PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

The King Above Everything

Colossians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Above Everything: Paul's Letter to the Colossians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Colossians was written to a small church in a small town that Paul had never even visited. It's only four chapters long. But it contains one of the biggest, most mind-stretching descriptions of Jesus anywhere in the Bible.

Someone was telling the Christians in Colossae that Jesus was a good start, but if they really wanted to go deeper, they needed more: secret knowledge, special visions, strict rules about food and holidays, maybe even the help of angels and spiritual powers. Paul's answer is that nothing is missing. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Everything was made through Him and for Him. He holds the universe together. And if you have Him, you have everything.

You live in a world full of offers to go deeper, level up, or find the missing piece: a new diet, a new routine, a new influencer, a new spiritual practice, a new set of rules that will finally make you feel complete. Colossians says you're already complete in Christ. You don't need Jesus plus something. You need more of Jesus.

And then, as usual, Paul gets practical. If Jesus is above everything, then He gets a say in everything: what you set your mind on, how you treat people, how you talk, how you work, and how you live at home. Let's dive in.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all four chapters of Colossians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about the town of Colossae, the people in the letter, and the ideas Paul was answering.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene introduces Colossae and its neighbors, the man who started the church, the mysterious false teaching Paul was fighting, and how this letter is connected to two other books of the Bible, Philemon and Ephesians. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Colossians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of Colossians first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to Philippians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Colossians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Colossians raises some questions that scholars discuss: what exactly the false teaching in Colossae was; whether 1:15–20 was an early Christian hymn; how Colossians relates to Ephesians and Philemon; and whether Paul wrote it himself or a coworker or later follower wrote in his name. I've presented these briefly and fairly. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout.

The household instructions in 3:18–4:1, to wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters, are handled briefly

and with balance, in the same way as in the Ephesians volume of this series. I note how they compare with Roman household rules, how Christians hold different views on marriage roles, that these words never require anyone to accept abuse, and that the Bible's words to slaves are not an endorsement of slavery. You may want to talk these sections through together.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see how big Jesus really is, and find that in Him they already have everything they need.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Town in the Valley

Colossae was a town in the Lycus River valley, in the region of Phrygia, in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now southwestern Turkey. It was about a hundred miles east of Ephesus, along a major road that ran from the coast into the interior.

Centuries earlier, Colossae had been an important city. Greek historians writing about the Persian wars called it a great city. It was famous for its wool, especially a dark red dyed wool that took its name from the town. But by Paul's time, Colossae had been overshadowed by two neighbors, and it was probably a fairly small, ordinary town. It may be the least important city Paul ever wrote a letter to.

Today, Colossae is a mound of earth that has never been fully excavated. Archaeologists hope to dig there someday.

The Neighbors

Just ten or so miles away was Laodicea, the leading city of the valley. It was wealthy, a center of banking, textiles (especially soft black wool), and medicine, with a famous medical school. When an earthquake damaged the area around AD 60, the Roman historian Tacitus says Laodicea rebuilt itself from its own resources without help from Rome. That's the church Jesus later tells, in Revelation 3, that it thinks it's rich but is actually poor, and that it's lukewarm.

Across the valley was Hierapolis, famous for its hot mineral springs, which people visited for healing. The springs left brilliant white terraces of mineral deposits on the hillside, still a tourist attraction today, called Pamukkale, or cotton castle. Some think Laodicea's lukewarm water, piped in from springs to the south, is behind Jesus' words in Revelation.

Paul mentions both cities in Colossians. There were churches in all three towns, and they seem to have been closely connected.

Epaphras

Paul didn't start the church in Colossae. He says that many of the believers there had never met him in person. The church was started by a man named Epaphras, who was from Colossae himself.

How did that happen? Acts 19 says that while Paul was teaching in Ephesus for two years, the message spread throughout the province of Asia. Epaphras may have traveled to Ephesus, heard Paul, believed, and then gone home to tell his own town, and probably Laodicea and Hierapolis too.

When Paul wrote Colossians, Epaphras was with him, apparently having traveled to report on how the church was doing. In the letter to Philemon, Paul even calls him a fellow prisoner. Paul describes him as someone who prays hard for the churches in the valley. He's a reminder that God often spreads His message not through famous people but through ordinary people going home and telling their friends.

The Colossian Problem

Something was threatening the church in Colossae, but Paul never names it or explains it fully. We have to piece it together from clues

in chapter 2. Paul warns against hollow and deceptive philosophy based on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of the world. He mentions rules about food and drink, religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, and the Sabbath. He mentions false humility, the worship of angels, people who brag about visions they've seen, and harsh treatment of the body, with rules like do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.

Scholars have offered several explanations. Some think it was a kind of Jewish mysticism, where people practiced strict rules and fasting to have visions of heaven and join the angels in worship. (The phrase worship of angels could mean worshiping angels, or joining in the worship that angels offer.) Others think it was an early form of the ideas later called Gnosticism, which taught that spiritual knowledge is the key to salvation and the physical world is bad. Others think it was mainly local folk religion, where people called on angels and spirits for protection; there is later evidence of angel veneration in the area. Many think it was a mix of all of these. Some even suggest it wasn't an organized false teaching at all, just pressure from the surrounding culture.

Whatever it was, the message seems to have been that Jesus wasn't enough. You needed something more. Paul's response is to show that Jesus is more than enough.

Philemon and Onesimus

Colossians is closely connected to the short letter to Philemon. Philemon seems to have been a wealthy Christian in Colossae, with a church meeting in his house. Onesimus was an enslaved man from Philemon's household who had left, perhaps running away, perhaps going to ask Paul for help after a conflict. Somehow, he

ended up with Paul, became a Christian, and became like a son to Paul.

Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae with Tychicus, carrying both letters. In Colossians 4:9, Paul calls Onesimus a faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. The same people are mentioned in both letters, including Archippus, Epaphras, Mark, Luke, Aristarchus, and Demas. It's helpful to remember Onesimus when reading what Colossians says about slaves and masters. Everyone in the church would have known who was standing in the room as the letter was read.

Colossians and Ephesians

Colossians and Ephesians are like twins. Both were carried by Tychicus. Both describe Jesus as head of the body, the church. Both talk about putting off the old self and putting on the new. Both have household instructions. Some sentences are almost word for word the same, and a large share of Colossians has a parallel in Ephesians.

Most scholars think Colossians was written first, and that Ephesians develops its ideas for a wider audience. Colossians 4:16 also mentions a letter from Laodicea, which the Colossians were supposed to read. We don't know what that letter was. It may have been lost, or, as some suggest, it may be the letter we know as Ephesians, if Ephesians was a circular letter passed around the churches of Asia.

Who Wrote It?

Colossians says it's from Paul and Timothy, and it ends with Paul writing a greeting in his own hand. The early church accepted it as Paul's.

Some modern scholars think it was written by someone else, possibly after Paul's death. They point to differences in style, with long, flowing sentences; some words and ideas not found in Paul's undisputed letters; and a greater emphasis on believers already being raised with Christ. Others suggest a middle view: that Timothy, listed as co-sender, may have written the letter with Paul's approval while Paul was in prison.

Many scholars, though, hold that Paul wrote it. They note that the style differences are smaller than in Ephesians, that the subject matter explains the language, and that the detailed personal connections with Philemon, a letter almost everyone agrees Paul wrote, make most sense if the same man wrote both at the same time. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim.

When and Where?

Paul was in prison when he wrote. If, as traditionally thought, he was in Rome, the letter dates to around AD 60 to 62. Some scholars think Paul wrote from an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus, around AD 54 to 55, which would explain how easily Onesimus and Epaphras traveled between Paul and Colossae. Either way, it's one of the Prison Letters, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul's thanks and prayer for the Colossians, the great hymn about Christ, and Paul's mission to make the mystery known: Christ in you.

Chapter 2: Paul warns against teaching that adds to Jesus. You're complete in Him. Your debt is canceled, the powers are defeated, and you don't need to live by human rules.

Chapter 3: Set your hearts and minds on things above. Put off the old self and put on the new, especially love. Then instructions for life at home.

Chapter 4: Prayer, wise words for outsiders, and a long list of friends and coworkers.

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CHAPTER 1

The Image of the Invisible God

Colossians 1

Paul opens the letter with his name and Timothy's, and he writes to the believers in Colossae, calling them holy and faithful, his brothers and sisters in Christ. Then, as usual, he thanks God for them. He and Timothy have heard about the Colossians' faith in Jesus and their love for all God's people. And Paul says that faith and love grow out of hope, the hope that's stored up for them in heaven.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith, Hope, and Love**
>
> Paul often groups these three together. In 1 Corinthians 13, he says they're the three things that last. Here he shows how they connect. Hope is like the root: knowing that God has a future waiting for you. Faith grows from that hope, trusting God now. And love is the fruit: because you're secure in God's future, you're free to care for others today. When you know your future is safe, you don't have to grab and protect everything for yourself.

Paul says the good news is spreading and producing fruit all over the world, just as it has among the Colossians since they first heard it and understood God's grace. And they heard it from Epaphras, whom Paul calls a dear fellow servant (the NIV footnote says the word can mean slave) and a faithful minister of Christ.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Bearing Fruit and Growing**
>
> Paul uses the same words God used in Genesis 1, when He told the first humans to be fruitful and increase. The gospel is doing what God always

wanted for His world: spreading life everywhere. In just about thirty years, the message about Jesus had gone from a small group of followers in Jerusalem to towns like Colossae, hundreds of miles away, and on to Rome. It's still growing today.

Then Paul tells them how he prays for them. Since the day he heard about them, he hasn't stopped asking God to fill them with a clear understanding of what God wants, with the wisdom and understanding the Spirit gives. Why? So they can live in a way that honors the Lord and delights Him.

Paul describes what that kind of life looks like. Producing good fruit in all kinds of good deeds. Getting to know God more. Being strengthened with His power, so they'll have endurance and patience. And joyfully thanking the Father, who has made them fit to share what belongs to God's people, living in His light.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Qualified**

Some people in Colossae were apparently saying that you had to qualify for the deeper spiritual life through special rules, visions, or knowledge. Paul says the Father has already qualified you. You didn't earn it. He did it. You're already in. That theme runs through the whole letter.

Then Paul describes what God has done in two vivid pictures. God pulled us out from under the power of darkness and moved us into the kingdom of His beloved Son. In the ancient world, when one empire conquered another, it sometimes moved whole populations from one land to another. Paul says God has done that with us. He has transferred us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His Son. You have a new King and a new homeland. And in Jesus, we've been set free and forgiven.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Kingdoms**

Paul doesn't say we were in a slightly dim kingdom and moved to a brighter one. He says darkness and light. There are only two kingdoms, and every person belongs to one or the other. The good news is that the move doesn't depend on you being strong enough to escape. God did the rescuing.

Now Paul writes one of the most amazing passages in the Bible. Many scholars think verses 15 to 20 were an early Christian hymn, or that Paul wrote them in a poetic style. They fall into two parts. The first part is about Jesus and creation. The second is about Jesus and the new creation, the church and the reconciling of everything to God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Christ Hymn**

Like Philippians 2:6–11, this passage has a poetic rhythm and structure, with repeated words and parallel lines. In the first stanza, Jesus is the firstborn over all creation; in the second, He's the firstborn from the dead. Some think Paul quoted a hymn the churches already sang; others think he wrote it himself. Either way, it shows that very early, Christians worshiped Jesus as the Creator and Lord of everything. This passage was likely written within about thirty years of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Here's what it says. Jesus is the visible image of the God no one can see. Nobody can see God. But if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He's the exact picture of the invisible God, God made visible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Image**

The Greek word is eikon, where we get the word icon. On your phone, an icon represents an app. But Paul means much more. In the ancient world, an image of a king, like his face on a coin or his statue in a city, represented his presence and authority. Genesis says humans were made in God's image. Jesus is the image of God in a perfect, complete way. He doesn't just represent God. He shows us God.

Then the hymn calls Jesus the firstborn over all creation. That doesn't mean Jesus was the first thing God created. The next verse says everything was created by Him. In the Bible, firstborn often means the one with the highest rank, the heir. In Psalm 89, God says He will make David His firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth, even though David was the youngest son in his family. Jesus is the firstborn in the sense of being first in rank and the heir of everything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Famous Debate**
>
> In the fourth century, a church leader named Arius taught that Jesus was the first and greatest being God created, but not truly God. He used verses like this one. The church gathered at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and rejected his view, declaring that Jesus is fully God, of the same being as the Father. The Nicene Creed, still recited in many churches today, comes from that debate. The very next verses in Colossians, which say all things were created through Jesus, were central to the discussion.

Everything was created in Him, the hymn says, heavenly and earthly things, seen and unseen, including thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities. Remember that people in Colossae were worried about spiritual powers and angels. Paul says Jesus made them all. Whatever powers exist, they're creatures, not equals. Everything was created through Jesus and for Him.

Think about that. Galaxies and atoms, mountains and oceans, sharks and hummingbirds, and you. Everything exists because of Jesus and for Jesus. You weren't made for yourself. You were made for Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hold Together**
>
> The hymn says that in Jesus all things hold together. Scientists can describe the forces that hold atoms and galaxies together. But Paul says behind every

law of physics is a Person. If Jesus stopped holding the universe together, it would fall apart. That's a big claim. It also means that when your life feels like it's falling apart, the One who holds the stars in place is holding you.

The second part of the hymn turns from creation to the church. Jesus is head of His body, which is the church. He's the beginning, the first to be born out of death, the first to rise to a resurrection life that will never die again, so that He might have first place in everything.

It pleased God for all His fullness to live in Jesus. And through Jesus, God chose to bring everything back to Himself, on earth and in heaven, making peace by the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fullness**

The Greek word is pleroma. Later, some groups called Gnostics used it for the whole collection of spiritual beings between God and the world. If the false teachers in Colossae were using similar ideas, Paul may be taking their favorite word and applying it to Jesus. You don't need to climb a ladder of spiritual beings to reach God. All of God's fullness lives in Jesus.

Then Paul applies the hymn to the Colossians. Once, he says, you were alienated from God, enemies in your minds, shown by your evil behavior. But now God has reconciled you through Christ's physical body, through His death, to present you holy, spotless, and free from accusation. Paul emphasizes Christ's physical body, maybe because the false teachers looked down on physical things. Jesus saved us not by escaping the physical world, but by dying in a real body.

There's a condition, though. You have to keep going in your faith, steady and solid, not moving away from the hope of the gospel. Paul isn't saying you could lose your salvation by accident. He's warning

them not to be pulled away by the false teaching. The way to stay secure is to stay rooted in the gospel you first heard.

Then Paul talks about his own suffering, and he says something puzzling. He rejoices in what he's suffering for them, and he fills up in his body what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the church's sake.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Is Lacking?**
>
> This doesn't mean Jesus' death wasn't enough to save us. Paul has just said that Jesus made complete peace through the cross. Most interpreters think Paul means that Jesus' people still suffer as they spread His message, and that Paul is taking his share. Jesus told Paul, when he was converted, that persecuting the church was persecuting Him (Acts 9:4). When the church suffers, Christ suffers with it. Paul is glad to carry some of that suffering so the gospel can reach others.

Paul says God made him a servant of the church, to make the word of God fully known: the mystery that was hidden for ages but is now revealed. And what is the mystery? Paul says it's Christ living in you, your hope of future glory.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Christ in You**
>
> In Ephesians, the mystery is that Gentiles are now included in God's people. Here, Paul puts it even more personally. The mystery is that the Christ who created the universe now lives in ordinary people, including Gentiles from a small town in Phrygia. And His presence in you is the guarantee of the glory to come. You don't need a secret vision to find God. If you belong to Jesus, He's already living in you.

That's why Paul proclaims Jesus, warning and teaching every person as wisely as he can, so he can present every person mature in Christ. Notice the word everyone, three times. The false teachers seemed to think only a special group could reach spiritual maturity.

Paul says it's for everyone. And to reach that goal, he works hard, with all the energy Jesus powerfully gives him.

KEY VERSE

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says Jesus is the image of the God no one can see. If someone asked you what God is like, what would you say about Jesus?
2. Everything was created through Jesus and for Him, including you. What difference does it make to know you were made for Him?
3. Have you ever felt like your life was falling apart? How does it help to know Jesus holds everything together?
4. Paul says the mystery is Christ in you. What does that mean to you?

TRY THIS *Go outside tonight and look at the sky, or look up a picture of a galaxy. Then read Colossians 1:15–20 slowly and thank Jesus for holding it all together, and for holding you.*

CHAPTER 2

Rooted in Him

Colossians 2

Paul begins chapter 2 by telling the Colossians how hard he's working for them, and for the believers in Laodicea, and for everyone who has never met him in person. He wants them to be encouraged, united in love, and to have full understanding, so they'll know the mystery of God, which is Christ. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hidden Treasures**
>
> The false teachers in Colossae probably claimed to have secret knowledge, available only to those who went deeper. Paul says the real treasure isn't hidden in secret rituals or visions. It's hidden in Christ. And it's not hidden from you. It's hidden in Him, like treasure in a field, waiting to be discovered by anyone who follows Him. If you want wisdom, you don't need a secret code. You need Jesus.

Paul says he's telling them this so that no one can fool them with smooth, persuasive arguments. Although he's not there in person, he's with them in spirit, and he's delighted to see how disciplined and firm their faith is. The church wasn't falling apart yet. Paul wanted to keep it that way.

Then Paul gives them the main instruction of the letter. Just as you received Jesus as Lord, keep living in Him, with deep roots in Him,

built up and made strong in what you were taught, and full to overflowing with thanks.

That's simple, but powerful. You don't start with Jesus and then move on to something more advanced. You keep going deeper into the same Jesus you started with. The way you begin the Christian life, by trusting Him, is the way you continue it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rooted and Built Up**

Paul mixes two pictures. A tree with deep roots can survive storms and drought. A building with a strong foundation can survive earthquakes, something people in the Lycus valley knew all about. Paul wants the Colossians to be both: deeply rooted and solidly built, so when strange teachings blow through, they won't be knocked over.

Then Paul warns them. Make sure nobody takes you captive through hollow, deceptive philosophy resting on human traditions and the world's elemental spiritual forces, instead of on Christ. The picture is of someone being kidnapped and carried off as a prisoner of war.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Philosophy**

Paul isn't against thinking or asking hard questions. He was a brilliant thinker himself. The word philosophy simply means love of wisdom. Paul is warning against a particular kind of teaching that sounded deep but was empty, built on human ideas rather than on Christ. Any idea, however impressive, that pulls you away from Jesus is hollow. Any idea that leads you deeper into Him is worth exploring.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Elemental Spiritual Forces**

The NIV footnote says this phrase could also be translated the basic principles, which is how it appears in Galatians 4. The Greek word, stoicheia, could mean the ABCs, the basic elements of the universe, or spiritual beings connected to the stars and elements. Many people in the ancient world

believed their lives were controlled by these forces. Paul says Christ rules over every power, so believers don't need to fear them or try to please them.

Then comes the heart of Paul's argument. Everything God is, His whole fullness, lives in Christ in a human body. And in Christ, you yourself have been filled. Jesus rules over every power and authority.

Read that again. Everything God is lives in Jesus, in a real human body. And because you're in Jesus, you're complete. Not almost complete. Not complete if you follow extra rules. Complete. You don't need Jesus plus something. You need Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Complete**

Our culture constantly tells you you're missing something. Ads promise that a product will finally make you happy. Social media shows you what everyone else has. Even religious people sometimes suggest you need a special experience or the right set of rules to be a real Christian. Paul says if you're in Christ, you're already complete. That doesn't mean you're done growing. It means nothing essential is missing.

Paul then explains what happened when they came to Christ, using pictures. They were circumcised, he says, but not by human hands. Christ removed their old self, ruled by the flesh. (The NIV footnote explains that flesh here means the sinful state of human beings.) They were buried with Jesus in baptism, and raised with Him through faith in God's power, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Baptism**

In the early church, baptism usually meant going completely under the water. Paul sees it as a picture of being buried with Jesus and raised to new life. Going under the water is like dying to your old life. Coming up is like rising with Jesus. It doesn't save you by itself, but it's a powerful sign of what Jesus

has done. If you've trusted Jesus and haven't been baptized, ask your pastor about it.

Then Paul gives one of the most powerful pictures of forgiveness in the Bible. You were dead in your sins, but God brought you to life with Christ. He forgave every one of your sins. He canceled the record of debt that stood against you, with all its legal demands, and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nailed to the Cross**

The Greek word for the record of debt was used for a handwritten IOU, a document someone signed saying how much they owed. Imagine a list of every wrong thing you've ever done, signed by you. Paul says God took that document and nailed it to the cross. When someone was crucified, the Romans often posted the charge against them on the cross. Over Jesus' head, the sign said King of the Jews. But in a deeper sense, Paul says, your list was posted there. Jesus paid it in full.

And then Paul says Jesus disarmed the powers and authorities and put them on public display, celebrating His victory over them through the cross.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Triumph**

When a Roman general won a great victory, he was sometimes given a triumph, a huge parade through Rome. The general rode in a chariot, and behind him marched his defeated enemies in chains, along with their captured weapons, for everyone to see. Paul says the cross was Jesus' triumph. It looked like defeat. But on the cross, Jesus disarmed every spiritual power that opposes God and paraded them in defeat. The powers the Colossians feared were already beaten.

So, Paul says, don't let anyone judge you about food and drink, or about religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, or Sabbaths. These were a shadow of what was coming. The reality is Christ.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shadow and Reality**

A shadow shows you that something real is nearby, but it isn't the real thing. If you saw the shadow of a friend coming around a corner, you wouldn't hug the shadow. You'd hug your friend. Paul says the Old Testament laws about food and festivals were good, God-given shadows pointing to Jesus. Now that Jesus has come, you don't have to cling to the shadow. Paul isn't saying these practices are evil. He's saying they can't be required to make you right with God.

Don't let anyone disqualify you, Paul says, who loves fake humility and angel worship, and goes on and on about visions they've seen. They're puffed up by their unspiritual minds. And they've lost connection with the head, Jesus, who holds the whole body together and makes it grow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Show-offs**

The false teachers apparently made a big deal of their humility, their fasting, and their visions. But Paul says their humility was fake, and their spirituality made them proud. That's a warning for every generation. It's possible to look very religious and still be disconnected from Jesus. Real spiritual growth doesn't make you feel superior to others. It makes you more dependent on Christ.

Since you died with Christ and are free from the world's elemental spiritual forces, Paul asks, why do you still live as if you belonged to the world, following its rules? Then he quotes the rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"

These rules, he says, are about things that are all used up and gone. They're human commands. They look wise, with their self-made religion, fake humility, and rough treatment of the body. But they don't actually help in fighting the desires of the flesh.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rules Can't Change Hearts**

Paul's point is surprising. You'd think strict rules would make people holy. But rules can only control behavior from the outside. They can't change a person's heart. In fact, sometimes being told not to do something makes you want it more. That's why Paul points to Jesus. What changes you isn't a longer list of rules. It's a new life, from being united with Christ. Rules have their place, but they can't replace Jesus.

KEY VERSE

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Colossians 2:6–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some things people today say you need, in addition to Jesus, to be complete?
2. How does the picture of your debt nailed to the cross make you feel? Is there something you have trouble believing God has forgiven?
3. Have you ever met someone who seemed very religious but proud about it? What makes real spirituality different?
4. Why do you think rules alone can't change a person's heart?

TRY THIS *Write down a few things you feel guilty about. Then, on top of the list, write Colossians 2:14 and tear the paper up, or throw it away, as a reminder that Jesus has taken it away.*

CHAPTER 3

Set Your Hearts Above

Colossians 3

Chapter 3 is where Paul turns from what Jesus has done to how we should live. And he starts with where to look. Since you've been raised with Christ, he says, fix your hearts on the things above, where Christ sits at God's right hand. Keep your minds on what is above, not on what is earthly.

That doesn't mean daydreaming about heaven all day or ignoring the real world. Paul is about to give very practical, down-to-earth instructions. It means letting Jesus, and His priorities, shape the way you see everything. Where your mind goes, your life follows.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Seated at the Right Hand**
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> In the ancient world, the seat at the right hand of a king was the place of highest honor and authority, for the king's most trusted official or heir. Psalm 110, one of the most quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament, says God told the Messiah to sit at His right hand until His enemies were defeated. Jesus is there now, ruling. When Paul says to fix your hearts above, he's saying: look to the King.

Why should we look up? Because, Paul says, you died, and your real life is now kept hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, your life, is revealed, you'll also appear with Him in glory.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hidden**

Your real life, your truest identity, is hidden with Christ. That means two things. First, it's safe. Nobody can steal it, because it's kept with God. Second, it's not fully visible yet. Right now, you might not look or feel much like a child of God. People might not see it. You might not see it. But one day, when Jesus returns, the real you will be revealed. Until then, you can live from that hidden identity, even when no one else notices.

So, Paul says, put to death everything in you that belongs to the earthly side of you: sexual sin, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is really idol worship. God's anger is coming because of such things. You used to live this way, he says, but now you must also get rid of anger, fury, malice, slander, and dirty talk. And don't lie to each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Greed Is Idolatry**

Paul says greed is a form of idol worship. That sounds strange, since most of us don't bow down to statues. But an idol is anything you look to for the security, happiness, or identity only God can give. Greed means believing that more stuff, more money, or more of anything will finally satisfy you. When you treat something that way, you're worshiping it. Paul's list covers both private sins, like lust, and social ones, like slander. God cares about both.

Put to death sounds intense. It is. Paul isn't talking about managing sin, or cutting back a little. He's saying to kill it. That doesn't happen in your own strength. It happens because you've already died with Christ and been raised with Him. You're becoming who you already are in Him.

The reason, Paul says, is that you've taken off your old self and its habits and put on a new self, which keeps being renewed, in knowledge, to look like the One who created it. Remember from chapter 1 that Jesus is the image of God. Now Paul says the new you

is being remade into that image. God is restoring in you what was damaged by sin.

Then Paul writes a line that would have shocked his readers. In this new humanity, there's no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or not, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. Christ is everything, and He's in everyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Barbarians and Scythians**

To Greeks, a barbarian was anyone who didn't speak Greek. The word may come from the way foreign languages sounded to Greek ears, like bar-bar-bar. Scythians were nomadic people from the region north of the Black Sea, and many Greeks and Romans thought of them as the wildest, most uncivilized people on earth. Many slaves in the ancient world came from Scythia. Paul says in Christ, even those deep divisions disappear. The church is a family where the most respected and the most looked-down-on people sit together as equals.

So, Paul says, as people God has chosen, made holy, and deeply loved, put on a new set of clothes: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Put up with each other and forgive each other, if anyone has a complaint against someone. Forgive just as the Lord has forgiven you.

And over all of these, put on love, which ties everything together in perfect unity. Love is like the belt or outer garment that holds the whole outfit together.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Forgive as the Lord Forgave You**

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things Jesus asks of us. It doesn't mean pretending the wrong didn't happen, or that it didn't hurt. It doesn't mean you have to trust someone again right away, or stay in an unsafe situation. It means letting go of your right to get even, and handing the situation to God. The reason we can do it is that we've been forgiven so much ourselves. When

you remember how much God has forgiven you, it gets easier to forgive others.

Let Christ's peace rule your hearts, Paul says. The word rule was used for an umpire or referee in athletic games. Let Christ's peace be the referee in your heart, making the calls when you're deciding what to do or how to respond. And be thankful.

Let the message of Christ live among you richly, he continues, as you teach and encourage one another wisely, through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with thankful hearts.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Singing**

Music was a big part of early Christian worship. A Roman governor named Pliny, writing to the emperor Trajan around AD 112, reported that Christians gathered before dawn and sang a hymn to Christ as to a god. Paul says singing isn't just for God. It's also a way we teach and encourage one another. The songs you sing shape what you believe. That's one reason it matters what the words say.

And whatever you do, Paul says, whether in what you say or what you do, do everything in Jesus' name, thanking the Father through Him. That covers homework, sports, chores, jobs, texts, friendships, and everything else. There's no part of life Jesus doesn't care about.

Then Paul turns to life at home, with a short set of instructions for wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters. It's very similar to the longer version in Ephesians 5 and 6.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Household Rules**

Greek and Roman writers, like Aristotle, wrote rules for managing a household. They usually spoke only to the male head of the house, telling him how to rule his wife, children, and slaves. Paul uses the same three pairs, but with important differences. He speaks directly to wives, children, and slaves,

treating them as people who answer to the Lord themselves. And he gives clear responsibilities to husbands, fathers, and masters, limiting their power and reminding them that they have a Master too.

Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands, as is right for those who belong to the Lord, and husbands to love their wives and not be harsh with them. The words in the Lord matter. Everything in this section is shaped by the Lord Jesus, who came to serve. And the command to husbands rules out any kind of bitterness or harshness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reading These Verses Today**

As with the parallel passage in Ephesians, which begins with a call for all believers to submit to one another, Christians read these instructions in different ways. Some believe husbands and wives are equal before God but have different roles, with husbands called to loving, sacrificial leadership. Others believe Paul was working within the household structures of his time, while planting seeds of equality that would later grow. Both agree that husbands and wives are equally loved by God, and that marriage should reflect the self-giving love of Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Never an Excuse for Abuse**

These verses have sometimes been twisted to excuse cruelty or control. That's the opposite of what they say. A husband who is harsh, threatening, or controlling is disobeying this passage. If anyone in your home is being hurt or is afraid, that's not something you have to keep quiet about. Tell a trusted adult, a teacher, a counselor, or a pastor.

Next, children should obey their parents in everything, because it pleases the Lord. That's for you. It's not always easy, especially when you're becoming more independent. But honoring your parents is part of following Jesus. (If a parent ever asked you to do

something clearly wrong or harmful, obeying God comes first, and you should talk to another trusted adult.)

And fathers, Paul says, don't embitter your children, or they'll become discouraged. The NIV footnote says the word can also mean parents. In a world where fathers had almost total power over their children, Paul tells them to be careful not to crush their kids' spirits with harshness, unfairness, or constant criticism.

Then Paul speaks to slaves, and he spends the most time on them. He tells them to obey their earthly masters sincerely, not just when they're being watched, but out of reverence for the Lord. Put your whole heart into your work, he says, as if you were doing it for the Lord rather than for people. The Lord will give them an inheritance as their reward. And wrongdoers will be paid back for their wrongs, because God doesn't play favorites.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why So Much about Slaves?**

Paul may have written more to slaves here because Onesimus, an enslaved man from Colossae who had become a Christian, was coming home with this letter. Philemon, his master, was a member of the church. Everyone would have been listening closely. Notice that Paul tells slaves they will receive an inheritance, something slaves normally couldn't have in Roman law. In God's family, they're heirs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery and the Bible**

Slavery in the Roman world was common, and though it wasn't based on race, it was still cruel. Enslaved people could be beaten, sold, and abused with little protection. Paul's words here are not an endorsement of slavery. He was teaching people how to live faithfully in a system they couldn't change, while planting ideas that would undermine it: that slaves and masters are equal in Christ (3:11), that masters will answer to God, and, in his letter to Philemon, that a slave is a dear brother. Sadly, some later Christians twisted these verses to defend slavery. But many Christians who led the

movements to end slavery were driven by the Bible's teaching that every person bears God's image. Today, these verses are often applied to work: do your work wholeheartedly, as for the Lord, and if you're ever in charge of others, treat them fairly.

KEY VERSE

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.

Colossians 3:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What do you set your mind on most during the day? How would setting your mind on things above change that?
2. Paul says your real life is hidden with Christ. How does that change how you see yourself when you don't feel very Christian?
3. Is there someone you need to forgive? What makes it hard?
4. What would it look like to do your schoolwork, chores, or job as if you were working for the Lord?

TRY THIS *Choose one item from Paul's new wardrobe in verses 12 to 14, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, or love, and put it on each morning this week. Look for chances to wear it.*

CHAPTER 4

Seasoned with Salt

Colossians 4

Paul finishes the household instructions with a word to masters: treat your slaves rightly and fairly, since you have a Master in heaven too. In a world where masters had nearly total power, Paul reminds them that they're under authority too. One day they'll answer to Jesus for how they treated the people under them. And fair was a strong word. It suggested equality.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Your Master in Heaven**
>
> This principle applies to anyone with power over others: team captains, older siblings, managers, teachers, parents, and leaders of every kind. Whatever authority you have, you have a Master too. Jesus will ask how you used it. The best leaders remember that they're servants first.

Then Paul turns to prayer. Devote yourselves to prayer, he says, being watchful and thankful. Devote means to stick with it, to keep at it, not just to pray when you feel like it or when something goes wrong.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Watchful and Thankful**
>
> Watchful means staying alert, like a guard on duty at night. When Jesus was praying in the garden of Gethsemane, He asked His disciples to stay awake and pray, but they kept falling asleep. Paul may be remembering that story. Prayer takes focus. Thankful means noticing what God has done and saying

so. Paul mentions thankfulness again and again in Colossians, more than in many of his other letters. A thankful heart is a protected heart.

Paul asks them to pray for him too, that God would open a door for the message, so he could proclaim the mystery of Christ, the very thing he's in chains for. And he asks them to pray that he'll proclaim it clearly. Notice that Paul doesn't ask them to pray for his release. He asks them to pray for open doors and clear words. Even in prison, his focus was on the message.

Then Paul gives advice about how to treat people outside the church. Act wisely toward outsiders, he says, and use every chance you get. Let the way you talk be gracious, flavored with salt, so you'll know how to answer each person.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seasoned with Salt**

Salt was valuable in the ancient world. It preserved food and made it taste better. Some Greek writers used salt as a picture for witty, interesting conversation. Paul's point is that the way Christians talk should be gracious and kind, but also interesting and thoughtful, not boring, preachy, or bland. Jesus told His followers that they were the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). Your words can make conversations better, and make people curious about Jesus.

Notice what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't tell them to argue with outsiders, or avoid them, or preach at them constantly. He tells them to be wise, gracious, and ready to answer when someone asks. People notice how Christians talk, online and in person. Sometimes the way you speak says more than the words you use.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Outsiders**

How you treat people who don't share your faith matters. Are you kind to them? Do you listen? Do you make fun of them behind their backs? Paul wants Christians to be the kind of people others want to be around, so that

when the time comes, they'll want to know why you're different. That doesn't mean hiding what you believe. It means sharing it with grace.

The rest of the letter is a list of people. It's easy to skip this part, but it's actually fascinating. These were real people, and their stories are part of the bigger story of the early church.

First, Tychicus, whom Paul calls a dear brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant (the NIV footnote says the word can mean slave). He's carrying the letter and will tell them all Paul's news. He's traveling with Onesimus, whom Paul calls a faithful, dear brother and one of their own.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Onesimus**

Imagine Onesimus walking back into Colossae. He had left his master's house, possibly as a runaway. Now he's coming back as a Christian, carrying a letter from Paul that calls him a faithful and dear brother. Paul doesn't call him a slave here. He calls him one of you. The short letter to Philemon tells the rest of the story, as Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother. Some think he may be the same Onesimus who later became a leader of the church in Ephesus, mentioned in a letter by Ignatius in the early second century, though we can't be sure.

Then come greetings from Paul's coworkers. Aristarchus, his fellow prisoner, from Thessalonica, who had been dragged into the theater during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and traveled with Paul to Rome. Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. And Jesus, called Justus. Paul says these three are the only Jewish believers among his coworkers, and they've been a comfort to him. (The NIV footnote says the Greek literally means the only ones of the circumcision group.)

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mark's Second Chance**

Mark is the same John Mark who left Paul and Barnabas partway through their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). Later, Paul refused to take him on

the second journey, and the disagreement was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas split up (Acts 15:37–39). But here, years later, Mark is with Paul, and Paul tells the Colossians to welcome him. In 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul even says Mark is helpful to him in his ministry. Tradition says Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. Failure isn't the end of the story. People can change, and friendships can be restored.

Epaphras, who started the church in Colossae, sends greetings too. Paul says he's always wrestling in prayer for them, that they'll stand firm, mature and fully confident in God's will. He's working hard for the believers in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Epaphras was far from home, but his heart was with his church. His main ministry for them right now was prayer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wrestling in Prayer**

The word Paul uses for wrestling comes from athletics. It's the root of our word agony. Prayer for Epaphras wasn't a quick, casual thing. It was hard work, like a wrestler straining against an opponent. Who is wrestling in prayer for you? Who could you wrestle in prayer for?

Luke, the dear friend Paul calls the doctor, sends greetings, along with Demas. This is the only place in the Bible that tells us Luke was a doctor. And since Paul lists him separately from the Jewish coworkers, Luke was probably a Gentile, which would make him the only Gentile author of a book of the New Testament. He wrote both the Gospel of Luke and Acts.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Demas**

Demas is mentioned here, and in Philemon, as one of Paul's coworkers. But in 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul says sadly that Demas deserted him, because he loved this world. We don't know what happened. Maybe he got tired of the danger, or wanted an easier life. His story is a warning. Starting well is good, but finishing well is what counts.

Paul sends greetings to the believers in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the believers who meet in her house. In the early days, there were no church buildings. Christians met in homes, often in the homes of wealthier members who had room. Several of those homes, like Lydia's in Philippi and Nympha's here, belonged to women.

After this letter is read in Colossae, Paul says, make sure it's read in the church in Laodicea too, and read the letter from Laodicea. (As Setting the Scene explained, we don't know for sure what that letter was.) Letters like this were read aloud to the whole church, since most people couldn't read, and copies were shared between churches. That's part of how the New Testament was collected.

Paul has a short message for Archippus, who may have been a member of Philemon's household: complete the ministry you received in the Lord. We don't know what that ministry was, but it's good advice for everyone. God gives every believer something to do. Finish it.

Finally, Paul takes the pen from his secretary and writes the last greeting in his own hand. Remember my chains, he says. Grace be with you.

Remember my chains. Paul was writing about the supremacy of Jesus and the freedom of the gospel while chained to a guard. He wasn't asking for pity. He was reminding them that the message was worth it. And his very last word to them, as always, was grace.

KEY VERSE

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Colossians 4:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you have authority over other people? How should remembering that you have a Master in heaven affect how you use it?
2. What makes conversation full of grace and seasoned with salt? Who do you know who talks that way?
3. Mark failed, then got a second chance. Demas started well, then walked away. What do you learn from their stories?
4. Epaphras wrestled in prayer for his church. Who could you pray for that seriously?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five people who don't follow Jesus. Pray for them by name every day this week, and ask God to open a door for a gracious, salty conversation with at least one of them.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Colossians. At its center is a Person: Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the Creator who holds everything together, who came to make peace through His blood shed on the cross.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, through Jesus and for Him.

Paul says everything was created through Jesus and for Him. That includes you. You were made to know Him.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. Paul says we were once far from God, even His enemies, in our thinking and our actions.

> *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.* **Colossians 1:21 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus canceled the debt.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. Paul says it's as if He took the list of everything we owed God and nailed it to the cross.

> *He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.* **Colossians 2:13–14 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't Jesus plus rules, rituals, or secret knowledge. It's a gift you receive by trusting Him.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. In Him, you have everything you need.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died on the cross for me, canceled my debt, and rose again. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You that in Him I have everything I need. Help me set my heart on Him. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Colossians 1:15–20 every day for a week. Then read Philemon, the short letter that traveled with Colossians, and the letters to the Thessalonians that come next in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Let the message of Christ live among you. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Devote yourself to prayer, Paul says, watchful and thankful. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, Jesus is bigger than anything you've imagined, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Colossians 3:2 (NIV)