn son). The Gentiles had their own rich history of trying to understand God, and people in places like Colossae had for centuries put Jewish ideas in conversation with Greek religious and philosophical traditions.

But now, the news of the gospel that they could know God through knowing Jesus Christ, the Jewish man who had lived, died and been raised from the dead roughly 30 years before and 800 miles away, had come to Colossae (most likely, as we have seen, through the teaching of Epaphras). Fusion and confusion were not surprisingly erupting. No wonder Paul was praying in the passage we studied last week! He longed for the Colossians to know and do the will of God and knew that depended on them growing in their capacity to understand God. But it was hard.

1. Think about the expectations that you bring to Bible reading. Do you expect the Bible to challenge you? Bore you? Comfort you? Reinforce your prior opinions? Speak to you? Have your expectations changed over time? If so, how?

Whether one was Jewish or Gentile in Colossae, the gospel would have challenged the way you used to think. Jews had to grapple with the idea of a crucified Messiah. Gentiles, who tended to think that the spirit was good and the body was bad, had problems with the idea of God becoming human. For both groups, however, the Jewish backstory is essential for understanding the gospel. Paul makes this clear in the passage we are studying this week. **Read Colossians 1:15-23.**

1 There has been a lot of discussion in the last couple centuries over whether this section of Colossians was a quotation or paraphrase of a hymn that was already in circulation prior to Paul’s writing this letter.
2 See Romans 11:33-36 where, after an extended discussion about how the gospel relates to God’s plans for his chosen people, Paul rhetorically throws up his hands in worship and rattles off what we call a doxology—reason dissolving into praise and wonder beyond words.

2. Ask God to give you “spiritual wisdom and understanding” (v. 9), and then read this week’s passage carefully. It has several paradoxes. Can you spot any?

This passage has two parts: *Who is Jesus?* (vv.15-20), and *What does that mean for us?* (vv.21-23)

Who is Jesus?

In verses 15-17, Paul talks about Jesus in relation to Creation.

3. According to these verses, what are the various ways in which Jesus is related to Creation?

Paul starts verse 15 with a paradox, as you may have spotted earlier: Jesus is the image of the invisible God. That should make you scratch your head! But when he talks about Jesus as the Creator, he is very clear. If Greek categories divided reality into Spiritual and Material, the Old Testament categories Paul employs are dividing the world into Creator and Created. The breadth of Paul’s claims for Jesus here are extraordinary. For example, “all things were created by him and for him”; and “in him all things hold together.”

4. Discuss what some of these “all things” might be. What difference would it make if you lived as though this was true?
5. Read verses 18-20. Make a list of all the truths about who Jesus is that Paul gives us here. You should be able to find somewhere between three and five.

Some of the language may be familiar to you—for example, that Christ is the head of the church, or that God is reconciling the world through him. Probably less clear is the idea that Jesus is “the firstborn from among the dead.” N. T. Wright explains:

For Paul as throughout the Bible, sin and death were inextricably linked, so that Christ’s victory over the latter signaled his defeat of the former (see Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28). “Firstborn” here...implies that Christ’s resurrection, though presently unique, will be acted out by a great company of others. Those Jews who expected a resurrection from the dead... had seen it as a large-scale, single event at the end of time. Paul however, believed that God brought forward the inauguration of the “age to come” into the midst of the “present age”, in order that the power of the new age might be unleashed upon the world while there was still time for the world to be saved.³

6. Paul’s conclusion from this truth about Jesus is that he deserves preeminence/supremacy in everything. What might it look like for Christ to have preeminence in your family life? in your work? in your...?, etc. Give some examples.

Earlier, Paul wrote about Christ as Creator. Now Paul is talking about Creator becoming part of creation. Verse 19 translated literally goes, “because in him (Jesus), he (God) was pleased, all his fullness to dwell”. Mull over that—all things hold together in Christ, and in the incarnation, all the fullness of God entered into Creation. And then, verse 20, he dies on a cross.

7. As a homegroup, give thanks for this amazing paradox, and worship this God who made all things and for whom all things were made, and then became human, with all the fullness of God dwelling within him. Give thanks for his death on the cross, using the words of verse 20.

What does this mean for us?

Paul starts this section in verse 21 by reminding the Colossians of what they once were—“alienated from God” and “enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior”—not a pretty picture. “But now,” verse 22, everything has changed.

8. What has Christ done for us, according to verse 22?

³ Wright, 74.

Verse 23 may jump out at some of us. Many of us have struggled with faith, or know people who have walked away from God.

9. What is the difference between facing important spiritual questions and doubts, and walking away from the faith?

10. What encouragement/warning is there in verse 23 for any among us who are having a hard time with faith?

11. Undoubtedly, these verses contain some of the most profound teachings about Christ found in the whole New Testament! Discuss with your homegroup what it would look like for you to live in response to the amazing truths we have studied this week and pray for each other to this end.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Give thanks for who Christ is (use words from verses 15-19) and what he has done for us (vv. 20-22).

Repent. Confess the ways we do not give Christ the supremacy, the preeminence (v. 18) in our lives, in our church.

Request. Ask that we would “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (v. 23).

Study 4

Colossians 1:24–2:5

The focus in last week's study was on who Christ is (verses 15-19), what he's done (vv. 20-22), and who we are because of that (v. 23). This week we move to who Paul is, and why he's writing a letter from jail. We will jump right into the deep end with a section about Paul's suffering that has filled commentary pages with different observations. But first...

Read Colossians 1:24-2:5 slowly and let it sink in.

1. Do any words or ideas stand out? What questions do you hope this study and our discussion will answer?

Take a look at verses 24 and 25. Some have wondered whether these verses might mean that Christ's death and suffering on the cross were somehow lacking, and that by his own suffering Paul could sort of "top off" or add to what Christ had accomplished.

2. Look up the following passages and make a note of how each contributes to our understanding of the sufficiency of Christ's suffering for us.

Hebrews 9:24-26

Hebrews 10:14

Although two Greek words are used in these verses—*pathema* (suffering) and *thlipsis* (affliction)—most translations use them interchangeably to mean enduring, ongoing tribulation, trouble, anguish, and persecution.

Two New Testament scholars shed a little more light on these verses:

When Paul writes that his own sufferings complete "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (1:24), there is no implication that Christ suffered too little to provide a full atonement for sins. Paul means that sufferings endured in spreading the gospel are also necessary if people are to

be saved and that Christ continues to suffer with his persecuted witnesses because of their union, or solidarity, with him.¹

The word *afflictions* is never used for the sufferings of Jesus on the cross. Most commentators see this as a reference to the affliction Jesus endured in ministry. These *afflictions* are not yet complete, and in this sense Jesus still “suffers” as He ministers through His people.

For the sake of His body, which is the church, Paul did not suffer for himself in the way that an ascetic might. Instead he suffered for the sake of the body of Christ. Ascetics focus on their holiness, on their spiritual growth, and on their perfection. Paul followed in the footsteps of Jesus and was an others-centered person. Paul found holiness, spiritual growth, and maturity when he pursued these things for others.²

2. Paul considered suffering to be part of living out his calling to evangelize the Gentiles in A.D. 62. What might suffering for the sake of other believers look like in 2023? Do you think it will look different in five years? In ten?

3. The drama builds in verses 26 and 27 as Paul reveals “a mystery hidden for ages and generations.” What is the mystery, who is it for, and why do you think it’s being revealed at this point in history?

Tim Mackie of BibleProject³ writes,

There are many words for hope in the ancient languages of the Bible and they’re all fascinating. In the Old Testament there are two main Hebrew words translated as “hope.” The first is YAKHAL which means simply “to wait for.” The other Hebrew word is QAVAH which also means “to wait”...

1 Gundry, 396.

2 David Guzik, *Blue Letter Bible Commentary/Study Guide for Colossians*, 1:24 Section C - “What Paul did for the Colossians”.

3 <https://bibleproject.com/>

...Biblical hope is based on a person which makes it different from optimism. Optimism is about choosing to see in any situation how circumstances could work out for the best. But biblical hope is not focused on circumstances, in fact hopeful people in the Bible often recognize there's no evidence that things will get better but you choose hope anyway. Like the prophet Hosea. He lived in a dark time when Israel was being oppressed by foreign empires. And he chose hope when he said God can turn this valley of trouble into a door of hope, like the day when Israel came up from the land of Egypt. God had surprised his people with redemption back in the days of the Exodus and he could do so again. So it's God's past faithfulness that motivates hope for the future. You look forward by looking backwards, trusting in nothing other than God's character. Like the poet of Psalm 39 who says, "And now, O Lord, what else can I QAVAH (hope) for? You are my YAKHAL (hope).

In the New Testament, the earliest followers of Jesus cultivated a similar habit of hope. They believed that Jesus' life, death and resurrection was God's surprising response to our slavery to evil and death. The empty tomb opened up a new door of hope.⁴

4. What fuels your hope? Use the verses below to prompt your thinking.

Psalm 39:7

Psalm 130:5-7

1 Peter 1:3-5

If Paul had asked a first-century marketing team to come up with a one-sentence mission statement, verse 28 might have been it. Read this verse in a few translations.

5. How would you break out the what, how, and why of Paul's purpose?

6. Helping other people to grow and mature in their faith is one privilege and responsibility that every Christian has. Where in your life do you have opportunities to do this, even in seemingly small ways?

⁴ The Bible Project annotated series video, *Yakhal/Hope*, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/yakhal-hope/>.

Take another look at verses 1:29 and 2:1. Hitting roadblocks in our spiritual life, or church life, or in relationships can sometimes feel like failure. We're geared for success and smooth sailing. Anything less can make us wonder if we've missed a turn somewhere. Paul expects struggle, finds it, and makes no attempt to hide it.

7. Thinking back to your response to question 6, what encouragement do you find in these verses?

Ephesians 1:16-17

Colossians 4:12b

1 Timothy 4:10

Paul has some very specific goals for these Colossian believers in 2:2-4. We can assume he's "struggling" in prayer for them about things Epaphras told him, and also for things all believers need.

8. Based on his list, name the areas where Paul hopes this church will grow.

Look again at verse 5. Paul uses his faith and imagination to encourage the Colossians. He has never met these people and yet he is rejoicing in what he "sees".

9. In what ways do faith and spiritual imagination motivate you to encourage others in their spiritual maturity? What insight do these verses provide?

10. Finally, look up three more verses that speak of the privilege and responsibility we have in each others' lives to help each other grow in faith. What are a few areas in which you yourself need to grow in spiritual maturity? List what comes to mind. How could your homegroup help and encourage you in these things?

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Hebrews 10:24

Hebrews 11:1

Prayer Guide

- Rejoice.** Thank you for allowing me to share in your sufferings for the sake of others. Thank you for giving me all I need to do this, and for surrounding me with other believers who also share in the struggle.
- Repent.** Forgive me for forgetting to pray for those on the front lines of teaching and preaching, and for working so hard to avoid struggling that I miss out on your blessing.
- Request.** Continue to equip the church for works of service through the gifts of teaching you've given our pastors, and all the other gifts you've given each of us. Show us your power as we submit to you, and work together to share the good news of your love and sacrifice.

Study 5

Colossians 2:6-15

Have you ever experienced someone try to sell you something or aggressively persuade you to some perspective? What methods did they use? What effect did it have on you and why?

Read Colossians 2:6-15.

1. What themes do you see emerging or continuing in this passage? Are there any references, statements, or terms that prompt more questions for you?

The Colossian context and challenge

As we discussed in the introduction to this study, the young Colossian church existed in a cultural and religious milieu that included many influences, from Roman/Greek gods and various gnostic philosophies to legalistic Judaism. It is in the midst of these cultural currents that Paul encourages the Colossian Christians to hold fast to what they have received in the teaching of the gospel, namely that the Lord Jesus stands head and shoulders above anyone or anything that would lay claim to their allegiance. Through Christ's cross and his subsequent resurrection from the dead, Jesus has not only proved himself supreme over all others who would tout special knowledge or authority, but also wholly sufficient to deal with their sin.

Encouraging the Colossians to be proactive in their new found faith, Paul uses agricultural and construction metaphors in verses 6-7 to describe the life of discipleship to Jesus. Once you have "received Christ Jesus as Lord," there is more.

2. How does the language of "rootedness" and "building" speak to the nature of our discipleship to Jesus?

3. Describe some experiences, practices, or people that have helped root/build you in Christ. Share these with your homegroup and listen for what might be helpful in better rooting/building your own life in Jesus.
4. Paul caps his exhortation on discipleship with a command to overflow with thankfulness. How is thankfulness related to being rooted and built up in Jesus?

Look back at verse 8. Pretty quickly Paul's tone changes to that of warning. His exhortation towards rootedness and being built up in Christ was not for nothing. Indeed it was for the purpose of resisting what he calls being taken "captive" by other ideas and powers that would lead the Colossian believers to lend their allegiance to something or someone other than Christ.

Paul describes these would-be captors as a threefold threat: "hollow and deceptive philosophies," "human tradition," and "the elemental spiritual forces of this world."

It is unclear exactly what false teaching(s) the Colossian believers are being invited to accept. Paul gives us the contours but not the specifics. Much has to be derived from Paul's antidote to these erroneous ideas, which he will go on to apply.

However, scholars have tried to imagine what these teachings could involve. Read these perspectives to gain a sense for what the Colossian believers were facing and which we, twenty centuries later, may face in one form or another.

Tim Mackie posits the Colossians were facing a two fold challenge:

On one side, a "mystical polytheism," as Colossian believers would have grown up worshipping the Greek and Roman gods that govern the various areas of human life....On the other, a pressure to observe the laws of the Torah.¹

1 Mackie, Tim. "Book of Colossians Summary: An Overview Video." BibleProject. <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/colossians/> (3min45sec)

F. F. Bruce states,

Their teaching was rather a blend of the highest elements of religion known to Judaism and paganism; it was, in fact, a philosophy.²

Potentially a form of Jewish gnosticism, Christians in that region would have been exposed to various gnostic strands of thought (i.e. that spirit was good and matter was evil and hence antithetical to one another; that no direct contact was possible between the supreme God and the created universe; that one needed special secret knowledge in order to be liberated from their material bodily slavery).³

Craig Keener expounds on what these “elementary principles” could be referring to:

“Elementary principles” or “basic principles” translates a term that can refer to the personified forces of nature, spirit beings or “spirits” as in Galatians 4:9; but here it may refer, as usually, to elementary principles (the term is often used of the alphabet). If this is the case, Paul affirms that the simple message of Christ is much more profound than the greatest secular wisdom could be.⁴

Given the various, and often overlapping, interpretations above regarding the Colossian heresy...

5. What are the ideas, philosophies, and religious impulses that seem to have a gravitational pull on Christians today, that may woo us away from our allegiance to Christ?

6. Choose one or two that you wrote down. How do you think Paul would argue against these?

Looking ahead to verses 9 and 10, with clear reference back to Paul’s description of the nature of Christ in 1:19, we have what is perhaps the clearest statement of the divinity of Christ in the New Testament.

2 Bruce, 98.

3 Bruce, 96.

4 Keener, 575.

Hear what N. T. Wright has to say about these verses:

What [Paul] means simply, is that Jesus was and is not simply a fully human being (though he is), not simply a man remarkably “full of God” (though that as well). He was and is the bodily form taken by God himself, God in all his fullness.⁵

7. What difference does it make that Christ is fully human but also fully God in human form?

Paul says the Colossians are “in Christ” and therefore have been brought to “fullness”. What is true of Christ is true of those who are in Christ. We have no lack if we are in Christ, no lack of wisdom, no secret knowledge to gain, no need to appease the forces of a chaotic spiritual realm.

8. List some fears and anxieties you have been struggling with recently. How could a deepened reassurance of Christ’s supremacy over every power and authority comfort you specifically in these areas? Write out a prayer that acknowledges his lordship over the specific things that are keeping you up at night.

For the people of Israel, circumcision was the outward, visible sign that they were included in God’s covenant family. However potent a symbol, circumcision on its own did nothing to change the human heart. In verses 11-13, Paul is not discarding the symbol of circumcision; rather he is appropriating it into the powerful reality of heart transformation and inclusion in God’s family through participation in Christ’s death and resurrection. This is the “circumcision not performed by human hands” but “by Christ”.

As N. T. Wright puts it: “True circumcision isn’t what happens to a man’s body, it is what happens when you are buried with Christ, baptized, and raised with him in his resurrection, by God’s power.”⁶ In other words, instead of putting off a small piece of flesh, we are called to put off an entire way of operating (*the flesh*) according to the world’s ways and our desires, and live a completely different kind of life.

⁵ Wright, 167.

⁶ Wright, 168.

and authorities stripped him naked and celebrated a public triumph over him. That's what they normally did to such people. On the cross, Paul declares, God was stripping the armor off the rulers and authorities! Yes: he was holding them up to public contempt! God was celebrating his triumph over the principalities and powers, the very powers that thought it was the other way round. But here the sharp edge of what he's saying is that all the authorities and rulers that might try to take over your life are included in the ones shamed by the triumph of God in the cross of Jesus.⁸

Prayer Guide

- Rejoice.** Paul encourages us to “overflow with thankfulness”. Spend some time thanking God for everything that he has accomplished through Christ on our behalf. And for the many blessings he lavishes on your life.
- Repent.** The reality is our debt of sin has been forgiven, nailed to the cross. However we still sin. We continue to trust in ourselves over and against trusting Jesus. Spend a few minutes confessing those instances, patterns, attitudes, asking Jesus to forgive you and make you whole.
- Request.** Jesus is the head over every power and authority. In other words, Jesus is in charge of our world. Take some time to ask him for what you need or for what others may need.

⁸ N. T. Wright, 171.

Study 6

Colossians 2:16-23

“God helps those who help themselves.” “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” “To thine ownself be true.” Throughout human history, we have been given statements like these to help us in our pursuit of the divine. However, if we are not careful, we may not even realize that what has been passed down to us is not even biblical. These statements may not be innately bad, but like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, they speak to our futile impulse to try to make our own way into God’s good graces.

However, the New Testament is insistent that human effort alone is not enough to reconcile us with a God who is holy and created us for holiness. One of the largest issues in the early Church was legalism, essentially the belief that one had to earn righteousness through good works. In this week’s verses, the Apostle Paul encourages believers to hold on to the truth of the gospel and to live the genuine good life as new creations in Jesus Christ.

Read Colossians 2:16-23. Write down any initial observations or questions that arise as you go through the passage.

Paul starts with the command to the Colossian believers not to let others judge them based on food, drink, or holy days. Let’s read some of the other places in Scripture where he addresses these same issues. Write down what Paul says about them.

Romans 14:2-9

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

1 Corinthians 10:18-30

1. What sorts of things might Christians today be tempted to turn into a new legalism? (These things might be negative such as, “Christians don’t get tattoos/earrings/etc.”, or positive like, “All Christians must listen only to Christian music.”)

As we have seen, the people of Colossae were heavily influenced by pagan worship, and a culture who trusted their gods to provide food, health, pleasure, and nature.¹ In the midst of this spiritual chaos, many believed that it was more spiritual to refrain from certain foods (especially meat sacrificed to idols), strong beverages like wine (possibly following the Nazarite vows from the Old Testament), and to observe the sacred calendar (which also involved following strict dietary laws). Paul insists on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ and his reconciling work on the cross— as we saw last week, redeemed, baptized believers may trust in Christ alone and live in freedom. However, as we see in his other epistles, our freedom in Christ is not intended to give us a license for self-indulgence, but must be informed by humility and love for others.

2. On a practical level, how do you live out your faith free from legalism?

Consider the words of the scholars N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird:

Paul’s opponents are implying that there are only two ways to live: the Jewish way, observing Torah, or the gentile (pagan) way, still enslaved to idols. No, says Paul, there is a third way: a double freedom, into which you are released and transformed by the new exodus that God has accomplished in Jesus the Messiah. That results in love....²

3. How do you ensure that you are not swinging your freedom too far to license where you may be actually falling into sin and disobedience?

1 Wright and Bird, 457.

2 Wright and Bird, 411.

Paul then warns against people who judge and look down on others according to their false humility and their worship of angels. These were people who believed they were the spiritual elite because of their spiritual experiences and their strict way of life. Paul tells the church family to pay them no attention as they are in fact puffed up with pride by their unspiritual minds.

4. According to verse 19, what is the key to true spiritual growth? How is this achieved as one body supported and held together?

In verses 20-23, the Apostle Paul instructs God's people to no longer follow these rituals and rules which are only temporary and cannot produce God's righteousness within us. Paul's basis for this is that they are already true participants in Christ's death (especially celebrated in the sacrament of baptism). Since they have died with Christ, why are they now trusting in their own efforts of legalism and asceticism to grow?

5. This concept of having died with Christ is found throughout Paul's letters. Read these passages and write down what Paul is saying in your own words.

Romans 6:1-7

Galatians 2:19-21

Philippians 1:20-26

6. Read over each of these situations and write down how you would respond.

Situation 1: There are two people who are members of Santa Barbara Community Church in a debate on the patio. One began following Jesus during the Jesus movement in the 1970s and is a firm believer in freely coming to Jesus wearing t-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops on Sundays. The other member grew up in a Baptist church in New England and wears her "Sunday best" as she desires to give God her best. Each strongly argues that their view represents how all should come to worship on Sundays. What would you say to defuse the situation?

Situation 2: How would you respond to a person who believes that it isn't necessary to worship with the church family on Sundays due to freedom in Christ?

As a final word here, when we are talking about legalism versus license in the Christian life, it's worthwhile to bring the conversation back to Christ himself, as Paul does in verse 17. What is the state of your heart toward Jesus as the ultimate purpose for existence? Is it your wholehearted desire to honor him with every aspect of your life—your beliefs, habits, priorities? Or, deep down, are you just trying to figure out what is the minimum amount of “religious stuff” you can do so you'll look good in comparison to others? A little of both, maybe? Take your thoughts to God and ask for him to greatly increase your love and reverence for him!

Prayer Guide

- Rejoice.** Praise God for the freedom you are offered in Christ! You do not have to live under a burden of guilt or try to appease God with good behavior. Because Christ is enough for you, you are free to live a joyful and holy life in Christ. Celebrate this!
- Repent.** Take some time to consider ways in which you can be more connected to the head who is Christ. Write down anything that God reveals to you and pray for God's help to obey.
- Request.** Take some time to consider ways in which you can be more connected to the rest of the body, the Church. Write down and pray for any people whom God brings to your mind.

3. Based on Colossians 3:1-17, how would you respond to the philosopher Johnny Cash?

As belief leads to behavior and identity leads to action, so much of our discipleship is formed in our minds (see Colossians 3:10). Both imperatives from verses 1-2 are verbs that are in the 2nd person plural (meaning “you all” or “y’all” depending on where you’re from) and present imperative, which means we are to do this at the present and also continuously.

4. What do you think these “things from above” are?

5. What are some practical ways you might seek and set your minds on these things?

For the rest of the passage, Paul gives us two lists comparing our old lives enslaved to sin and our new lives free in Christ. As he does in his other epistles where Paul gives us lists of sins (1 Corinthians, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy), sexual sin is placed first. It is a great reminder that we currently live in and have always lived in a sexualized world, and that sexual sin can have a stronghold over our lives.

6. Write down Paul’s list of sins in verses 5-9.

7. Why does Paul say that greed/ covetousness is idolatry?

8. The Scriptures warn us again and again to pay attention to the words that come out of our mouths. Do a little self-evaluation of this part of your life. Consider slander, gossip, coarse language, shading the truth. How might you “put these things to death”?

We must remember that Paul’s call to seek and set our minds on things above is never to be an abstract exercise of the theoretical; we are called to actively put to death the parts of our old lives that have no place in the people of God. As some scholars put it, “The ‘heavenly’ life does not mean having one’s head in the clouds. It means killing off the vices of sex and speech.”² In addition, Paul instructs us to put away or lay aside our sin like old dirty clothes.

9. Practically speaking, have you had the experience of actively putting to death a sinful part of your life? What steps did you take?

10. According to verse 10, what is the great hope of our discipleship in these areas? What is the significance of the verb “you are being renewed”?

In Genesis 3, we read of how Adam and Eve introduced sin to the world. God made clear that the consequence of this would be pain and death. However, God in his compassion also provided for their needs by providing clothing. Here in Colossians 3 we see this same pattern at work. As we are called to put to death and lay aside our old selves, we see God’s amazing grace: he doesn’t leave us naked and ashamed, but rather, clothes us in his goodness and perfection.

11. Read Colossians 12-17 and write down ways that you can grow and live this out in your own life. How can your homegroup grow and live this out together?

² Wright and Bird, 465.

Prayer Guide

- Rejoice.** Thank God for providing the amazing gift of His Word. Thank Him that you are not left in the dark about His truth and the way He wants us to live. Rejoice that He is always with you and will never give up on you.
- Repent.** If you struggle to seek and set your mind on heavenly things, talk to God about that. Ask Him for His strength and help to actively put to death the sin in your heart and life. Ask God for His cleansing and renewal.
- Request.** Ask God to do these things for each of the members of your homegroup. Pray for each of them by name to receive a fresh measure of His grace and power. Pray that God would use you to be a source of blessing and encouragement to them.

Study 8

Colossians 3:18–4:1

1. Do you have any “house rules” that you operate with as a family, whether spoken or unspoken? What are they?

Read Colossians 3:18-4:1.

2. Make some general observations of the passage. What stands out to you? What is confusing or challenging? What questions or feelings does it prompt?

Colossians 3:18-4:1 (with its parallel in Ephesians 5:21-6:9) make up what are called “household codes” and relate very specifically to how first century Roman households were governed.

To aid in our understanding, it is helpful to situate these verses within the context of what Paul has just described as essentially the creation of a “new humanity” in Christ (3:1-17). More specifically, he lays out how this new community, a wonderful kaleidoscope of people from every ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and sex, is to relate to one another. Marked by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness, love is to be the binding agent and overall relational quality of this radically diverse group of people. He caps his instructions for the church with a charge that is intended to be the standard operating procedure of the people who bear Jesus’ name: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (3:17).”

With this backdrop in place, Paul gets really practical by describing how these redeemed relationships take shape in the location of our daily lives, the home.

What does a first century Roman household look like?

Roman households were arranged in extended family household structures and were modeled on the social hierarchy of the Roman empire itself, where the ruler exerted absolute authority over the various social strata of his empire, from the governing class and priests, to the merchants, day laborers and slaves.¹

¹ Gorman, 13-14.

Regarding the Roman family, at the top was a patriarch who had legal and economic ownership of all who lived in his estate. As Tim Mackie describes it, “The Roman household was a highly authoritarian institution, where the male patriarch held the power of life or death over his wife, children, and slaves.”²

The Roman household and its traditional hierarchy were seen as essential to the stability of society. Deviation from this authority structure would arouse concern and potentially signify a threat to the order of society as a whole. As Andrew Lincoln comments:

“As Christianity spread in the Roman world and women and slaves converted to this new religion, it too became the object of similar suspicion and criticism. Social tensions between Christians and the rest of society, as well as tensions within the early Christian movement, need... to be given their due in any account of the emergence of Christian household codes. It may well have been external factors, the need to respond to accusations from outsiders and to set standards in line with common notions of propriety, as much as internal ones, the need to respond to enthusiastic demands for freedom on the part of believers, that led Christians to take up the household code.”³

While Paul’s use of the household code shares significant parallels to those of his surrounding culture, there is the clear infusion of the “upside down value system” of the Gospel, and a clear view towards the one who is truly sovereign over every family on earth, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s explore how Paul applies these “new relationships in Christ” to the household codes of the first century Roman Empire which the young Colossian church would have been readily familiar with.

3. To help round out our understanding of Paul’s use of household codes, compare and contrast Colossians 3:18-4:1 with Ephesians 5:21-6:9. What are the similarities and what are the differences you notice?

Look back at verses 18 and 19. Paul addresses both those with more power (husbands) and those with less power (wives, children, slaves) in the Roman household, as having responsibilities to one another.

4. How does this “reciprocity” in relationship speak to the nature of the “Christian” household? How do you see relational “reciprocity” working out in your own household, or how did you see it worked out in your family of origin?

² Mackie, 19.

³ Lincoln, 358.

5. When you read the word “submit” in this context, what comes to mind? Is there a difference in your thinking between submission and subservience?

6. Husbands are instructed, “love your wives.” How might Paul’s command for the patriarch to “love” speak to the power dynamics involved?

Read the commentary by Timothy Gombis below. While he is specifically addressing the household codes in Ephesians, it has equal resonance with those in Colossians:

This instruction [in Ephesians 5] to the husband/patriarch is completely at odds with contemporary household codes.... First, husbands are commanded to “love” their wives, a command that appears in no other contemporary household code...which focus on the proper ordering of household units by the patriarch for his own comfort and ease. Second, husbands are not to dominate their subordinate wives, but their love is to imitate the self-sacrificial love of Christ. Paul directly confronts the system of domination in the wider culture...where the great authority that is invested in patriarchs over their entire households was often exercised with conniving manipulation. Husbands are to resist the temptation to operate according to the Old Humanity, and not to take advantage of their position as the head, but rather to use the power of their position for the sake of their wives.⁴

Read verses 20 and 21. In addressing children’s relationship with their parents and vice versa, Paul again employs a relational reciprocity.

7. Why do you think Paul specifically speaks to fathers about embittering and discouraging their children?

8. How can parents create opportunities to build trust and encourage their kids?

⁴ Gombis, 327.

The final verses of this passage present one of the more difficult sections to understand and apply to our modern life. We will no doubt be tempted to read our own nation's history of race-based chattel slavery back into the passage.

At first glance, Paul seems to uphold the institution of slavery, or at the very least refrain from criticizing it. However, as we have seen with his instructions to husbands, wives, and children above, there are powerfully subversive ideas at work in the gospel message that will have a radically equalizing and empowering effect in the decades and centuries to come.

A Brief Primer on Slavery in the Roman Empire

- "Slavery was indelibly part of the social structure, welfare system, and economic activity of the ancient world; while the moral treatment of slaves was discussed on a philosophical plane, the fact of slavery was never debated; its necessity was simply assumed"⁵
- Up to 30% of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves.
- Slavery in the Roman Empire was not race-based (as the concept of race did not exist at that time).⁶
- The slave trade was fed by prisoners of war, ethnic enslavement, and debt slavery. Most slaves were sexually abused. Manumission/redemption of slaves did happen and was the hope of almost every slave. A freed slave gained some honor, but being a freedman still came with a stigma and lower social rank.⁷

Maybe you are wondering, in light of Jesus being Lord, and the liberation that the gospel message brings, why didn't Paul take it one step further and call for the abolition of slaves? Here are a few scholars commenting on that question:

- "Slavery was intricately woven into the fabric of Roman society, and there was no democratic way of introducing legislation to eliminate it. To encourage a slave revolt would have led to bloody extermination of those revolting...and, in all likelihood, the end of the Christian communities that had fostered or supported the revolt"⁸
- "The most effective means of ameliorating a slaves' plight was through just and kind treatment by a master, with the hope of manumission at a future point...."⁹
- "The slave/master relationship might persist in the home and business life: within the church it was swallowed up in the new relationship (cf Colossians 3:11)."¹⁰
- "Regarding slaves as brothers and sisters to those who were free within the Christian communities provided the groundwork, however, for the eventual elimination of slavery..."¹¹
- "In sum, Paul was certainly no William Wilberforce, but without Paul, the ethic that drove Wilberforce and his friends might not have existed."¹²

5 Wright and Bird, 467.

6 Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, 425.

7 Mackie, 20.

8 Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, 424.

9 Wright and Bird, 467.

10 Bruce, 168.

11 Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, 424.

12 Wright and Bird, 467.

- It is worth pointing out that no one in the New Testament is identified as anyone's slave, except where Paul describes himself as the slave of God.¹³

Read Colossians 3:22-4:1. Here Paul reframes whom slaves are ultimately serving.

9. How does the inclusion of "for the Lord" inform the commands that Paul gives to slaves?
10. Paul makes it equally clear to masters who is ultimately in charge, and who the true Master is. How do you think his statement impacts the master/slave relationship that existed at the time?

After studying the household codes, you still may be wrestling with the tensions that are created as a result. Consider Paul's statements regarding social status, sex difference, ethnic/racial distinctions in Colossians 3:11, Galatians 3:28, and Galatians 5:1.

11. What stands out to you in these passages? How do you see these ideas working redemptively, even subversively, throughout history?
12. Ultimately, in the Christian household, the risen Jesus is the true Lord. What do you personally take away from the household codes that you can apply to your life/household?

¹³ Garland, 276. See Romans 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Titus 1:1, as well as others. For more on early Christians and slavery, see Wright and Bird. 467.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Spend some time rejoicing that it is Jesus who is the true Lord and Master of our lives and households.

Repent. Take a moment to confess where you have not operated as is “fitting in the Lord” in your family relationships.

Request. Ask the Lord to help you to “put on the virtue of love” in your household so that Christ will be glorified and our families strengthened.

Study 9

Colossians 4:2-6

This short passage is the beginning of the end of Paul's instructions to the Colossians, his last thoughts before sealing up his letter and giving it to Tychicus and Onesimus to hand-deliver to the church at Colossae. He began his letter telling them that he is praying for them, and ends it asking them to pray for him.

Read Colossians 4:2-6 slowly and let it sink in.

1. Do any words or ideas stand out? What questions do you hope this study and our discussion will answer?
2. Look up verse 2 in several Bible translations (biblegateway.com is a great online place to look up a verse in multiple translations). What are some of the different words used in this verse to describe the posture of a Christian's mind and heart in prayer?

Verses 2-4 are Paul's call to the Colossian church—and all believers—to live lives of persistent and thankful prayer. Look back at some of his previous encouragement in the verses below.

3. What clues do you find about how persistence and thankfulness are possible?

Colossians 2:6 Therefore as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:9 For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

4. Read the following quotes about prayer by Christian thinkers, and then reflect on your own experience with prayer. What is frustrating? What is meaningful? What barriers do you face in being a person of prayer?

“I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God. It changes me.” –C. S. Lewis

“Prayer is talking to God about what we are doing together” –Dallas Willard

“It matters little what form of prayer we adopt or how many words we use. What matters is the faith which lays hold on God, knowing that He knows our needs before we even ask Him. That is what gives Christian prayer its boundless confidence and its joyous certainty.”
–Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“To fail to pray, then, is not to merely break some religious rule—it is a failure to treat God as God.” –Timothy Keller

“God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.” –Mother Teresa

“To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”
–Martin Luther

There are many types of prayer, from petition and intercession to silent meditation, group prayer, middle of the night watchful whispered prayer, phone app prayer lists and more.

5. What are your habits of prayer? How have they changed through the seasons of your life?
6. Share with your homegroup something that has been helpful in creating a habit of prayer.

7. In Colossians 4:3-4, what three things does Paul ask the Colossians to pray for him and his fellow workers?

E. M. Bounds wrote, “Prayer must be broad in its scope—it must plead for others. Intercession for others is the hallmark of all true prayer. Prayer is the soul of a man stirred to plead with God for men.” We all have different gifts and aren’t all called to be teachers and preachers, but we are all called to intercede. Think about the pastors in our church, missionaries, and others you know who are currently on the front lines sharing Christ.

8. Using our passage and the following verses, talk with your group about how to pray for these people in their specific areas of ministry (Use the church website as a guide for names if needed).

2 Corinthians 1:10-12 He delivered us from so great a risk of death, and he will deliver us. We have set our hope on him that he will deliver us yet again as you also join in helping us by prayer, so that many people may give thanks to God on our behalf for the gracious gift given to us through the help of many.

Ephesians 6:19-20 Pray for me also, that I may be given the right words when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may be able to speak boldly as I ought to speak.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 Finally, pray for us, brothers and sisters, that the Lord’s message may spread quickly and be honored as in fact it was among you, and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil people. For not all have faith.

Circle back to Paul’s overall focus in Colossians 4:5-6 with the idea of living lives with the spiritual welfare of others in mind. As we have prayed that God will use others to share Christ well, now we look at the opportunities we have to share Christ and model his love.

9. List the names of a few people currently in your life who don’t know Christ. List a few ways you can make the best use of the time with them.

10. What do you think it means to “let your speech be gracious and seasoned with salt” so you know how to respond to them?

Praying scripture is a good way to make sure that what we think about God lines up with the truth of scripture.

11. If you have used scripture in your prayer life, share with the group some of your favorite passages to pray. Consider saving them in a group text or email.

Prayer Guide

Rejoice. Thank you, God, for providing direct access to yourself at any time through prayer. Thank you for the people who shared Christ’s love with me, and for the privilege of praying for others.

Repent. Please bring to mind and forgive past opportunities to share your love that were ignored. Forgive my prayerlessness and the distance I sometimes allow between us.

Request. Catch my attention throughout the day so I see the people around me who need you and remember to pray for those who are in the trenches serving you. Sharpen my spiritual ears to hear your soft voice so we can talk together. Romans 8:26: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*

Study 10

Colossians 4:7-18

There's something about the joy of shared friendship that speaks deeply to all of us. Whether it's long conversations around the food-laden banquet tables of Rivendell, the lazy riverside antics of Frog and Toad, or the adventures of three young wizards as they explore the mysteries of Hogwarts, a journey is made sweeter when it's done with friends.

1. Before moving on, jot down some of your favorite friendships from literature, movies, or history. Be ready to share with your homegroup. Which of these groups of friends would you love to spend time with, and why?

Read Colossians 4:7-18. This final section of Colossians includes Paul's news of the coming of Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9), personal greetings and instructions, and Paul's sign-off and benediction. Before reading, ask the Holy Spirit to open the scriptures to you. Read the passage slowly and thoughtfully, noting the different names, various places, and introductory descriptive sentences Paul gives to many of the names he singles out.

2. Use the space below to write down some initial observations. What details jump out at you? What is the overall tone? What questions do you have?

From Melchizedek to Nimrod, Jethro to the thief on the cross, Scripture is filled with tantalizing references to people we wish we knew more about. The roster of names at the end of Colossians is no exception, although some of the people in this passage turn up elsewhere.

One thing to notice is *how* Paul introduces his friends. Like a good host, he seems eager to present everyone to everyone else in the best way possible.

3. Use the space below to write down some of the descriptions he uses to describe his friends, and their role (if applicable). The first one is already filled in.

Name	Paul's Description	Role/Job
Tychicus	Beloved brother, faithful servant, fellow servant (of Christ) to the Colossians and to update them on Paul's circumstances	Sent to encourage
Onesimus ¹		
Aristarchus ²		
Mark ³ , Barnabas' cousin		
Jesus ⁴ (called Justus)		
Epaphras (Colossians 1:28)		
Luke, the Doctor ⁵		

1 Onesimus is almost certainly the same Onesimus described in the book of Philemon, another letter from Paul included in the New Testament canon. This is important because Onesimus was a slave in the household of Philemon, and had robbed Philemon and run away to Rome – certainly a punishable offense in the 1st century Roman world. The fact that Paul refers to Tychicus (presumably a non-slave) as “a fellow slave (“servant” in the ESV and NIV)” in the Lord while referring to Onesimus as Paul’s “faithful and beloved brother” is striking, and illustrates the new kind of household and social structure that the Lordship of Jesus brings into the world. (For a reminder about the realities of Roman slavery, see study #8).

2 See Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2, possibly 27:1 and Romans 16:7.

3 See Galatians 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 9:6; Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:36-41, also 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13.

4 Jesus was a common name for boys in the 1st century. It is the Greek spelling of *Joshua*, the Hebrew name for Moses' successor. It was common at this time for Jews with Semitic names to have another Greek or Latin Name (Garland, 278).

5 This is most likely the same Luke who authored the Gospel of Luke, as well as the book of Acts.

The roster of names in this passage is striking for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the church in Colossae enjoyed fellowship between both Jews and Greeks (all of the people listed are apparently Greek except for Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus, who are identified as Jews), men and women, and across social classes (slave and free).

6. How can a church like ours work intentionally toward becoming a community that consists of a range of social classes and ethnicities?

In verse 12, Paul once again mentions Epaphras⁸. This is the same Epaphras who founded the Colossian church mentioned back in 1:6-7.

7. Re-read Epaphras' description below and circle any words that jump out to you:

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. (NIV)

8. What do you notice about the language Paul uses to describe Epaphras' prayers for the Colossians? Write your thoughts below:

As we come to the end of our study in Colossians, what better time to look around the room and notice those in this journey with you, and to thank God for the countless ways others in your homegroup have encouraged you in your faith, challenged you, etc. These people are not here by accident, and they certainly are not as prosaic as you might be tempted to view them on a busy weeknight. As C. S. Lewis so aptly reminds us in *The Weight of Glory*:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest, most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping

⁸ See also Philemon 1:23.

each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.⁹

9. Paul's greeting from his own hand in verse 18 is both sweet and sobering. How does this verse challenge us in our own context, especially as we consider the church worldwide?

One last thing to ponder with wonder: the people listed in this last section of Colossians are more than just names. They are actual historical people, and in a profound sense our great-great-great grandparents in the faith. That means, if we believe the stunning claims of scripture, that we will most likely meet them at or after the event called the resurrection. Heavenly pints with Epaphras, anyone? It's exciting to think about.

As we transition into the close of our study of Colossians, stop and take a moment together with your group to reflect on the past months together.

10. What were some "standout" moments for you?

11. What are some of the ways God has shown himself faithful in the past season?

⁹ Lewis, C. S., *The Weight of Glory*, Harper Collins, 2001, 45-46.

12. What are some ways we want to keep growing, and things we want to keep praying about as a result of our time together?

Prayer Guide

- Rejoice.** Praise God for the people on the journey of faith with you; those who have gone before, and those who are with you now. Praise God for the past ten weeks and the work he has done in your midst.
- Repent.** If you have put a low priority on fellowship with other believers, talk to God about that and ask him to show you if there are any steps he is directing you to take.
- Request.** “Remember my chains.” Pray for the growth, witness, and encouragement of the church worldwide, especially the persecuted church. How might we practically use our freedom to assist those who cannot worship freely?

Things happen. Tragedy strikes. The stakes are high, and there is an enemy at hand. Boromir tries to take the ring. Judas betrays the Christ. We don't know how the story ended for many of these people, although it appears that Demas deserted Paul at his most vulnerable moment (2 Timothy 4:10). But this is precisely why we put our hope in Jesus, the perfect judge, and not ourselves. We don't know the end of the story, but we know the one who holds it in his hand. Pray for those who are wavering in their faith, intimidated by evil, or barely holding on. Pray that they would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and brought to complete maturity in Christ. Spend some time praying for the people in your homegroup—the long-term, far-flung prayers of someone who desperately wants to see their friends at the finish line.