

COMMON SENSE COMMENTARY SERIES

LIFE HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD

● PHILIPPI

● GALATIA

● COLOSSAE

● EPHESUS

Optimistic, conversational,
thought-provoking commentary
on Paul's letter to the
Colossians

C CLIFTON JONES

C Clifton Jones

Life Hidden with Christ in God

An optimistic, conversational,
thought-provoking commentary on
Paul's letter to the Colossians

First Edition (2.0)

C Clifton Jones

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Preface

An imperfect commentary

This commentary leaves a lot to be desired. Of this, I am painfully aware. But at the same time, I hope it will encourage some people, especially those under the spiritual bondage of laws, rules, regulations, and control, which are widespread today.

I've spent the last fifty years carefully reading many systematic theologies, commentaries, and well-written books. So, I am very aware of how far I have fallen short of the high bar that's been set before me. My approach in this commentary differs from most of those I've read, admired, and benefited from over the years. My only complaint about most good commentaries is that they are difficult to get through. So, I've tried to write something anyone can read and relate to.

A conversational commentary

I've attempted to make this commentary conversational. That is, I want readers to feel they are having a *conversation* about the subject at hand. For me, this means saying things using common, informal language – even using folksy and slang terms at times – just as most people do when talking with their friends. This makes my commentary a bit wordy, but my goal is for the reader to relax, enjoy the ride, and settle in for a journey through one of Paul's letters which he writes so passionately.

However, I've also tried to include some background information and explain words used in the original language – Greek. But this is a *comment-ary*, so I have commented as I felt it might be helpful and appropriate. It is left to the reader to investigate things more carefully if so desired.

A thought-provoking commentary

I have also tried to be thought-provoking. This is more of my goal than having readers automatically accept what I write. I always encourage people to take Paul's advice and “Examine everything carefully.” You are always better off doing that than blindly trusting anyone. Always take everything you hear and read directly to God for his take on what is true. Your ability to do this (as granted to everyone by God) is greater than most teachers and writers want you to believe. God will never fail you. Trust him.

A verse-by-verse commentary

At best, I am a rank amateur when it comes to the Greek language. I took my first year of Greek from Darell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1982. I also completed a video course by Bill Mounce (as a refresher) about 30 years later. Then, as an attempt to get my second year of Greek under my belt, I worked through Daniel Wallace's excellent and thorough book, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. So, I depend on those who have dedicated their life to being experts in this ancient language, and so I learn from them.

However, I do know Greek well enough to understand what they are saying when they weigh in on the New Testament writings. Translation and interpretation of any language is both an art and a science. One big thing I learned from Wallace is that all translators interpret, to some degree, when they translate.

From Mounce, I learned that “common sense is your best friend” when translating any text.

So, though I depend on those who know Greek better than I do, I still check and double-check them against each other, use common sense, and do not just assume any translation is perfect. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says there is “safety in a multitude of counselors,” which certainly applies here.

Some translations are very literal renderings of the original New Testament text in an attempt to be as accurate as possible. Others are very loose and flexible, desiring to express the original author’s intent in English. There are disadvantages to each method, and there is no perfect way to translate anything from one language to another. So, I try to combine all these principles into the text I use in my commentaries. I want it both readable and accurate, and sometimes these two goals are at odds with each other. The translation I use is a combination of many. However, I am convinced that if readers use common sense, read with the full context in mind, and seek God for understanding, pretty much any popular translation will be sufficient.

In my commentaries, every time a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, I use a different font so it will stand out. The font I use is a *handwriting font that looks like this*. When you see this, a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, followed by the comments of this commentary.

An optimistic commentary

Finally, and perhaps this is the most important feature of my commentary, I try to present God, life, and eternity in the most optimistic perspective possible. I do this simply because this is how Paul and all the other New Testament writers present God. This is not to say there is never anything harsh or severe spoken about God. There is! But as Paul once wrote, “Behold the goodness and severity of God.” He presents a balance of how to

view God. Essentially, he is saying that God is *severe in his goodness* but also *good in his severity*. And this is the key. Despite any severity that he allows and brings, the goodness of God always represents who God is and how he operates. He always acts in goodness and wants the very best for all humanity that he so loves and created in his own image!

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Colossians is not quite as academic as his longer letter to the Romans which is sixteen chapters. This letter is only four chapters, but it is packed with a ton of good and encouraging stuff! It contains some amazing ideas, as you will see. Colossians says a lot about how to live a successful spiritual life and, therefore, a better material life. It says a lot about walking *in Christ* and Christian living, especially when we get into Colossians Three, about halfway through.

In Colossians One, there's a whole bunch of info on who Jesus is, more so than just about anything else in the New Testament. Jesus is presented as having a unique connection with God, and many conclude that Jesus was *God in the flesh*. Actually, it's a great mystery about how this all works in light of who God is, dragged out by a lot of debate throughout church history.

Paul starts with his usual greeting in almost every letter he writes. By the way, these are letters; they're not books. Some of these shorter letters, like Colossians, are more like short essays; Paul's longer letters, like Romans, are more like short books. Romans is also "headier" and more academic, yet it has a lot of heartfelt stuff in it. Most New Testament letters are just that – letters. They aren't meant to be picked apart, scrutinizing every bit of grammar, as if the writers were composing an accurate theological set of definitions with exact rules to follow. Many people try to approach the New Testament letters in this way, but I think they tend to impose on them what they want them to say. Paul wrote letters, not theology books, to be taken at face value like any other letters. It's easy for some people to overstudy

things. I did this for about thirty years as a new and young Christian. People in seminaries over-scrutinize everything. I know; I'm a seminary graduate. But that's okay. It was a very useful analytical exercise. However, over-studying can result in missing the simpler message that a letter (not a textbook) intends to bring. So, proceed carefully.

Sometimes, these over-studiers lose the *forest* by over-examining the *trees*. And sometimes it is best to sit back, take a big look, and say, "Wait a minute. Paul wasn't trying to be academically accurate. He just wanted to impart some useful and helpful information about Jesus and God." So, keep in mind that Paul was writing a letter to people and was just using the common trade language of that day. It's okay to pick it apart as we study it carefully, but when you get done, close the book and go to God! Talk *with* Him. He's there, and he wants a real conversation with you as an amazing creation that he so loves! He's a person. He's real.

The New Testament, helpful as it is, is just a collection of ancient writings. It's not a theology book. True, it has theology *in* it, and it says a lot about God, but I don't think it was meant to be more than what it appears to be – letters from one person to others (and, in the case of the Gospels, narratives about the life of Jesus and what he taught). So read the New Testament, and this letter of Paul's to the people living in Colossae, with all of this in mind.

I think the reason they're called "testaments" (the New and Old Testaments) is because they're really just "testimonies." Basically, they record what people experienced and believed in ancient times. They're saying, in written form, "We're claiming that this happened, we saw and experienced these things, and this is how we think you should respond and live."

1. Those Who are Faithful

(Colossians 1:1-2)

A Letter to Special People (1:1)

Paul starts out by saying, This letter is from Paul, chosen by God as an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy. “Apostle” just means to be “a sent one.” It’s not some kind of Pope, Bishop, or Pastor. Many have been taught that *apostle* is some kind of fancy title. Paul never uses it in any kind of official manner. He just identifies himself as an apostle – a sent one. Others refer to him as *the Apostle Paul*, but he always refers to himself as simply Paul, who happens to be an apostle of Christ, a sent one. I can imagine him saying, “I’m just one that’s sent out by Jesus. That’s all. So don’t make a bigger deal of it than what it is.”

However, it is important that he was *sent out* by Christ. But we all are in some way. We’re all apostles. We’re all sent out to do what God *uniquely* wants us to do in our lives. Paul was a special kind of *sent one*, as were the disciples of Jesus. But we’re all sent out by Christ!

He then wrote, *We’re writing to God’s holy people in the city of Colossae*. Holy people? For many people, the word *holy*

means “spooky.” Holy, holy, holy, goes the hymn, and many people tense up. We think if we’re in a *holy* place, in a church building, we must be somber, quiet, and serious. In some churches, that’s what they do, which should be respected. It *feels* holy to many people when they are in that setting. That’s the way religion has presented it to us. We’re in God’s presence, and we’re in a place where people worship. Right? There’s quietness, respect, and a sense of awe. But holy doesn’t mean all of that. It just means “to be set apart.” That’s all. So, when people are called *holy*, it just means they are set apart for some special purpose. When you see the words “Holy Spirit,” it just means the spirit that has been *set apart* or called attention to for some special purpose. In Greek, the words “holy” and “spirit” both existed before the New Testament was written. Holy means “set apart,” and the word “spirit” just means *wind* or *breath*. Greek-speaking people used these words all the time. In fact, almost every word in the New Testament was used by Greek-speaking people as everyday, common words. But then the New Testament writers put these two words together (holy and spirit) to create a new idea – that the spirit of God is involved in this world in some special (set apart) way. I don’t think anybody had ever done that before. We do this a lot in modern-day English. New words that are compounds of existing words are combined to convey some new concept.

When Paul talks about writing to *God’s holy people*, he doesn’t mean they’re necessarily like the best dudes on the block. They have problems like everybody else. But they’re “set apart” people. God has made special those who know Him and seek Him in a special way. It doesn’t mean they’re more important than other people, or that they alone are saved, or that God loves them any more than the rest of his creation. It just means there’s a special situation, a special relationship that people who are believers have with God. And again, it doesn’t make them more important, nor does it make unbelievers worthless or objects to be thrown away,

given up on, or eternally tormented by God. But when we believe in God and engage with him, we seek Him and have a special relationship with Him that others don't experience. They're just missing out. It doesn't make them horrible people. It doesn't make them *junk* to be thrown away. It just means they're missing out on that special relationship with God.

So, these are holy people that Paul is writing to, those set apart in a special way to have a relationship with God. They're in Colossae, in the southern part of Galatia (modern-day Türkiye), in this city, not too far from Ephesus. This whole region is where the seven churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation were located. All the churches (except for Rome) that Paul wrote to, which became his collection of letters in the New Testament, were located in the eastern region of the Mediterranean Sea, including the Greek peninsula. Only Rome is located out of this eastern region; it became known as the Western Church later in history. Christianity got its start in that eastern realm with all those churches. For about 1000 years, the Eastern Church (the Orthodox Church) and the Western Church (the Roman Catholic Church) stayed united, then began to divide and distinguish themselves. They finally split in 1054 AD. This became known as The Great Schism. But at least the Christian Church stayed united for nearly a millennium with East and West wings, pretty much one in purpose.

Faithful in Christ (1:2)

Not only does Paul call them holy people, but also *those who are faithful brothers and sisters in Christ*. Now, were *all* of them 100% faithful believers? Probably not. But as you'll see as we move on in his letter, Paul's pretty happy with them. It's a pretty much together church, much different from the church in Corinth, to which he wrote two letters (probably three – one

referred to but somehow lost to history). That church had some serious problems that Paul tried to help them overcome. But God includes and loves messed up people (churches) as much as those who seem to have their lives more in order. Everyone needs God's help; some just need it more than others. But God skips over no one and always works to redeem, restore, correct, save, and reconcile all of humanity. This is what he has promised to do. How could he do anything less and still be God?

Paul also gives them one of his typical greetings. *May God our Father give you grace and peace.* Now, why would he say that? Does he mean *maybe* God will give his grace, and maybe he won't? That's how Paul words it, but like so many things in language (any language), reading too literally can create misunderstanding. Sometimes people mean something a little different from what they literally say. From Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we know that God lavishes his grace on all humanity. So why would Paul use the word *may* and *give* in reference to God's grace? He is probably referring to the fact that people must *receive* God's grace in order for it to be effective in their lives. He wrote, "may God give..." but perhaps his intention was "may we receive..." You decide in light of all you know God to be! Keep in mind, as you read through the writings of Paul, that these are letters, not textbooks or systematic theologies (which began to emerge in church history as people tried their best to guess and understand exactly what the New Testament writings really meant).

The failure is never on God's part. In fact, he never fails. However, he sometimes, in his wisdom, allows us to fail and flounder in life, not out of complacency or cruelty but as part of how he works in our lives to cause us to grow, mature, improve, and learn how to live life better. It is all done in love for all of us, but it is done in a very customized manner, knowing exactly what every person needs, in difficulty and blessing, to bring about the

best result according to his perfect timing. God always gives us grace and wants us to have peace, but we usually get in the way of that. However, we are never a lasting hindrance to what God is determined to accomplish in our lives for our own good.

Paul is saying he wants people to experience God's grace. We just need to learn how to sense the grace and peace that's already there. Some people have created a whole theological system of belief that God withholds his grace until we get our act together. They believe that's how God presents Himself to us and how he works in our lives. "God helps those who help themselves," so the saying goes. But God is so much bigger and better than that. Yes, he allows (and maybe sometimes even causes) difficulty in our lives. But it is always to the end goal of our salvation, correction, learning, and a better life with him. He does not wait for us to do something (or have the right attitude) before he acts in our lives. He's always at work – in everyone. How could he not be and truly love the world that he created?

Get past the book

Paul starts out by saying he's an apostle of Christ who gave him authority to write things down and encourage the church. It is good to get these great letters from Paul (and others), but after we read them and maybe even study them, at some point, we need to put them aside and seriously turn to the God who is there right now, present with us. For many people it's easy to just keep reading the Bible and trying to have a relationship with it. I did that for ... maybe 30 years. It's not that I had no relationship with God and only tried to have one with a book. But the book dominated too much, and God was only *included* instead of being my focus.

Some people think too much. Others don't think things through very much at all. It was hard for me to let go of over-studying the Bible. I kept wanting to dissect it and know what it

was *really* saying. But what I needed was to put it down, go to God, and say, “Okay, God, I’ve read what these folks have to say. Are they right? Show me what *you* want me to know!” So, at some point, we are all wise to put the book aside (good as it is), experience God, and get to know him. Unfortunately, some people never get past the book and stay in it.

I have a friend who studies and studies and studies the Bible over and over. He’s at the coffee shop every day trying to figure it all out. One time I saw him and said, “Hey, I have an idea for you. Why don’t you just put the Bible down, set me aside, too – you don’t need me in there cluttering up your mind – and just go talk to God? Maybe say, ‘God, I want to know who you are! Speak to me. I’m listening.’” Well, he took great offense because I was taking away his secure situation, and he clings to that. Now, it’s not a bad thing to do Bible study, but if we are trying to have a relationship with a book – a bunch of writings that can’t talk or interact with us – we may be missing out on something much better – something much more real with the spiritual being who made us!

The *testimonies* (writings of the New and Old Testaments) tell us about other people’s experiences and ideas about God so that we can develop our relationship with him. If we never reach that point in a very real and present way, we have missed the whole point of what life is about! If you never move on to that, you may end up just stuck in a book. I’m not knocking the Bible. It may very well be the greatest book in the history of the world. It is certainly phenomenal and hard to explain without admitting God had some kind of hand in it. But the Bible is not equal with God. It can’t indwell you. A lot of people say, “The Bible spoke to me.” I don’t think it was actually the Bible that did the speaking. God can use anything written in the Bible to speak to anyone, but only his Spirit can actually speak to us. If I stick my ear down on the page, it never says anything. However, I know what people mean when they say it *speaks* to them. They read it, and something

becomes alive in their heart and mind. But what becomes alive has got to be God and the Holy Spirit. It can't be the writings themselves. Right?

There's a reason why God didn't allow the original writings of the Bible to stick around. We don't have any of them today. There are legitimate questions about the reliability of what's been copied repeatedly, which has resulted in what we have today in the Bible. The New Testament seems to be reasonably reliable, but perhaps God, in his wisdom, wanted to prevent us from worshipping a book, which we probably would have done if we had the original writing under some glass case for all to come and see. We might see them and bow down to them (in our hearts) instead of God. However, it seems that God wants us to read those *testimonies* (New and Old), take them to heart, and then go to God and say, "Okay, God, is this true? I want to know who you are. Please talk to me through my experiences, other people, and these writings. But it's gotta be you and not me, God. That's the bottom line!"

In this commentary, we're looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians, which is just a letter from one person to a group of people in Colossae. A bunch of believers. It's not a textbook, so don't treat it like one. Well, it might be okay to treat it like one long enough to look into it, analyze it, and gain from it. But when you get done, ask yourself, "What did Paul say and mean?" That's our goal as we look further into this letter.

2. Changed Lives (Colossians 1:3-6)

Faith, Love, and Hope (1:3)

Paul goes on and says, *We always pray and give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for all of you. We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God's people, which comes out of your confident hope in what is reserved for you in heaven by God.*

That's quite a statement. Paul says he's praying for these dear folks in Colossae and thanks them for three things: their *faith* in Jesus, their *love* for others, and their *hope* in what God has reserved for them. Notice these three big words used by Paul to describe them: faith, love, and hope. Paul used these same three words in his famous thirteenth chapter of his First letter to the Corinthians. This is often known as the "love chapter," where he defines love as patient, kind, and about a dozen other great qualities. At the end of his definition, he uses these three words, but in a different order: faith, hope, and love. Then he adds his grand conclusion, "The greatest of these is love!"

These are three of the greatest spiritual realities we will ever experience, but they are different, each one conveying a special aspect of spiritual life. How should we distinguish them? Faith isn't the same as love, and love is not the same as hope, and hope is not the same as faith. Yet, the three work together flawlessly. It

looks like Paul sees love as the final culmination of all three of these put together. The fullness of love includes faith and hope as a gift from God. Without diminishing faith and hope in any way, what is it about love that makes it so foundational to everything else? Well, for one thing, love is directly identified with God, but not exclusively so. “We love because God first loved us,” wrote John in his first letter. He also wrote, “God is love,” which says much more than just “God loves.” He *is* what love is, and the two can never be separated. God must love, always does, and will never stop loving. It is who he is, perhaps more than anything else that he is. He loves unconditionally, and love is the one great characteristic that motivates God in everything he does. He has no greater reason for doing anything. When he saves, it’s because he loves. But even his judgments are rooted in his love; they’re certainly not based in hatred or contempt. Though God hates certain behavior, he loves his creatures who were made in his own image. Any displeasure is because he loves them and wants the best for them. This all results in God deciding to do something to bring correction and salvation. Correction is always his ultimate goal, not destruction, shunning, or forsaking; love can never do such things. As fallen, flawed creatures, we have no less motive and ultimate goal for our children, whom we love unconditionally. Is there anything they could do or say that would cause us to give up on them, stop loving them, or punish them with no corrective purpose in mind? Neither does God toward all of us!

Where would faith and hope be without love? If we exercise faith and have hope about the future, but there is not an ounce of love in it, nothing of any value will ever be accomplished. And the opposite is also true. It’s hard to genuinely love without having some faith and hope. Faith and hope give love a way to express itself and be fully experienced. But love is always the final and greatest thing. I always think of it as the ultimate motivation for doing what we do. This is certainly true of God! Grace, as

wonderful as it is, isn't what motivates God. Grace is what God does – it's how he operates with favor toward us, totally unmerited on our part. Justice doesn't motivate God either, though he is a just God who eventually makes everything right in eternity. (That's what *justice* means!).

It's not that love is a more important aspect of God, but it does seem to be the *foundational* thing on which he bases all that he does – what ultimately motivates him. What seems to motivate God is his unlimited and unconditional love. It is a capacity to do things that are so immense and so huge. Love is what ties faith and hope together with it.

Though we can distinguish these three, faith, love, and hope, we really can't separate them either. Hope may be more of a *result* of faith and love. Perhaps this is why Paul listed it last. It seems like we must first believe, hard as that is sometimes, and such faith (according to Jesus) need only be the size of a tiny mustard seed. Then faith prompts us to love others because we believe in a God who *is* what love is. Love is involved in everything he does. Hope, then, is the natural result of our having exercised faith and love.

We first believe, then as we love and are loved by others, then hope emerges, and we are filled with “overwhelming confidence.” (That is what hope means in Greek!) Sometimes, life can get very dismal, and it may even get worse when things become tougher. None of us want this or like it, but we all experience it. We don't want to be in this place, and yet deep down inside us, beneath all the surface crap, is where we find and experience hope. Many times, it makes no sense and defies logic, but hope is there anyway. It's there when we need it the most. Where does it come from? Certainly not from the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in. Usually, based on our situation, we have no reason to have any hope at all. But we have this strange sense of hope, the ultimate optimism that says, “Everything's going to be okay, even if it isn't right now.” And that is priceless!

By the way, the word hope in Greek doesn't mean, "I hope it will *somehow* all work out." The Greek meaning of hope is not like when you took a test at school, you didn't study, and you hesitatingly said to yourself, "I *hope*, somehow, I will pass the test." That's the meaning of the English word, *hope*. However, the Greek word, the one used by the New Testament writers (including Paul), is much stronger than that. The best way to translate it would be "overwhelming confidence." Hope is not proof; it's not even an accurate measurement. But it is an overwhelming confidence that is more than just mere feelings. The confidence that hope brings is that everything will eventually be okay. It is a reason to hang in there, be patient, and wait on God. It's often a result of our faith and experiences, in spite of all the trouble and difficulties. That's what makes it so amazing. We know our Papa (God) is going to show up. We don't need to doubt, even though we do. When we were little kids, we totally trusted our parents. Our hope was in them, and they did a good job (the best they could), even though sometimes they failed a little bit.

But our heavenly Father – the one Jesus called his Father – never fails; even when it looks like he does, he really doesn't. He can't! He operates differently than we do, higher than us, in a different timeframe, and for different reasons. Hope understands this, even in some way beneath our conscious understanding. Have you ever felt hopeful in a difficult situation and did not know why? It made no sense. Right? Well, it could only be God at work in your life holding you up by his mighty strength. A friend recently told me that John 3:16 is a shining example of faith, love, and hope. "For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in him shall not perish, but have *eternal life*." That's like faith, hope, and love all wrapped up in one passage!

An Expectation of Good News (1:5b)

Paul now turns his attention from people to the Good News message. You've had this expectation ever since you heard the truth about the Good News. This is the Good News that came to you and is going out all over the world. Of course, he didn't mean the whole globe because the Good News wasn't reaching the Far East. They had their own spiritual stuff going on, and it was like another world compared to the known, civilized Western World that Alexander conquered – from Greece almost to India and from the Black Sea down into Egypt and Northern Africa.

However, this Good News message preached by Paul was going out into the civilized Western World as Christianity began to spread in the First Century. But as we know, today, it eventually went out into the whole world! Missionaries like Hudson Taylor took the Good News into China in the mid-1800s, long before the Communist Revolution. Taylor dressed like, looked like (except for his eyes, which weren't quite right), married a Chinese woman, lived their culture, and loved the Chinese people! And that's why he had such great success. If you want to read a good biography, get your hands on *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*. It's an encouraging book and a great, true story. You'll have to read it to discover his spiritual secret!

Paul adds more about the Good News going out into the world. It's bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives. Fruit is what is produced by a tree or a vine. Changed lives are the fruit produced by the Good News message when people everywhere encounter it. It is a revolutionary message today, but it was even more so back in ancient times. We have had 2000 years of benefiting from all the changed lives and changed society in history, so we never see how radical the salvation message about Jesus, his cross, and resurrection really was in those days. The

Gospel (Good News) goes out and changes people's lives. And back then, the change was even more dramatic than it is today. We are recipients of Western Christianity, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. The idea of “human rights” was unheard of in ancient times. We are greatly blessed to be living in our day and age, despite all our problems.

Today, we have a lot of immorality, but we also have a lot of morality. Morality was limited back in ancient times. It was a big free-for-all, “might makes right” ruled the day, and people were constantly destroyed. Then came the Good News about Jesus, who he was, what he did, and all he taught. The cumulative effect of all this changed the world. This is why Christianity grew. It was so different, so engaging, and so helpful to people's lives. “Changing lives” is how Paul describes it because it brings about great personal gain and real hope that far transcends this material world.

Understanding grace (1:6b)

Paul says more about this Good News message. *Your lives were changed the first day you heard it because you understood the truth about God's wonderful grace.* Think about that – from the first day! A lot of people hear about Christ, they hear about grace, and they hear about God. Almost everyone has heard about God, at least indirectly. But when people *really* hear it for the first time, their lives change dramatically, in one day, one moment. It becomes a huge, permanent shift in perspective. Often, they have never heard about or imagined anything like grace once they understand it. It is not just good news to them, it is the best possible news they could ever hear, and they know it. To find out they are completely forgiven by God, based on his love and mercy and not on anything they have done to earn it – this is life-changing.

This doesn't mean that after they believe they're perfect or never have a problem again. But there's always a big change and it takes them a long way in a much better direction. However, there are some people who gradually come into it. It takes time for them to fully realize all of the benefits and implications of what grace is all about. One day they say, "Okay, yeah, I get it. I'm a Christian now. I'm a believer." So, everyone is different in how they come to Christ.

Perhaps you went through something like this. You used to hear things over and over, and then one day, you understood and said, "I never heard that before. Why didn't you tell me sooner!" But then, after you thought about it, you realized, "Ah, yes, I did hear it. I just hadn't thought about it and didn't understand it. Now I do!" That's kind of our story, isn't it?

"You understood the truth about God's wonderful grace," Paul wrote to them. Grace is, for sure, full of wonder. It's amazing – both amazingly good and amazingly mysterious. The mystery is in how God, who is supposed to be good, awesome, and wonderful, can allow horrible, evil things to happen right under his nose! But even this is part of grace, and sometimes we don't understand until much later in life after we have walked with God down life's road and experienced many things with him. All we can do now is trust God, knowing that either he is smarter than us, or we are smarter than him. I'll take the former. We only need to know that he knows and that *knowing he knows* is all we need to know!

But sometimes, we get to look back and realize, "Oh, that bad thing turned out to have a good purpose that I couldn't see at the time." More importantly, there are many bad things in life that we will not understand, and we will not understand God's good purpose until we've moved on into eternity, where everything will be explained and made right. We will all have unanswered questions when we finish this life. Count on it! I have many questions, and many things I've seen and experienced have

not made sense to me in my puny thinking. But I've had enough success with God to trust Him for all those things I can't understand. And some of them are a challenge. The evil in the world, all the unfairness – not so much what I have experienced – but when I see other people suffering, I can't help but ask, “God, what are you doing?” But then I realize that he's got to know what he's doing ... or he's not God!

Last week, I realized that there are two very opposite things that are hard for people to believe. The first is the *existence of God* because of all the evil they see in the world around them. A lot of people I talk to conclude, “I don't know how there could be a loving God with all this crap going on.” That's not a bad argument, and I don't think God minds that anyone struggles with this. He knows how he made the world and how hidden he seems to be to most people. He is patient, has a plan and purpose for all of us, and wants us to think things through honestly and not just *fake it* in the presence of others.

That's one hard thing for people to believe. The other hard thing is to believe God *doesn't exist* because of all the good and amazing things we see all around us in life. And it's not just good ... it's *really* good! The beauty of creation, the amazing huge cosmos with its celestial giants, the blueprint in human DNA, and so many other amazing things are just a few examples. Funny thing about life ... it's really good, *and* it's really bad! Which one is dominant? I can't help but conclude that there must be a God who created everything, good, bad, ugly, and beautiful, and did so with a grand purpose far beyond what I can comprehend. But I am also sympathetic to those who are atheistic. Their conclusions are not unreasonable and are not without merit (from a merely human perspective). However, I see us all as *people of faith*. No one can objectively prove the existence of God, except to themselves if they can do so at all. But, even more dramatically, no one can ever prove that God does not exist! This is because it is impossible to prove a *universal negative*. Consider this: What

evidence could anyone ever bring to prove something does not exist? It is philosophically impossible. So, I concluded that people who believe God doesn't exist are not just people of faith, like me, but people of *greater* faith!

3. Love from the Spirit (Colossians 1:7-8)

Love for Others (1:7)

You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved coworker. There are many minor figures in the New Testament. In some ways they are like secondary characters in a novel. They serve some purpose in furthering the storyline but are only briefly mentioned – like a hotel doorman or a bank guard. But this guy, Epaphras, is no minor figure even though Paul briefly mentions him. He’s the one who taught these Colossians the Good News. He is the one who stimulated the *ab-ha moment* that changed their lives. He may have established this church in Colossae and was the first missionary to arrive on the scene before Paul. That is significant.

He seemed to have done more than just visit once, presenting the Good News message about Jesus. He taught them, and this takes time. He was probably a good teacher, lived with them, was an example, and that's all we know about him. Paul made it clear that he was a “beloved co-worker.” That’s quite an interesting description. It’s not a title like pastor, bishop, or even apostle (as Paul called himself). Just co-worker – equal with Paul in the work they were doing. Paul could have called him a junior apostle or an

apprentice, but he seemed to view Epaphras as an equal, a co-worker.

Contrary to modern-day religion, the New Testament writers had little use for titles. There was much more a spirit of equality among believers, comradery, community, and a realization that they stand equal before God by faith. No titles are assigned to anyone, like pastor, bishop, and certainly not pope. There were positions in the church, but they were positions of serving others as Jesus did. You'll never see Pastor Bob, Elder Jim, Cardinal Larry, or Pope Franklin. Paul, for example, always used his name and then identified himself as an apostle. He never called himself The Apostle Paul or used any other such title. This should be a prime example to Christians today, but the temptation to be called by some official-sounding title and address others the same way is just too tempting and invigorating. It is hard for most people to maintain the kind of equality (in any religious group) that parallels the kind of equality modeled in the New Testament.

Interestingly, the title "Sr. Pastor" is commonly used in churches today. Yet no such title was ever given to anyone in the New Testament. The closest thing is the label "Chief Shepherd" (similar words to Senior Pastor), but it is only applied to Jesus by Peter in one of his letters. It seems that the writers of the New Testament unanimously wanted any preeminence to go to Jesus alone. However, in any organization, there must be some responsible person in leadership, or there will be a power struggle. One church I attended used the title "Lead Pastor" to avoid infringing on the title of Chief Shepherd, seemingly reserved for Jesus. Hopefully, such a position is really a *Senior Servant*. Any worthy pastor will view himself (or herself) as the ultimate servant, not the ultimate lording-over person. So always watch for that. Servants keep things on track and never mind giving other people the credit. They never mind if other people do better than them or accomplish more. Good leaders gather people around them who are better at doing things than they are. They never

need to be the *big cheese* that accomplishes everything by themselves.

Paul has more to say about Epaphras. *He is a faithful servant of Christ and helps us on your behalf. He has told us about your love for others, given to you by the Holy Spirit.* What's true of these Colossians is also true of us. The love we have for others comes from the Holy Spirit. We don't just generate it all on our own. However, we must be open to receiving that love to pass it on. The Holy Spirit always tries to infuse love in us, but it doesn't always take hold. However, when it does, it's from him! The Spirit is patient and keeps bringing a spirit of love into our lives. Have you ever loved someone who is hard to love because of their actions or attitude? Where did that love come from? Were you not surprised knowing it could never come from you in that situation? That's the Holy Spirit working in our lives; it sure is good that he does! But after any analysis, the Holy Spirit is the one who brings love – when we finally get over our stubbornness and let some of it in.

Gee, why do we wait so long? If you've never loved somebody who offended you or did you wrong, you've missed out on one of the great pleasures in life. It's hard at first. But what happens is that all of your anger toward them, your frustration and intensity, it all goes away because you don't need it anymore. You are now able to love those who are unlovely in our estimation because we know that God loves them (and us) unconditionally! Once we realize this, we can't help but love them. This is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

What Real Love Is

I've been in situations where somebody is mad at me, but I'm trying to love them for my sake and theirs. I found that I must

discipline myself not to smile too much in their presence because they think I'm condescending to them in some way, even though I am not. I'm just walking in the Spirit, and he is giving me love for that person, and I have no ill feelings toward them. So, I need to stay somewhat serious without being phony. That is not always easy. In other words, I try to meet them where they are emotionally in order to establish a rapport with them. It doesn't always work, but I know it's the right thing to do. I want to tell them, "Hey, this is ridiculous. Let's work on having a good relationship, not a bad one." But I usually don't say such things because it would somehow seem like I'm condescending to them. I stay somewhat serious but mostly just quiet, listen, and love them. Sometimes it's hard to do, but it's not complicated. The best thing I can do, in addition to this, is give it time and be consistent in my love for them.

If you've ever had the chance to experience this, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, try it next time, and remember that your love for them will come from the Holy Spirit as you abide in him. You will find that doing this is delightful because you've risen above the noise and confusion, which is a wonderful place to be. But we don't get there naturally. I wouldn't have been able to do this when I was middle-aged or younger. Some people can. It took me many years to learn how love really works. But I learned from the Holy Spirit that loving people is better than getting angry with them, trying to retaliate, or defending my turf and reputation. It is much easier just to give it all to God!

Many years ago, I found myself in a situation at my church where I came to some honest conclusions (after many years of careful study) that disagreed with the official positions. To my great surprise, there was a lot of anger, shunning, name-calling, and labeling by good and long-time friends, all because I dared to think for myself and come to my own conclusions. However, I recognized that they were just doing the job they were hired and

appointed to do by defending what had been established as *inerrant truth* based on a particular interpretation of the Bible. I never faulted them for that, nor did I oppose them in any way, except to tell them what I honestly believed. In dealing with me they took away my opportunity to teach or even express what I believe as my opinion. They took my dignity, reputation, and any influence on others. However, as leaders of a local assembly of like-minded people, they had the power and right to take all of these things from me.

But there was one thing they could not take: my integrity. I have never forgotten a line in the movie *Rob Roy*. “Integrity is a gift a man (or woman) gives to himself. No one can give it to him, and no one can take it away.” Integrity is a very special and personal thing, where you stay true to yourself and true to God no matter what. It is standing up for what you honestly believe and not wavering despite peer pressure, labeling, name-calling, and anger on the part of others. The hard part is that this sometimes comes from family, loved ones, friends, and those cherished in your own social circle. But the beautiful thing I learned in all of this is that you don't have to argue, win the battle, or emerge victorious. We can just love others as God loves us – unconditionally – and let others experience strife, angst, anger, and stress. We need only sit quietly and trust God, knowing we've been true to ourselves and honest with the facts. And the amazing thing about facts, simple as they usually are, is they are stubborn things; they don't change. So, build your beliefs on facts that result from doing what Paul suggested – examine everything carefully – and you will experience the peace of knowing you are acting quietly and confidently with integrity.

I've got a friend whose wife is slipping into Alzheimer's, and she's not herself. She'll start swearing at him and doing things she would never have done before. So, he has to just love her and remember her for who she really is. It is a challenge for him to trust God; his wife can no longer trust God in any conscious way.

Sometimes, I lay awake at night and think, “I’m so sick of all this struggling in life; it seems to never end.” It’s not so much for myself that I am concerned, though I experience some of it too, but for others who I know as I watch them go through very difficult things, realizing there is little I can do. So, I pray for them. It’s my favorite thing to do when I can’t sleep. It provides an emotional outlet and soothes the soul. I usually go back to sleep trusting God all the more, knowing I’ve done all I can do in that moment. Occasionally, I can help people in some tangible way, so I do that whenever possible. But as Paul wrote in the closing part of his letter to the Galatians, “Bear each other’s burdens, knowing that each person must bear their own burdens.” Both are true; we just need to know where the line is so we can experience peace and not try to do what only God can do. The bottom line is that we need to trust God because there is satisfaction and “peace that passes understanding” in trusting him when we can’t do anything more.

Think of the people who are in solitary confinement. They can’t do anything, can’t go anywhere, can’t help anyone, can’t go to a worship service, can’t do much of anything at all. But one thing nobody can take from them is that they’re in the presence of God, and they have a relationship with him even though they are alone because they are not really alone. No captors can ever take that away from you, and no illness can either. That’s why we study these letters of Paul and other New Testament writings, so that by the time we get into these tough situations, we will have all these great principles in our heads and hearts, and they will serve us well in our greatest time of need. That’s why we go through Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Romans in this series of Commentaries. These letters are all full of great truths to nourish our heads and hearts. These principles will serve you well, even if you don’t remember one word of them. Your soul remembers, and God recalls it when you need it most. It is all there, and it will make a difference.

What goes into your heart and your soul causes you to become a different person, a better person *in Christ*, not just a better person by your own doing. This is why Paul told these Colossians that “their love for others comes from the Holy Spirit.” We exercise our relatively puny love the best we can; then God steps in, shores it up, and makes it dynamic. It's kind of like the elephant and the ant that crossed the bridge. When they got to the other side, the ant looked up at the elephant and said, “We really shook that bridge, didn't we?” Well, we all know who shook the bridge. Sure, the ant was on board; he was walking across, too, and he probably contributed a tiny bit to the shaking. But the elephant did the lion's share of the work. The ant just got to participate actively. It was a very real experience for him.

That's how it is with us and God. We bring our little puny bit of love – all we are capable of, and it is very real even though small – but then the Holy Spirit brings the rest. Perhaps you've been in situations where you ask yourself, “Where did all that love come from? It certainly wasn't all from me!” In some situations, it's not normal to love, and we know it. So, love is a very mysterious thing; and it's a wonderful thing. It's very powerful – the most powerful force in the universe – and more powerful than any physical might. It's also more powerful than any argument because there is no argument about love. It's just something we do. It's a disposition we have toward others and that God also has toward us. No words need to be said. Just love others and experience it.

4. Producing Good Fruit (Colossians 1:9-10)

Complete Knowledge (1:9)

Ever since we heard about your faith, we have not stopped praying for you. So, we ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Wow, that's quite a statement. Paul wants them to gain *complete* knowledge of God's will. Good luck with that one. Paul seems to be a bit idealistic, but he probably knows he is. However, he may also know that people need a big and idealistic goal to shoot for in life. It's hard to say how complete anyone's knowledge can be. Paul wants them to have, at least, sufficient knowledge, even if it is somewhat incomplete. That's why he felt compelled to ask God for *complete* knowledge. It may be along the lines of, "Shoot for the stars, and maybe you'll hit the moon!". Nobody will ever get *complete* knowledge on the order of what God has. But who knows how this all works in eternity when we have new bodies and new minds and are free of the limits we experience in this life?

It's easy for people (in fact, it's their tendency) to slam things to an extreme when they read the Bible or some other *authoritative* set of writings. Remember, this part of the New Testament is a letter from Paul to people in a particular location during the middle of the First Century. It is a good and helpful letter with

many great insights, as are all of his other twelve letters. But it's hard to know, exactly, Paul's thoughts on the significance of what he was writing or how long he expected them to be around. He clearly believed he was sharing a revelation he received from God that did not come from other human beings.

For Paul, what he wrote was Divine Revelation. But making such a claim does not make it true. If it is, then it is. If not, no one, not even Paul can make it such. The bottom line is that each reader (for the past 2000 years and today) must decide – hopefully taking it to God himself, who is there in real-time, and ask him to reveal the truth about Paul's writings, the Gospels, and the Old Testament. The Bible is, perhaps, the most phenomenal collection of writings the world has ever seen. This cannot be denied, nor should it be dismissed as some people do. But it also seems like some people make the Bible into something far beyond what it really is. It is a book that has problems, just like any other book. Without question, it has human authors who have opinions and strong convictions, but to what degree the writings themselves are completely without error and are *the very Word of God*, no more, no less ... that is something legitimately debated by thinking and observant people today.

Perhaps Paul just figured he was writing letters to churches and individuals that would be read, referred to, and maybe kept around for a while. Then again, maybe he knew them to be something more. No one knows for sure, though there are many who claim they do. Either way, Paul communicates his beliefs and what he thinks with the intention of helping and encouraging others.

When we write a letter, we don't try to make everything extremely technical, accurate, or literal. Neither does Paul. So, when he says, "We ask God to give you a complete knowledge of his will," that is Paul's goal. I'll bet he would have been satisfied if people gained knowledge as complete as they were capable of receiving. This is Paul's practicality and reasonability, which are

evident in all of his letters. He adds to this, "... along with all spiritual wisdom and understanding." This seems to be Paul's ultimate goal for his readers – which would include us today, even though he had no concept of future people gaining so much from letters not written directly to them. We are so blessed today!

Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge

What is the difference between *wisdom* and *understanding*? What's the difference between those two concepts in your life? For me, understanding has to do with information – hopefully factual information. Wisdom involves *how* we apply that information – effectively or ineffectively, successfully or poorly. We can have knowledge (factual information) without understanding it. But when we do understand, we are ready to act wisely. However, we can understand without being wise. Perhaps this is how wisdom, understanding, and knowledge work together. When we understand, it's an ah-ha moment, and we say, "Oh, I get it!" Wisdom is about what we decide to do with it. Will we use our understanding wisely or just say, "I understand?" Wisdom is always taking that next important step.

Solomon was supposed to be so wise, but he really wasn't. He was wise in how to tell everybody else how to live, as he did in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. He had a degree of wisdom and was wise in some things, but he obviously wasn't wise about his personal life. Having too many wives got him into too much trouble. Many people read the Bible but don't seem to understand who God is. They read it too literally or too figuratively, or they take it all out of context and draw all kinds of weird conclusions. Some just blindly read it the way they were taught and never ask any good questions that might help them to understand better. It happens every day to someone. You'll hear it on the radio, TV, and at churches, and God allows it. Perhaps God is saying, "We'll work through it." But until God does, a lot of people can be out

there getting it wrong, even though they are otherwise well-educated. But nothing can take the place of just coming to God and saying, “Hey, I really want to know. I want to understand. Grant me wisdom!”

This kind of person comes to God more objectively than a person who's been thoroughly trained, indoctrinated, and convinced to think a certain way. Other people just kind of show up and say, “Hey God, tell me what's going on.” God always tells such people, and he never fails them. Sometimes they get it, and sometimes they don't. But God remains faithful, and he never gives up. Their advantage is that the education and information they've been flooded with all their life doesn't get in the way. Knowledge can be really good if you know a lot and have acquired a great deal of factual information. It *can* be very helpful.

Many people know a lot of stuff, but they're not necessarily wise about it, and they don't really understand very much. They've just gained a lot of info. So, we need to be careful. There are teachers and all kinds of people in politics, medicine, and church who sound good – they have all the words and articulation to sound like they know what they're talking about. And they act like it, too. They are often in prominent, accepted positions in life. It's easy to think, “Gee, they must be right!” Not necessarily! That's why we must always take everything directly to God. And if you get from God something different than what other people are telling you, they may be wrong and are not necessarily right. Jesus invited us to “Ask, seek, and knock ... and the door will be opened.” And that's probably the right order, too. I'm sure that God wants us to ask other people, but ultimately, we need to ask him for the right answer for each of us. Always consider what other people have to say. Do not live in intellectual isolation. The majority is not always right, but at least it is important to find out why so many people believe in a particular thing. There is always a reason, good or bad. Sometimes they are right, but not always. This is an important thing to sort out in life.

We can get too much knowledge too fast and start thinking, “I know more than the average person now, so I must be wiser and understand things better.” Not necessarily! But there are people like that out there. You want to get out of their way and let them go on and do their thing. Help them if you can, if they will let you. But chances are, they’re not listening to anyone but themselves. Paul wrote this in his first letter to the Corinthians, “Knowledge puffs people up with pride, but love builds others up.”

So, we can have *knowledge*, but then do we *understand* the information we have gained? And then, most importantly, can we apply that understood knowledge in some good and *wise* way for ourselves and others? Those are the three layers of thinking: knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. I’m sure we’ve all experienced this. We can look back now and say, “Wow, I really fell short in my thinking. I wasn’t even close to being wise and barely understood anything back then.” Sometimes, we think we’ve got it all figured out, but later we find out we didn’t. That’s okay. It’s a common disease. Perhaps Paul had some of this in mind when he asked God to give these Colossians spiritual wisdom and understanding!

Learn to Know God Better (1:10)

Paul then adds this practical application as encouragement to his readers. *This will help you live in a way that honors and pleases the Lord. As you grow and learn to know God better, your lives will produce every kind of good fruit.*

A lot of people grow in knowledge, but not everyone grows in grace. God bestows his grace fully and instantly, but also in exactly the right way in any given situation. He never holds back unless it is for us to learn and end up even better off and living even more in grace. However, growing in grace takes time. It's

not the grace of God that grows but our understanding and appreciation of it. Our experiences become visible in our mind's rearview mirror. Sometimes we grow in grace and do not realize it until after we see the results. This is why we need to be patient with ourselves and others. God is always at work, even when we can't see it!

Another wonderful thing about grace is that when you experience it from God in a way that only he can bestow it, it doesn't make you proud; it makes you humble. Pride will get in our way quicker than anything because the big thing about pride is that it blinds us, and we don't know that it does. We think we have it all figured out, then when grace comes bringing humility, we look back and realize, "Oh, man, I didn't have a clue. We thought we did at the time, but we lacked grace in our lives. We needed to grow and learn to know God better. But eventually, we did. And that is how grace slowly works in our lives. Any lack was not on God's part but on our part in receiving it. Genuine humility is a sure sign of God's grace in our lives, and we admit, "Maybe I don't have it all figured out."

Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge – Paul prays that they'll attain these things, knowing that they will honor and please the Lord by living this way. Keep in mind that just because you have some knowledge and understanding (which is a good start) doesn't mean you will always honor and please the Lord. This comes as a result of grace with humility, and this produces wisdom. But be prepared to have it fade somewhat in certain situations that catch us off guard. An overwhelming challenge can come up, and suddenly, your wisdom and understanding leave you because the flesh (your old human nature) takes over. And that is when we need to stop and think. Don't overreact; instead, decide to walk again in the Spirit. We're left in trouble when we fail to do this (and we will, occasionally). God does not always stop us – assuming he ever does at all. He knows this is how we learn, grow, and get to where we say, "I'm never going back!" But

this can take a lifetime to learn. That's okay because God, through his Spirit, is so patient and kind, and he wants us to grow and learn. Sometimes, he knows the wisest thing for him to do is to get out of the way ... but he never abandons us. He is always there when we emerge from the other end of any situation with a little more knowing, a little more understanding, and, best of all, more wisdom.

Sometimes it feels like, "God, where *are* you?" Well, he's there. However, sometimes he steps back to let us experience and grow. It's just like teaching a toddler to walk. We let go of their hands, and they start to fall over, but then we catch them to keep them from getting hurt too badly. Always propping them up completely will not allow them to grow in learn how to walk. When they fall, they may cry and ask with their eyes, "Why did you let go of me?" Our answer is always, "Well, I'm trying to teach you how to walk," even though they cannot understand us. God does this too. He wants us to walk on our own and enjoy all the pleasures of doing so. But he also knows there is only one way for us to get there, and it's never easy. But he never leaves us. And so, we're involved with him. Without God we would not only flounder, we would also not grow. God's presence and allowance, in perfect harmony, is what we need. And that's what we get! This is, perhaps, what Paul is getting at. He wants them to honor and please the Lord so they will grow and learn to know God, producing every kind of good fruit in their lives. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, the *fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, self-control, and those kinds of things.

It's a *process* of learning to know God better and better, and that's an up-and-down process but one that is generally going upward. We all go through lows and feel we're not getting anywhere. We just need to be patient. We plateau, and then suddenly, something unexpected happens. Sometimes, that is when we begin growing again. Occasionally, we jump ahead in our growth, thinking, "Wow, I've really gotten somewhere. Thank

you, God!” Well, it's because of all the stuff in the past, the going up and down, the difficulties and learning. We were sure we weren't getting anywhere, but we were. We just couldn't see it, clouded by all the chaos and struggle. This is why we must be patient with ourselves as much as we are with others.

If you've ever played a musical instrument, you practice and practice and don't seem to get anywhere. Sometimes you get frustrated and impatient. I've done this hundreds of times. Sometimes I told myself, “I'm done. I quit. I can't get any better.” So, I put it down, but only for a few days or maybe a week. Eventually, I returned and tried again, and to my amazement, I could play better. I realized it had to take time for my brain to process what I had practiced with all the mistakes I made along the way. I think this is true of spirituality, too. When we're going through tough times, it's easy to get discouraged and think, “I'm worthless. I can't be a better person. I can't live this spiritual life very well.” Sometimes we give up. Eventually, we return and try again, often when we see a glimmer of progress. It's a natural result of struggling, praying, learning, and gaining a new perspective that can come to us in no other way! So be patient with yourself in this process of learning to know God better and better.

I have a friend who told me that we all need to *marinate*. I responded with, “Yes, but in different ways. And if we're not careful – if we just sit there marinating too long – we can get a little fermented! We can get a little drunk about ourselves, and then we have to get over it.” But marinating is an interesting idea. When you marinate meat, it gets more flavorful and tender. That should be our goal ... more loving, patient, and kind. This is God's goal for us. And if you think about how marinating works, you just leave it a while, and then you come back. And when you do; you are different inside or have a new perspective. So always be patient with yourself, give yourself time, and know that God

is at work. Remember that he's always there, even when you feel like he's abandoned you. He's just letting things *marinate!*

5. Rescued and Transferred (Colossians 1:11-14)

Strengthened with God's Power (1:11)

Paul goes on and says, *We also pray that you will be strengthened with all God's glorious power so that you will have all the endurance and patience you need.* Occasionally, Paul gets a little hyperbolic in his writing. *All* god's power? *All* endurance? But that's okay. We all do this in our everyday speech. We do this to express some points we want to make dramatically. We speak idealistically to encourage others to seek perfection, even if it can't be reached. Paul is no different, and this is another example of the care needed in reading anything too literally, not allowing for the human nature of the writer.

It certainly would be best if we could be strengthened with all of God's power. That would be nice. And perhaps, at times, we are strengthened to that maximum amount. Or maybe God *provides* such strength, but we don't tap into it. It's hard to say exactly how it works. But, for sure, Paul wants them to be strengthened by God's power (and not their own) so that they will have all the endurance and patience they need. Notice how endurance and patience are tied to being strengthened by God's power.

Paul adds this. *May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father.* This naturally results when we are strengthened by God's power and by his presence in our lives. And when we're filled with joy (as a result of experiencing his power), we can't help but thank him. How can we not? We know that ultimately our joy – that very real happiness and peace beyond our understanding – comes only from God. He is responsible for it. True, we must receive it and allow it into our lives, but there is never any earning on our part – only yielding. Big difference!

It's not that we're not involved. It's not that we don't do anything. The bottom line is that God is always at work in us. We fumble around in life, and God knows this. But he's doing the work *in* us, and we are the ones learning. However, he gets the credit, and that's how we should want it if we possess any wisdom. We gain by fumbling around and learning, but at the end of the day, we desire to be “filled with joy and always thanking the Father.” You can't beat that. It is the only way to go!

Making good out of evil

Sometimes, we get into these situations (physically or emotionally) where we lose perspective, and our focus is completely on our pain or struggle. We are totally distracted by it. Recently, I got something in my eye. It was in there all night. I couldn't get it out. Sometimes our eyes get scratched or irritated, and the pain goes on after the irritant has been removed. But the only thing I focused on for about 24 hours was that looming irritation in my eye. That's the only thing I could think about. It totally distracted me from everything else, and I just wanted to return to normal.

Life can become like this, too. We experience something so distracting that we can't possibly see what God is doing in it. We

don't even want to. We just want the difficulty to go away! Eventually, it does, and that's when we either learn from it and grow spiritually or wander on in life, only to be faced again someday with the same learning opportunity. God will give us a break to catch our breath, but then something else will come up that is intended to teach us and make us into a better person. God will never give up on us because love never quits doing (often allowing) what needs to be done to accomplish what is best for us in our lives.

At some point in life, we learn to trust God more in these annoying and sometimes horrific situations. Though we don't want to think about it or even deal with it, wanting even more to run away from it, we are wise when we just trust God *in* it! We get where we can say, "God, I know somehow you're doing something in my life, and I'll endure and wait to find out what it is." Usually, it's not until we get through it that we see what God is doing.

The process of turning evil into good is a messy process. It's not easy. It's not painless. But that's how it works. Otherwise, God would have done life differently. However, we never get used to difficulty. It is never desired. We do get a little better at it, but we never conclude, "Oh good, more pain coming. I'm going to learn more and become more Christ-like." But we can, in the midst of it, know God is working in our lives, endure, and wait on him. When we've had enough experiences with God, we can go through any difficulty with this mindset. And after it is over? That's when we are free to say, "I wouldn't trade what I learned from this for anything."

However, most people I've talked to also say they would never have signed up for what they went through, even knowing the good outcome. The pain was just too much. I agree with them. But this is why God must sign us up for learning experiences – because we would never be wise enough or strong enough to go through such things in our own strength. This is

why Paul wrote in verse eleven, “We also pray that you will be strengthened with all God’s glorious power so that you will have all the endurance and patience you need.” My usual conclusion is, “I would never want to go through it again, but I wouldn't trade what I learned for anything!” Perhaps this has become your conclusion in life, too. If so, you understand that what you gained from it was priceless, but you still wouldn't want to do it again. And that's why God makes us do it and says, “This is the way it's going to work because you'll never sign up for this program that makes you righteous and purifies you.” To go from evil to good, we've got to shed that evil, and sometimes we have to go *through* it in order to deal with it. It's not easy. It's hard.

There's another aspect to consider when people get into these situations. This is when we need family, friends, and other people praying for and encouraging us because we can hardly think straight. We need someone to remind us what is important and help us keep the right perspective ... the *big picture*, if you will. I tell people, “God is always with you and will never leave you.” Most of them already know this, but they need to hear it, just as I do. We all need to be reminded, especially when we're not feeling good about our situation at that moment. This is why we need each other.

But one caution here. When a person is in the middle of some kind of trial, we should be careful how we talk with them about it, even though what we're telling them is true and it's what they need to hear. Often, they are not ready to hear it and are in no mood to consider anything good about their struggles. They just want it to end. I don't blame them. The best time to try to teach people this hard-to-accept reality is either before or after they are in their difficulty.

Situations like Alzheimer's are among the most difficult. We can't see any good coming from it, at least not for that person, not at that moment, or even for the rest of their life. It's always hard to see how other people are gaining from it. But God makes

good come out of the terrible things that happen. Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians that God will never give us more than we can handle. Many Christians disagree with this or just don't believe it. Their own experience tells them this is not true. A friend of mine was greatly influenced by her mother's best friend. She was such a wonderful role model for her when she was growing up. But when the admired lady got older, her husband died, she got very depressed, and she killed herself. My friend believes she was given more than she could handle. And it could be! Paul admitted (in his first letter to the Corinthians) that sometimes what he wrote was just his opinion. Paul also wrote hyperbolically and idealistically in order to get people to focus on the success God brings rather than on all the failures we can't help but notice. One other thing to consider: just because someone behaves in some negative way does not necessarily mean it's because they were given more than they could handle – although it sure may seem like that to them! Perhaps it is sufficient to conclude that God always gives (allows?) the correct amount of difficulty in order to accomplish his good purpose in our lives. It's not about how much or how little but about the correct amount.

Generally, when we go through things, it could always have been more or less, better or worse. Either way, we get through it, but sometimes with scars (physical and emotional). We tend to get way too much on the side of, "Oh, I can't handle this!" But God is saying, "Yes, you can, and one way or another, you'll get through it because I'm faithful." God is always faithful to us by not letting up and following through when he knows to have a good purpose in what he causes or allows. He doesn't wimp out. When I was a kid, I would fake being sick, and my mom would let me stay home from school because she had a big heart. But if she were God, she'd say, "No, you're not really sick. You need to go to school." But God has an even bigger heart, so he would also let me stay home occasionally and help me learn to be honest

and do what is sometimes hard. So, God never wimps out, gives up, or gets tired. He always does just the right amount of discipline and permission ... not too much, not too little.

A lot of good things that result in life are things we will never see, even though we took part in it. People always learn more than they realize. It's like my kids; when they were young, I would watch them, and they didn't even know I was watching. I saw them learning a little bit each day, even though they thought they were just *playing*. They interacted with other kids and discovered how life works. I like the way my dad handled getting old and dying. It's had a profound effect on me. He quietly took one day at a time, trusted God without any fanfare, and slipped into eternity and God's presence at age 96. He probably did not realize the full effect this had on me.

Sharing an inheritance (1:12b)

Paul expands on his idea of “being filled with joy and always thanking the Father.” *God has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people who live in the light.* Wow! We share an inheritance with others – actually with everyone because God has a good plan with a good result for the whole world. Paul is focusing on “his people” in the sense that they are active believers in God. But in reality, all people are God's people in the grand scheme of things. Those who believe are his people in a special way, in an active way, right now, in the present. This does not ultimately exclude others. It just means that they are not actively engaged with God by faith at this time in their lives. Paul, many times in his letters, focused on what a particular group of people have and experience. But he is not doing this to the ultimate exclusion of all others. He is just focusing on what they experience right now so that they can realize how much God loves them.

Here are some other examples where Paul uses this kind of language that can appear exclusive in nature. In his letter to the Romans, in the middle of chapter eight, he wrote, “All things work together for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” Well, first of all, everyone is called by God to come to him and find the purpose he has for everyone in his love and saving work. Jesus put it this way, “Come to me all of you who are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.” Everyone meets the requirement of being heavily burdened and therefore called by God through Jesus.

Secondly, all who love God will have everything work together for good. But any basic logic student can tell you that it does not follow that those who do *not* love God will *not* have everything work out for them. Paul is focusing on those who love God because when they do, things will naturally go better for them. But there is no reason to conclude that things will *not* (eventually) work out for those who presently do not love God. This is because *our* love for God does not ensure salvation. Instead, it is *God’s* love for us (for the whole world), and what he did in Jesus on the cross that causes everything to work together for good!

Another example is Paul's use of the words “us” and “we” in the opening part of his letter to the Ephesians. There he described all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ. As in the above example, he addresses a particular group of people, making his comments very personal, emphasizing that it applies to them! This does not mean that others out there never receive these spiritual blessings. He never indicates this, so we need not assume it either. However, active believers will experience these blessings sooner and better than others who ignore God. This is clear throughout the New Testament writings.

Paul and other writers in the New Testament clearly say that God loves everyone and desires all to be saved. It is unthinkable that he would ever abandon this desire! How could he? Many

places in the New Testament identify Jesus as the “Savior of the world” and God as the “Savior of all mankind.” So, when Paul seems to be exclusive in some of his writings, he is just applying some principle to those he is writing to in a personal way. The many all-inclusive passages by Paul in his 13 letters make it hard to conclude otherwise. When Paul says to the people in Colossae that their inheritance from God belongs to them, it is not exclusively theirs... but he wants them to know it is theirs!

God has rescued us from the realm of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. That's the bottom line. That's what all of this is based on, all this endurance and patience and joy and thanking the Father and getting an inheritance – it's all based on Him rescuing us from darkness and transferring us over into this kingdom of His Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. Notice who does the rescuing ... it is not ourselves!

6. Visible Image of God (Colossians 1:15-20)

Now, Paul launches into who Jesus is. This is some important information about Jesus and his relationship with the Father. It is one of the most unique passages in all of the New Testament. I can't think of anything that's quite equal to this, except for how John begins his Gospel, identifying Jesus as the deity who is the creator of all created things. Paul, here in this letter, says about the same thing. It is interesting that Paul wrote long before John. Paul couldn't have gotten this idea from John, so did John get this idea from Paul? Perhaps they each independently came up with this exalted view of Jesus.

As we shall see, it seems that Paul has the Father essentially saying, "This is my son, and he's the fullness of me. My fullness is in him. I'm fully in my son." Okay, that makes them pretty darn equal, but we'll deal with this in due time,

The invisible God (1:15)

Paul starts out, *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God*. This makes sense. Jesus said he came to *reveal* the Father, and when we've seen him, we've seen the Father. He also said, "I just do the things I see my Father doing," and "When you believe in me, you're believing in the Father." He probably made about a dozen statements like this. So, Paul is consistent with Jesus' claims that he is the "visible image of the invisible God." When we see Jesus, we are essentially seeing who God is. That is amazing! And

who else in history can this be said of? Mohamad, Gandhi, Buddha? Jesus seems to stand head and shoulders above all others. But is he fully equal with God in every way, as church leaders decided in 381 AD, at the Council of Constantinople, over 300 years after Jesus lived? This is a legitimate question that is still debated today by scholars, philosophers, and theologians.

Many historians believe this section in Paul's letter (verses 15-20) was originally some kind of hymn or creed that early Christians used in their gatherings. This is why many translations place these verses in line-by-line prose rather than normal paragraphs. Paul goes on to add, *He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation.* This kind of language elevates Jesus about as high as anything, or anyone can be. He places Jesus above everything and has him existing before everything was created. This strongly implies that Paul believed that Jesus was not a *created* being and was somehow before and prior to God's creative work in the world and the universe. John was even more explicit in the opening of his Gospel. He wrote, "Nothing was created that was not created by him" (that is, the Word, whom he later identified as Jesus).

Creator of everything (1:16)

Paul expands his focus on the role Jesus played in creation. *For through Him, through the Son, God created everything in heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see – such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.*

Wow, that's a lot to unpack! Some of these things Paul lists (thrones, kingdoms, rulers) we see and know about. But apparently, according to Paul, there also exists some kind of *unseen* authorities. He's probably referring to angels, demons, and other spiritual beings that he believed existed. And, if the Gospels

accurately portray Jesus, he seemed to hold the same belief in such spiritual beings. The Gospels record Jesus having conversations with some kind of spiritual entities that he cast out of certain individuals possessed by them. On one famous occasion, Jesus reportedly had a showdown with the Devil in a wilderness, who tempted him to disobey his Father in various ways. But Jesus won that battle and demonstrated what it means to be fully dependent on his Father and do only the things he sent him here to do.

The unknown author of a letter to Jewish believers (a book in the New Testament called *Hebrews*) wrote, “Faith has to do with things we can't see and things that haven't happened yet.” And so, it appears that God has created a *material world* that we live in, which looks and feels very real to us, and an unseen world in a realm in which he dwells, often called heaven by many New Testament writers. This material life is all we know in our daily lives. But it's not all we know, ultimately. Most people sense that there is something beyond this world of our five senses. However, in some ways, it's hard to believe that there's more out there than what we can see, hear, feel, and smell. But in another sense, it's hard to believe there isn't something more. This has been a dilemma since the beginning of time, and people are still debating and sorting it out today.

Atheism

For me, personally, it would be harder for me to be an atheist. Maybe it's because of the way I was raised. I've talked to many atheists, and I can't help but tell them, “Bro, you've got more faith than I do. If you can look around at all the beauty and complexity in this world and conclude that there's nothing beyond this ... that takes a lot of faith.” For me, the evidence in creation – especially with all we know today, far beyond that of the ancients – demands that there must be a Creator of some sort who is the

source of everything we experience in this life. It turns out that there aren't many atheists in the world or in history. Most people I've talked to say, "Yeah, there's got to be some kind of higher power. I don't know who or what it is, but there's something there." However, they're more *agnostic* than anything else because they're not dogmatic either way and conclude that they just don't know for sure.

However, I'm sympathetic toward atheists since we can't detect or measure anything in the supposed spiritual realm – not in any objective, tangible way. I have an engineering degree, so I'm used to measuring things like voltage, current, force, velocity, and acceleration. These things are pretty much invisible, but they can be measured and sometimes felt. There's no such probe we can put in the air and sense the presence of the Holy Spirit. If that can be sensed at all, it must be done through spiritual means. It's unprovable and unmeasurable, and we can't demonstrate it. All we can do is experience it in some subjective way. This does not mean it is not real; it's just that it can't be proven in the way that the boiling point of water at sea level can be, for example. It's all internal and spiritual, perhaps just as real, and for some people, even *more* real than this material world!

Many spiritually oriented people want and try to prove things they can't see and things that haven't happened yet. But they can only prove such things to themselves, and this seems to be how God made it. We all experience material things in common, but spiritual things we experience individually. However, we can sense a kinship with others who claim to believe what we do about unseen things. People also tend to get dogmatic about spiritual convictions, even though they cannot be demonstrated or proven to others. Perhaps this is the motive for such dogma. It reminds me of the joke about the preacher who had a side note in his printed sermon that read, "Argument weak – wave hands and raise voice!" Religious people have many ways of making their beliefs *appear* undeniably real. They often find "proof texts"

that have been carefully selected from their sacred writings to be used in defense of what they believe. Nothing wrong with this, but there is often a tendency to cherry-pick verses that best suit what is already assumed to be true. This can be a form of indoctrination and censorship, often self-inflicted. Remember Paul's exhortation, "Examine *everything* carefully!"

I have learned to tell people, "If you've got a different view and it's real to you, then that's fine. I can't prove it or disprove it. I can't even show you that what I experience is real. All I can do is tell you it is what I honestly believe and let you do the same in mutual respect." All we can do is give our *testimony* concerning what we believe to be true. Perhaps this is why the Bible is called Old and New *Testaments*. They are, essentially, testimonies (not proofs) written down by honest and sincere religious people from the past, telling what they claim they have seen and experienced back in their day. Some of them wrote things down and said, "I'm a prophet," or "Thus saith the Lord." Or perhaps they claim to have received direct revelation from God or Jesus, as Paul did in his second letter to the Corinthians. Either way, these are claims and testimonies, and each reader must evaluate the validity of what they read, and hopefully take it directly to God, who is the final authority in all matters of life. But I don't know. I wasn't there. I can't prove any of it. But when I read writings like Paul's and other New Testament books, I can't help but conclude that there's something important in what has been written, something worth paying attention to, and (for me) worth living my life in accordance with. So, I tend to give unverifiable writings (like those in the New Testament) the *benefit of the doubt* when what I read makes sense. But then, I take it to God and ask him for his take on things. For me, God alone is the ultimate authority. Others are simple providers of ideas for me to consider carefully.

There seems to be something fundamentally right about Jesus, Paul, and other writers of the New Testament. Whether they are *infallible* or not is another discussion. But Paul wrote

many amazing and practical things. I like to think of them as “words to live by,” and so I do. Such writings are an amazing moral and spiritual guide to this life. They also address things in that other realm, a heavenly one, one we can't see and can't prove, but one we sense to be nonetheless real. So according to Paul, Jesus made the things we *can* see and the things we *can't* see, and they have to do with “thrones, kingdoms, rulers and authorities in the unseen world.”

Existing before anything else (1:16b)

Everything was created through him and for Him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. This is quite a resume, for Jesus, by the way. If anyone could ever be a candidate for *God in the flesh*, it would be Jesus. According to Paul (and John) he's certainly got the resume for it! Do not miss the gravity of Paul's statement. Everything was created, not only *by* Jesus, but also *for* him! Paul sweetens his claim about Jesus even more by saying that Jesus *holds together* all creation!

Paul has more to say about Jesus. He's also head of the Church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So, he is first in everything. He gets more specific here. Jesus is also head of the church, which Paul defines as Christ's body. Obviously, Paul does not mean literally, but almost! We are the way Jesus gets around in this material world since he is in us, and we live *in* him. That's kind of a mysterious thing. But it is not ridiculous if all he has been saying about the spiritual realm is true. Somehow, Christ dwells in us, and perhaps this is accomplished by the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to send. And so, in a very real sense, we are his body – the way he gets around in this world (through us). Seems like it

would be better if he represented himself in the flesh. But then again, it would be impossible for Jesus to be everywhere at once. A spiritual presence in each person is a complete presence. So, perhaps, this is the best way for us to be with Jesus – by him being with each one of us and calling us *the church*. It's not a building, folks, although the church (people) can meet in a building. Important distinction!

The fullness of deity (1:19)

God in all his fullness, was pleased to live in Christ. Paul, once again, reminds me of how John started his Gospel. “In the beginning, the Word already existed. The Word was *with* God. and the Word *was* God.” Who or what is this Word? John explains later in his gospel that “The Word became human and dwelt among us.” This is a tricky but hard-to-dismiss verse. Some have translated this, “The Word was with deity, and the Word was deity.” This helps to solve the logical impossibility of something *being* the same thing it is *with*. I cannot *be* Carl and, at the same time, be *with* the same Carl. But I can *be* a dad and at the same time be *with* a dad. The difference is that “Carl” is a particular person, whereas “dad” is a general category of a person. So, some theologians have concluded that John was referring to Jesus as a person classified as a deity and, at the same time, was *with* another person (the Father) who is also classified as a deity. Then, the only question is what the *relationship* is between them. Are they equal, resulting in polytheism, or is one subordinate to the other, maintaining a pure monotheism? However, many theologians reject this kind of rational explanation and insist that somehow Jesus is the same exact thing he is with; he is fully God, and he is with the Father, who is also fully God, yet there is only one God (even though it seems like two Gods the way it is stated.)

The word for god in Greek is “theos”. It is not the name of a particular person, though it is easy to use it in that way. The

New Testament identifies the Father as the one true God. If Jesus and the Holy Spirit are also identified as the one true God, then it reeks of polytheism. This has been a problem for 2000 years. The Fourth Century Christians solved this problem by concluding that the one true God exists in three separate persons, each of whom is fully God and equal to each other. But it is not one person playing three roles. This defies logic, but some religious people find this appealing and something experienced when dealing with God, who is infinitely beyond our understanding. I find this a reasonable conclusion, and I respect it.

But I tend to lean toward a more rational explanation, one that seems to have been held by the New Testament writers and those in the early church. They all viewed God as one, not three, and that the Father alone is that one God. Paul states this repeatedly in his letters. He said, "There is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ." He clearly distinguishes the two persons and never equates them as one God. In another place, he wrote, "There is one God, the Father, and one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ." This is even more explicit. Jesus always claimed to be subordinate to the Father in every way, dependent on him. But some will argue that this was just while he was human. Yet Paul wrote in another letter that "someday Jesus will bring everything in subordination to himself, and then go and subordinate everything to the Father, including himself?" This is why many in the early church, before the Fourth Century, believed that the Father and Son were *not* equal and that the Son was subordinate to the Father. But many today believe that the Fourth Century guys got it right and that, somehow, one God exists in three separate and equal persons.

What is important here in Paul's letter is that, in some manner, the fullness of deity dwelt in Jesus. Maybe equally *with* the Father but maybe subordinate *to* the Father. Perhaps we are not supposed to know for sure because we can't. What is

important is that this person, Jesus, in Paul's mind, was supreme over everything and can be fully trusted by us to be the only Son of God who dwells in us, making us his body (the church) and the means by which he gets around in the world today!

All things reconciled (1:20)

Paul ends his hymn, creed, or prose with this, *Through Jesus, God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth through Christ's blood on the cross.* The cross of Christ is always Paul's focus. It's where it all happened. It's where God has done his greatest work for humanity, and it didn't fall short or fail. What Jesus did wasn't just a *potential* atonement. It accomplished something and completely so. He made peace with *everything* in heaven and on earth by means of his death (shed blood) on the cross. Many translations say that he reconciled everything to himself. The effects of this will not be fully experienced until after we die, attain new bodies, and live with God forever. Could he ever settle for anything less? And, if all things are reconciled to God (made to be at peace), that means everyone, no matter how disconnected they may have been from each other in life, will be fully reconciled to each other. It will be a great day for all! God will then forever be known as the great and successful savior who did not in any way fail to do what he sent his son to do. Otherwise, he will forever be known as the worst, meanest, cruelest being who fails to make everything right and leaves things wrong, and billions will be forever tormented in hell!

7. Fully Reconciled **(Colossians 1:21-22)**

Far away from God (1:21)

Paul continues on and applies this to his readers on a personal level. *This includes you, who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from Him by your evil thoughts and actions.* God's reconciling work includes all people, even the worst sinners who were God's enemies, full of wrong thoughts and actions. A lot of people want to exclude others. But God is saying, "Hey, I reconciled everything to myself, everything in heaven and earth, and this includes all people."

Look at what separated us from God; it was us, what we were doing and thinking. It wasn't God. He wasn't pissed off at people saying, "I'm going to keep you at arm's length until you get your act together." We keep ourselves away, right? We were his enemies because we made ourselves to be so. But God wasn't our enemy because he has always loved us and had always planned to save the world – all of us. The problem is in our head. It's in our mind. We're the problem. God's disposition toward us never changes. He's always loved us, and he loves us now. Our disposition toward Him is what is wrong. But he came to take care of even that. It's a complete salvation that he brings, not one where he meets us partway and saves us after we have done our part. When it all becomes good and right, and we think clearly

with our eyes opened, then we realize, “Oh, God always did love me, and he always was *for* me. The problem was me! But God saved me from myself and my sin, which is my real enemy.”

I have a good friend who once went through excruciating back pain and then surgery. During that time of pain, he was mad at God (understandably); he couldn't get up, and it went on for quite some time, not knowing if or when it would end. While flat on his back, he read this verse about how God was *in Christ*, reconciling everything and everyone to himself. My friend told me, “I had seen that verse my whole life, but I didn't get it.” So, he had knowledge without understanding. The verse had not changed; he did! Perhaps, it took this horrible experience for him to see this verse again for the first time. It became his *life verse*, and his love for people grew tremendously because he began seeing people as God sees them – fully reconciled to himself (at peace with him). God can speak to us when we are in pain or feeling great (although we usually are not listening then) and everything in between.

Okay, so Paul says, “This includes you who were once far away. You were his enemies, separated by your evil thoughts and actions.” God didn't separate Himself from us. We did the separating, but only in our darkened minds, distracted by our foolish thoughts and actions. Have you ever done something or lived a lifestyle that later you asked yourself, “What was I thinking?” The longer we live, the more we realize how tuned-out and irrational we can be, and we think God is far away from us. Somebody once said, “If it seems like God's far away from you, who moved?” Well, probably you did ... in your mind. Paul wrote near the end of his letter to the Romans, as he began the practical ending of his letter, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” God's disposition toward us need not change. He has always loved us and always will. Our minds must change; that's where the problem lies, and God will never give up on anyone

until he successfully completes this saving work of all humanity that he came into this world to do.

Standing holy and blameless (1:22)

Paul expands his idea of all humanity being reconciled to God (made at peace) and makes it personal. *God has reconciled you to Himself through the physical death of the body of Jesus.* See, Paul always goes back to the cross. And what Christ did there was a *finished* work accomplished through his death. It was a physical death, leaving out any possibility (in Paul's mind) that Jesus was just some kind of spiritual manifestation and not fully human (as was believed by some in his day). His death was real, his suffering was real, and he was as human as any of us. This is exactly why he could legitimately become the second (and final) Adam and the new and better head of the human race. As the one who represented all of us, Jesus embodied God, reconciling all humanity to him and making everything right.

Paul continued his thinking about Jesus. *As a result, God brought you into his presence; therefore. So now you are holy and blameless, standing before Him faultless.* Now, I don't think Paul's being hyperbolic here. I think *in Christ* we are made perfect. We all stand before God without a single fault. Now, this does not mean that none of us have sinned or failed. We have! But this is exactly what Jesus came to save us from. According to John in his Gospel, Jesus is the *lamb of God* who "takes away the sins of the world!" He can only take away what exists, and our sins are very real.

The reason we struggle with this idea of being perfect is that we know we still sin. We see and experience our old nature, which comes and plagues us every day. Paul struggled with this, too. Perhaps you remember him writing, "I do what I don't want to

do, and I don't do what I do want to do,” in his letter to the Romans. He was struggling with sin, just as we do. We all do, and that makes us think we're not perfect. But we are perfect *in Christ!* Yet we're totally sinful and lost in our humanness (our flesh). We live in a paradox, and we'll live like this until we die.

But this is the process that God, in his wisdom, decided to take us through to get us where we need to be. I don't pretend to understand it; I just accept it and figure it must be the best way, or God would choose to do life differently. So, I go with the flow and let God accomplish everything he has planned in my life (and in other's lives). It's like when I go to the dentist; I don't tense up and fight it. I remind myself to let them do the annoying things they must do to improve my teeth and prevent worse things from happening. God's whole goal is to save the world and save everybody in it. And the way he does it, he says, “You're already infected with sin. And so, what has to happen is you need to die so I can make you anew.” As sinful people, we must die. We're all going to die, and we're all going to get out of here. I, personally, think that is a good thing. I do not want to spend forever here on this earth with all its problems. That would, for sure, be hell on earth. So, dying is, ultimately, a good thing. It's just sad for loved ones who remain a while longer. But this is when we'll get the *fullness* of salvation and perfection. Today, we only experience it partially and only catch a glimpse of all the wonder that it will be when we get there.

The beauty in death

So, we're all perfect in Christ; we stand holy and blameless before him, not because we never sin but because in Christ, all sin is taken away – *from* us and *onto* him! Whether it is *by faith* that we are perfect or we *actually are* perfect in God's sight is hard to say. Perhaps both. I would say that we are perfect, at least by faith, and maybe even totally in God's mind, which is where it counts.

Perhaps this is why Paul said that we *stand before him* holy and blameless. That is how God sees us because that is how he has made us in Christ. If you can ever catch a glimpse of this (and that may be all we can have in this life), your life will never be the same. However, at the same time, we are plagued with our flesh and all its weaknesses. Perhaps this is why Paul wrote to the folks in Rome, “All creation groans awaiting the revealing of the sons of God.” That great and wonderful day will come, but until then, we must moan and wait, but we do so knowing we are loved and saved forever.

But the beauty of death is that through the resurrection is where the real, complete salvation lies. That's where our hope lies – in being raised from the dead. When God saved the world, it wasn't a *preventative* program. He let sin fly, obviously. Look around. Instead, it is a *revitalization* program after the sinful person has died. We're going to die in our sins. No one can prevent this. But when we're raised from the dead, we will be raised in newness of life, with a new body and, I believe, with a new soul.

We'll still remember everything in this life; otherwise, what's its purpose? Life would have been a high price to pay to gain nothing! We will still be who we are, except perfect in every way, no longer plagued by sin. We will be so perfect then, in eternity, that we can't fully believe it or appreciate it now. Hey, even your husband or wife will be perfect, and so will your relationship with them, the way we always knew it could be but could never make it happen, no matter how hard we tried. Of course, we won't be married; we'll have relationships far beyond mere marriage. But I believe we will still appreciate each other in some special way.

That's God's salvation program, allowing us to die, knowing we must. So, what did Jesus do? He came into this world as a human being. Then he died on the cross to take away the world's sins, saying, “Here's how I'm going to save all of you. Since you're all going to die, I've come to join the human race, and I will die with you. We'll all die together. Then I will rise up out of death

because I am victorious over it. I will raise up all of you at the end of time as you know it. This was my plan before I ever created this world, and I will not fail!”

Once Jesus came and joined the human race through the birth process and became the *final Adam* representing all of us, then whatever happens to him happens to us because we are forever indelibly linked to him. What a wonderful savior he is. No kinder act could be performed. So, his real salvation, the ultimate salvation, is raising us up from the dead on the last day.

Jesus once said, “All who are in the tombs and the graves will someday be raised.” This is his goal. He looks at us, loves us, and says, “You’re plagued with sin and a sinful nature. I’m going to get rid of it. And the way I’m going to get rid of it is by letting you die. But I’ll die, too; then I’ll rise from the dead, and someday you’ll rise from the dead also.” Now that’s a plan! And it’s a good one because it’s complete, it’s perfect, and when we’ve been raised from the dead, we’ll no longer be that sinful person we once were. We’ll be free!

So, it’s not just a matter of believing in Jesus, getting a new mindset, new thinking, and acting differently in this life. Yes, it *includes* this, and we experience this now. We rightly call this “salvation” because we’ve been *delivered* (which is what salvation means) from the entanglement of sin in this life. We’re not completely delivered, but we are delivered to a great extent, giving us a better and more peaceful life. That’s what we get now. But guess what? We’re still struggling with sin to some degree. The only way to get fully rid of sin is to die and be raised from the dead. Then we are fully saved in the most complete way. God has even given us illustrations of this in nature. It’s like the caterpillar and the butterfly and like the seed and the tree. Things have to die in order to become new, bigger, better, and more beautiful. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul said, “If Christ didn’t rise from the dead, we’re to be pitied more than anyone.” This is because we would live thinking we would someday escape, but it

would never happen. We can only rise from the dead and live forever in victory over sin if Jesus was raised first!

When Jesus rose from the dead, he effectively said, "I'm going to give your life by raising you from the dead, too." He gives it to us now by faith, and we experience life in a new way. But on that day when we die, whether we become unconscious until the resurrection or are immediately in Christ's presence, it doesn't matter. At that moment, we'll say, "Wow, I made it. This is great!" We will all look back and conclude that it was all worth it, even though sometimes we don't feel like it today.

Some people are going through horrible, horrible things. I hurt for them, and I can't help but ask God, "How can you allow all this, especially when it involves children, the most innocent among us?" Well, the only way I can deal with it (and stay sane) is to believe that someday God will make everything right. Just like Paul said previously, "He will reconcile (make peace with) everything through the blood of Christ," This is accomplished through the cross for everything and everyone. It's all finished. Now in one way, it's not finished since we haven't died and haven't been raised from the dead. But someday, it will all be completely finished. Jesus has already done everything that needed to be done to bring this about on the cross. So, we can rest assured that our eternity is certain.

In his raising of the dead, we're raised with Him, at least ideally, and maybe in some sense of actuality, outside of time. Perhaps in some strange way (to us), we're already there! Jesus may now exist outside of time, and we're already with him. We experience time, but we don't know exactly how time works. I only know that I'm here, now, in this life. But I *believe* we will be with Him someday in the future. We have such good news to tell people; there's nothing bad about it. It's just temporarily bad. If God doesn't make things right, eternally, and he allows things to stay wrong, there's something wrong about that. If he's going to torment people forever or even annihilate them, it's the ultimate

act of violence. I would never say what God can and cannot do, but whatever he does must be consistent with who he is, his moral excellence, and his infinite and unconditional love. So, I figure the only thing he can do (and stay true to himself) is to make everything right, eventually. Otherwise, he's not God.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians and told them that we are *seated* with him in the heavenly realm in Christ Jesus. He states this in the present tense. He does not tell them that they *will be* seated someday. Was Paul speaking figuratively? Should we take his present tense statement literally? I know that Christ is personally living in me so that I can have that reality of his presence, not waiting for some future date. We can experience Jesus (and God) now. The great mystery is that God resides in each one of us and that we can have joy and peace as a result.

In a way, we all preexisted. If you think about it, the material world isn't all that real. Mostly, it's empty space. If we could compress all the atoms and electrons to where there is no space between them, there would not be much there. If we take a battleship and shrink it down, it would be very small – perhaps too small to see. So, we're mostly not here and may be more of an *immaterial* soul than a *physical* body. But we exist now, we know we do, and God already knew us from eternity past. He already knew everything about us, everything that was going to happen. It's like we existed, but it hadn't played out yet. And that's why I don't think God can annihilate people. He would still know *about* them in detail, just as he did before creating them. Is he going to forget that they existed? They're still going to exist in his mind. So that doesn't make any sense. He's bigger than that.

I once got in trouble with the Church for claiming God's bigger than he really is (in their thinking). “He can't be *that* big,” they said. “He can't be *that* good. He can't save *everyone!*” They are convinced that there's got to be something bad out there. Most religious people need to have a yen-yang view of God. He's really good, but he's also got to be really bad so he can inflict pain on

people forever for their sins and unbelief. No, actually, he doesn't. God is one who loves, saves, redeems, and restores, and he always succeeds. He always wants to correct, never to destroy – unless it is to eliminate some evil or unhealthy thing in us.

And so, Paul concludes, “As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless and stand before Him without a single fault.” Wow! I'm still blown away by this. How can this be? I know I'm not faultless, yet somehow, in Christ, we really are. That's how God sees us because he is the one who made this happen. Sure, we all sin, and he knows we sin, but he doesn't focus on that. He focuses on the solution and says, “Okay, yeah, you've sinned. Let's work on that. Let's get that out of your life. And, eventually, I will get it completely out of your life!” God doesn't hold grudges and conclude, “How dare you sin?” He's just not like that. He is magnanimous to the nth degree. He is not petty. He is far above all such nonsense and is a God who loves us and brings into our lives what we need the most ... correction and improvement to make us whole.

8. The Secret Message (Colossians 1:23-29)

Stand firm in what you believe (1:23)

You must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. You must? Really? Well, they don't have to. Nobody has to do anything ... except die and pay taxes! But they must believe this truth that Paul is revealing to them and stand firm in it *to gain* something. What is it they need to believe and what will they gain if they do? It seems like Paul must be referring to the hymn, creed, or prose that he just presented about who Jesus is and the result that comes from that – being reconciled to God and being holy and blameless.

Notice that believing something, even firmly taking a stand for it, does not make it a true belief. It's already true or false before it is believed by anyone. Our believing something doesn't make it true. But our belief belongs to us. Sometimes, we choose our beliefs; sometimes, they are imposed on us. But then, sometimes the evidence is so compelling we can't help but believe. So, Paul's not telling them to believe because it will not be true if they don't. He is saying that they need to believe and stand firm in that belief so that they can fully gain from what is *already* true about Jesus and all he has done for them.

Paul continues his thinking about standing firm in belief. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you

heard the *Good News*. Notice what they got when they heard the Good News. Assurance! That calm understanding that, due to something beyond ourselves (God), everything is going to be okay because it's not something that depends on us. Assurance is what we experience. It doesn't change reality. Assurance isn't the reality; it's how we feel about what's already true. So, we gain assurance when we believe the Good News. When people hear the Good News about Jesus dying on the cross and taking away their sins, dying in their place *for* them, *with* them, even *as* them, there is an assurance they gain that they know does not come from themselves, their own thinking, or their own doing. There is no more wonderful experience in life.

I had a friend who carried a cross with a small mirror on it. He would go around, show it to people, and ask, "Who's on that cross?" They would look at the cross and see themselves in the mirror and realize that Jesus died *as* them, not just *for* and *with* them. This made it very personal.

Paul further explains, *The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, as God's servant, am appointed to proclaim it.* But Paul is not the only one. We all have that mission to be carried out in our own way, the way that God wants to accomplish it in us, according to how he uniquely made each of us. Some, like Paul, are very bold and unstoppable. Others are more cautious and reserved, allowing the natural circumstances of life to be our cue. It is usually a mistake to think we need to be just like Paul or any other kind of vessel that God never intended us to be. Be who God made you to be. Be happy and satisfied with it. Rest in who you are, and don't seek to be like anyone else. It won't fit, anyway! Be that one unique person in eight billion that God made you to be!

Proclaiming the message (1:24)

Now Paul turns his attention to what happens when this Good News about Jesus goes out into the world. *I'm glad when I suffer for you physically because I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that all of you are experiencing.* Paul is saying, "Hey, I'm willing to suffer right along with all the rest of you." Paul did some serious suffering; his readers knew it. Not only was he writing this letter (and several others) from prison, but he went through many other things after his conversion to Christianity. He lists them in his letter to the Philippians, including stoning, beatings, and shipwrecks. Yet, he tells them he is glad to suffer with them as one who partakes willingly in some of the hard things they are going through. This is real dedication, and it shows how sincere Paul was and to what degree he believed what he wrote. He practiced what he preached!

God has given me the responsibility of serving his church by proclaiming his entire message. First, he saw what he was doing as his responsibility. Second, he saw what he was doing as a service to others. Third, he held nothing back in his teaching; He gave them the *full* message, everything he knew about God, Jesus, grace, and salvation.

Now, this gets interesting. *This message has been kept secret for centuries, for many generations in the past. But now it has been revealed so the Jews would know that the riches and the glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too.* Paul's once-secret message is now revealed because it is for everyone. Some people don't get the message, either because they have not heard it or have heard it and are not listening. But this doesn't mean it does not apply to them. It doesn't mean they're not included. There was a time when no one received it because it was

kept secret. Why would God do that? According to Paul, it was kept secret for centuries and many generations. For whatever reason, God decided to work through the nation of Israel to bring the message through Jesus, then through his disciples, and finally through Paul. But God's goal clearly was to bring this saving message about Jesus to all humanity. Probably, Israel was supposed to have their act together, recognize their Messiah, and get the message from God to share with the world. But God knew they wouldn't, and perhaps he might say, "That's ok. I'll run this Old Testament experiment, and then the day will come when I send my Son to reveal who I am and what I have planned for this world."

Okay, now Paul clearly spells out what this *secret message* is. *This is the secret message now being revealed: Christ lives in you as the hope of glory!* That's it! This simple message has many more details, but the essential message is *Christ in you*. Period. That's the secret message. Three words. In his letters, Paul continually speaks about how we are *in Christ*. In his letter to the Ephesians, he opens with a magnificent list of spiritual blessings that we have because we are *in Christ*. Check it out! And if you figure out what it means to be *in Christ* and Christ in you, you've got it made. However, it seems we need to experience this to understand it. There's a lot more to be said, and Paul (and others) have written a great deal to try to explain it so people can understand it. It is not Christ preaching to you; it's not Christ showing up and teaching (though he did a lot of this); it's not even Christ being born a manger, coming into this world, necessary as that was. The bottom line is that it's all about *Christ in you* as your very own hope of glory. One popular translation puts it this way, "Christ in you, which gives you the assurance of sharing his glory." The idea is that when Christ is *in* us (however that works, literally or figurately), we gain an assurance that we will share in

his glory and righteousness, and to some degree, we will share his divine nature! That is a radical idea.

In his second letter, Peter put it this way: "We are partakers of his divine nature." And in his first letter he quoted the Old Testament book of Leviticus, "You must be holy because I (God) am holy." And since we all know we cannot make ourselves holy and blameless, we know only God can do this. This is what Paul mentioned earlier in this letter. Now, of course, we will never share God's nature to the same degree that he possesses it. But this is the amazing thing, that God has created us and said, "I'm going to link up with you by Christ living in you, and you're going to share things in common with me." We don't share his omniscience (all-knowing), his omnipresence (everywhere present), or his omnipotence (all-powerful) aspects of his being. But there is one thing that we can share completely with God, and that's *righteousness*. It's perfection, and we can never become more perfect than we are in Christ. This is the one thing equal to himself that he infused in us.

Of course, in this material life we live, we are not perfect. We all know this about ourselves and each other. But somehow, in Christ, we are perfect by being joined with him through his becoming the new and final representative of the human race, just as Adam once was. But Jesus takes us in the opposite direction. Instead of plunging us into sin and destruction (as Adam did), Jesus plunges us into perfection (righteousness). There is no better tradeoff in the universe! Everyone's old, sinful, flawed, failed person will die out when they die. This is a good thing. We don't want it or need it. We're all getting there at different times, in different places, and by different means. But when that old nature is someday gone, there will be nothing left but the new person we will be (and now are) in Christ. We only get a glimpse of it now, only a sample – partly by faith and partly by experience. But then, we will clearly enjoy our newness in Christ fully. That's an amazing thing!

Presenting people as perfect (1:28)

We tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching them with all the wisdom God has given us. Many Christians will immediately, in their minds, interpret the words “warning everyone” to be a warning about hell, eternal damnation, and God’s plan to punish sinners by inflicting horrible pain on them forever. But this is because many religious people have been told this over and over until it became a fact in their mind, simply because it is so familiar to them. This is how *indoctrination* works, and it works well! Tell someone the same thing repeatedly, with no opposing information, and they will believe it. But notice that Paul says nothing about hell or never-ending punishment here – or anywhere else! He never mentions the word “hell” in any of his letters and never warns anyone about it.

Some argue that the one place where Paul gives such a warning is in his second letter to the Thessalonians, where he writes, “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction.” Wow, it sure sounds like it. However, as is the case many times in the New Testament, translators use misleading words. Combine this problem with some good old-fashioned indoctrination, and it’s a winning strategy for those wanting people to believe in hell and damnation by God. The Greek word for punishment has no aspect of *never-ending* in it. Punishment has a variety of meanings, but usually, it is corrective in nature rather than pure retaliation. This is how it is used in the New Testament, especially in light of God’s moral excellence, his love for his world, and his desire for all to be saved, restored, healed, and made whole. There is no reason for God to inflict never-ending pain on anyone since it is totally out of character for him. *Destruction* is yet another word that people assume has to do with retaliation by God without any corrective purpose. But this word is always used in a temporal sense of someone being physically destroyed, a reputation

destroyed, or destruction with the purpose of getting rid of something unwanted. Destruction by God always includes a purpose of correction, healing, and making whole. So, look carefully into what you read and what you're told before assuming the worst possible things about God.

Paul doesn't say what the warning is in this passage, but there are always legitimate warnings about any relationship, especially one with God. We are warned not to ignore Jesus and what he has done for us, nor the Holy Spirit, who has been given as a comforter but also as a conscience to keep us on track in life for our own good. God wants us all to be saved (delivered) from the entanglement of sin in this life that so destroys us. Proverbs is full of such warnings.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable or edify." God has forgiven humanity for its sins, and he will never act in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose. But this does not mean there are no consequences. There are two kinds. One is the consequence that life itself brings – unprofitable and unedifying results that come from doing what is wrong. The other consequence is from God, but it is always corrective. He always wants the very best for everyone because he loves everyone, and he will never give up on anyone until he accomplishes perfection in them. Can he do anything less and still be God?

The New Testament is full of warnings and exhortations, but none of them are given for the purpose of earning something with God. Instead, they are given so that we can enhance our relationship with him and enjoy our fellowship with him and others. God is like a parent – a perfect one. Perhaps that's why Jesus prayed, "*Our Father...*" The whole parent-child thing seems to be a cosmic eternal aspect of reality. God has a son, begotten of himself. And he is the *only* one he has. There is a father-son relationship with God. When he created us, he made us in his image to be a limited reflection of himself. And so, a significant

part of our life – and our very existence depends on it – is that we beget our offspring, whom we so dearly love and cherish. This should tell us a great deal about God. To a limited extent, we experience what God experiences with his son, who was begotten of God himself and fully reveals who the Father is. Jesus said he came to reveal the Father, and he did. He said, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.” Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he wrote previously in this letter, “The fullness of deity dwelt in Jesus.”

So, we experience a little bit of what the Father and Son experience in their relationship. But when we do our parenting thing, we sometimes do it wrong. Paul is saying that, technically, there is no *law* because we are now in a love relationship with God where we are completely forgiven. So, there will never be any retaliation by God. But these wrong things we do as we try to be good parents and good people can result in some kind of loss and a failure to be fully edifying to others. God knows this, but he eventually works through and past our shortcomings!

God destroys the bad, evil, and crap in our lives. He wants it out and gone forever. But he will never destroy *us*! He is a savior who saves. Sometimes we destroy ourselves, but God's not going to bring some kind of revenge that doesn't have any reconciling purpose to improve us and help us grow. The only kind of revenge God takes is in the form of success. He is so successful at redeeming and restoring us that he has retaliated against our old sinful nature by eventually annihilating it! Now that's salvation. That's deliverance! Love can and does act severely but always in our favor. It's never *against* us; it's always *for* us. How did you raise your kids? Did you ever punish them or discipline them in some way? What was your purpose and Goal? Wasn't it to correct them, help them, and make them better people? Can it be any different with God who so loves his world?

If your child ran out in the street, you'd disciplined them in some way. Right? Maybe you would severely communicate your

concern to them and the gravity of the situation. It wouldn't be because you hated them. You wouldn't threaten to send them to the orphanage or say, "I'm going to put you in your room and torment you forever for disobeying me and being unrepentant." That would accomplish nothing and would make you a puny parent! So, how can we ever tag the magnificent, loving Creator of the universe with such pettiness? For us, even as flawed, fallen creatures, it was about discipline, correction, improvement, and betterment. If you want to call this *punishment*, you can. But for God it is always corrective in nature. That's our goal as parents, and that's always God's goal, too.

So, this parent-child thing is something that God has brought into our being and our existence. We are all his children, whom he loves so much. How could he not? Paul wants his readers to know that there are warnings and that he is teaching them with all the wisdom God has given him. Notice that his teaching is based on wisdom from God, not his own, and he is passing on this wisdom not only to warn his readers but to bring about *rooting* in something real, as he will soon describe in this letter.

Paul adds this, *We want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. This is why I work and struggle so hard depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me.* Paul's goal for them was to be perfect. That's God's goal, too, for us. And you know he's going to accomplish it. He doesn't set out to do something (like save the world) only to fail! He doesn't give it the *good old college try*. He doesn't set up an escrow account and say, "Well, I'll do this part, and then you finish the deal with your part, and if you don't ... well, too bad!" God's a very good parent. He will continue disciplining, teaching, training, and reconciling until the job is done. And if it needs to continue into eternity, so be it. We don't know exactly how God works and when. But we know that he does, and he will never abandon or

give up on anyone until he accomplishes all he came to do – and that was to rescue a fallen humanity that he so loves. As Paul wrote previously, “He's reconciled everything to himself, everything in heaven and earth!”

9. Mysterious Plan; Hidden Treasures (Colossians 2:1-7)

Knit together by love (2:1)

Paul starts out Colossians Two by saying, *I want you to know how much I have agonized for you, for the church at Laodicea, and for many other believers who have never met me personally.* This is very heartfelt. I think Paul was a truly transformed man from the mean-spirited, ruthless Pharisee that he once was. Now he's a big teddy bear, puppy dog, passionate lion-hearted person, caring so much about others. I think he probably amazed himself concerning how different he was from the heartless Pharisees of days gone by – caring, willing to agonize, and even endure suffering with them.

It's an amazing transformation, but that's what happens when a person encounters Jesus. But it's an ongoing, growing process, and it looks like Paul took about fifteen years to be fully transformed before he started his ministry. It's not something that happens overnight in anyone. Oh sure, we can feel and think differently, be elated and optimistic. But it takes time for people to change, even when they want to. I think God had to bring Paul through many experiences, and who knows what happened during those years of development. Undoubtedly, he had lots of trial-and-error experiences, self-searching, and maybe even

beating himself up for his past. But he learned about God's matchless grace and how to forgive himself, realizing that God forgave him. I bet Paul could have written quite an autobiography, but he didn't. Instead, he wrote about "Christ and him crucified" – the person and work of Jesus, who he was, and what he accomplished on the cross. Paul includes plenty of biographical information in his letters, but it is never just about himself. It is always about grace and what God has done in his life, telling people about what God can do in their lives, too.

I suppose a lot of what comes out of this letter is a result of those years of walking with God quietly behind the scenes and not talking to anybody all that much. He obviously wasn't writing any letters back then. So, it takes time for us to learn how to agonize for others and genuinely care about them.

He goes on, *I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love.* It is love that he desires to be the bond that holds his readers together, not doctrine, not an institutionalized church, not a building, and not even Paul. Love! That's by far the strongest force in the universe. Physical strength always has temporary success. Read some history for endless details. People gathering institutionally in a building with a doctrinal statement and a leadership hierarchy is not bad. But it sure lends itself to all kinds of problems.

What truly knits people together is love because only genuine love can rise up above every kind of distraction and disruption. The degree to which any church engages in genuine, self-giving love (not the superficial stuff that is easy to fake) is the degree to which they will have success and grow in the right ways (not just in numbers). Sometimes, we fail in trying our best to love, usually because others are not fully on board with us, or we slip back into the undercurrent of the powerful status quo and local political peer pressure. But when we rise up above all this stuff, knowing the love God has for us, we can then turn right around and love

others. There is no better way to succeed. “I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love,” says Paul, but this isn't just affectionate feelings.

When he says *strong ties of love*, he's talking about the *First Corinthians Thirteen* kind of love. There in that letter, Paul describes love clearly. Love is patient, kind, doesn't envy, doesn't brag, is not proud, not angry, does not hold grudges, plus a few more important attributes. That's quite a list. These are the things that tie people together when love is in action; it's real love and not just affectionate feelings. When we forgive, are tolerant of each other, support each other, and help each other when we're down – even those who are annoying to us – this is when we shine like the stars in heaven and succeed in our relationships. We're all annoying to each other to some degree, yet we still love each other and struggle with it somewhat. But it is true love that ties people together, love in action, not just affection. So, Paul wants them to be encouraged, and the best way for this to happen is through love.

Mysterious plan (2:2b)

I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God's mysterious plan, which is Christ himself. That's the plan. It's a person. This is great news. Forget the theology books. You can read them a couple of times, but they are mostly someone's speculation about how it all works. Even the Bible, as good as it is, isn't a person. God's plan is in a person ... Jesus! The New Testament writers tell us about Jesus. That's good. It is a great historical resource about this unusual person who lived 2000 years ago. They call attention to him; they chronicle his teachings and actions. In effect, these writings are their *testimonies* about Christ. Perhaps this is why we call these ancient writings the New and Old Testaments. The real solution is in a person, not any book. Even Jesus said, “You think you're

going to find salvation in the writings?” He meant the Old Testament writings of that day. “Salvation can only be found in me!”

Real salvation (deliverance) is only in a person because only a person can be a savior. The Bible can't save you. It can't do anything except lay there on the table until you read it. Religious people will often say, “The Bible spoke to me.” I think I know what they mean. It is not a literal thing where they put their ear down on it and hear a voice. However, I'm willing to bet that someone has tried this! Ha! We all know that a book cannot talk. So, what they mean is that what is written in the Bible has significant meaning to them, as if it were talking. But who is doing the communicating? It can't be the book itself. It can only be God who speaks to people in the quietness of their own minds and hearts. It's God. It's not the book. I'm not dismissing the Bible, but don't trade in a relationship with God to try to have a relationship with a book! Bad trade. Go ahead and read the Bible, especially the New Testament, which is quite a contrast to the Old Testament. Love it, learn from it, and let it be helpful. But when you get done reading ... go to God, bask in your relationship with him, and ask him to show you what is true. Is this too difficult for God, who created you? No. And he will never let you down. It might take time, experiences, and mistakes before you figure out what is true. But God is faithful and will never lead you astray!

If you stay in the book, keep reading, studying, and keep trying to have a relationship with a book, you'll miss out on the real deal. This is really important. I had a friend who I recently challenged to close his Bible, quit studying for a season, and go spend time with God. Oh, he blocked me from texting and would not speak to me. I think I hit a nerve; I wasn't condescending about it and let him ponder this new idea. My only desire was to help him. He spent a lot of time in Bible study, trying to figure it

all out, which he admitted he hadn't. Sometimes we need to get a new and better perspective.

So go and read the Bible (and other books) and read it anew if possible. Read something like this letter of Paul's every day for a while. Let it sink in and let it have a good effect on you. But when all is said and done, close the book and open your heart to God. He's the one who will talk to you in his time and in his way. If you never get around to doing that, you'll miss out on all that life is really about. Don't stay stuck in Bible study trying to parse all the verbs and find proof texts. I did that for years. I didn't completely miss out, but I was missing out on something much better. I was taking the good and missing out on the best. So, Paul is telling them, "I want you to have complete confidence and understand God's mysterious plan, which is Christ himself."

Hidden treasures (2:3)

Hidden in him lie all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. It's all in Christ, and he's in us. So, all wisdom and knowledge is also in us. That does not mean we are totally wise and know everything. But somehow embedded in us is everything we need – to know what's right and do what's right. We can know what to do and how to do it in the wisest way by tapping into Christ, who dwells in us (and us in him). This is very mysterious, and I do not fully understand how it works, but I see it at work in my life and in the lives of others. We still make mistakes and have lapses in judgment, but often enough – perhaps when we need it most – that treasure of wisdom and knowledge in us emerges to save the day.

Paul goes on and says, *I'm telling you this...* Okay Paul, why are you telling us this? What is your point? *I'm telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments.*

That's a good reason. Paul wants his readers to be aware of deception. It is easy for any of us to fall into this, and often, we don't even know that we have. Usually, some well-intentioned person has carefully crafted some arguments that persuade us, especially when they don't tell us everything and indoctrinate us into their thinking, right or wrong. The problem is that we all too easily gobble it up without any critical thinking whatsoever. Paul, elsewhere in his letters, warns his readers to "Examine everything carefully." In other words, don't just assume that what you've been told is true. Check into it and eventually take it to God for his final say on what is true and false.

Be careful. The solution isn't necessarily in well-crafted arguments. Occasionally some truth might be found in them, but look elsewhere, also. All the treasures of knowledge and wisdom are hidden in Christ, according to Paul. Find truth and solutions in Jesus, a person – not a book or persuasive arguments. Allow these things to be something you consider, but do not blindly trust them. All the knowledge and wisdom are hidden in Christ, and you can dig it out by receiving him (being open to him spiritually) and engaging with him as the one who's already in you. Reading the Bible will help, but it's really about you and God. There are people in this world who don't have a Bible and don't know very much. But Christ is still in them; he just works in them differently. He won't ignore them even if they don't have a Bible. As a result, perhaps he works in them all the more.

A strong faith (2:5)

Though I am far away from you, my heart is with you. I rejoice that you live as you should and that your faith in Christ is strong. This is Paul's heartfelt goal for these dear folks he cares for. He doesn't beat people up for their sins. We are wise not to focus on sin over and over. However, we need not ignore

it, either. There is a careful balance that either extreme can destroy. As the new person we are in Christ, we do not sin because we *cannot* sin while in him. Yet, we sin every day in the *old person* we still are in the flesh. This is the dilemma we all live with; it is one that Paul spelled out in detail in his letter to the Romans. Just recognize the difference and move on to that *higher calling in Christ* that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Philippians. Only in Christ are we engaged with God in a very real way, experiencing the solution and the joy that is only found in him.

Previously, Paul warned about people with well-crafted arguments. Be careful; a good talker can make anything sound right. So always check into things and ask God, "Is this true? Please show me!" Don't just accept something because somebody has presented a good-sounding argument. "Test everything and then hold fast to that which is good," so says Paul. I don't think he means to go out and try to test everything in the world but simply test everything that comes your way and give it a good strong test. See if it easily breaks. If it does ... it's not true. If you believe one thing, and then somebody brings a new belief for you to consider, take it out for a test drive. There might be something to it; then again, it might be another reminder that "I'm not going there!" It's a very personal process that you have to work out with God. He will show you how to test everything and decide what ideas to keep and what to discard. Everybody around you will make the same decision. It's always possible they are right, and you are wrong. But stick with what you believe God is telling you – one person in 8 billion. He will correct you in his time if you're in error. Sometimes, he allows us to go down a rabbit trail to learn firsthand which trails not to follow.

The truth will not always be what is popular, what you presently believe, or what you've been told all your life. But it is okay for you to start there and trust God to guide you where you need to go. He is in no hurry to take you to the right place! Trust him! Until then, just walk in your faith and say, "God, for today,

this is what I believe. If there's something wrong with it, please show me, and I'll make some changes.” Staying open without being “thrown around by every wind of doctrine” (as James put it in his letter). That’s a good way to live your life.

Now, on to verse six. Oh, this is a great passage! *Just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your lord, you must continue to follow him.* Hey, you started with Jesus ... continue on with him! Paul says “must,” but actually, no one is required or forced in any way. God does very little forcing, if any! Look around. He allows things to happen for good or bad. However, there is some infinitely wise and good purpose God has in allowing things to happen. I admit that understanding *why* is far above my pay grade. The only thing I can think of is that since God will eventually make everything right in heaven and on earth, he knows we will learn what is needed by allowing things to play out without interfering with them. This does not mean God is not involved; he is very involved in helping us work through the problems we make for ourselves, plus the ones other people impose on us. He never abandons anyone.

Often religious people attach a mean-spirited requirement on the part of God when they see the word *must*. Often their thought is, “If we don't do what God has required in some law or command, he's going to do something bad to us when we die.” But this does not follow. Just because there's a requirement doesn't mean the worst possible thing has to happen if the requirement is not met. There is no need to tag God with doing the worst possible thing anybody can do to anyone else. If someone does not do what God commands, they will miss out on everything they could have gained by meeting his requirements. That is usually consequence enough. They will miss out by not turning to God and getting to know him. Paul is just encouraging his readers to continue with the good things they started in their lives and telling them they must do this to avoid

the entanglement of sin, which is so destructive. There are so many good things to be gained by a life of faith in God, and Paul wants them to have them. No one has to accept or continue in Christ, but they'll suffer everything that comes from not following him. However, someday, no matter how long they wait, they will eventually realize there is no other way to enjoy real peace and freedom.

Deep roots (2:7)

let your roots grow down into him. In other words, tap into who God is and who Jesus is. What we need resides in God, and we need only to tap into it. But this is a spiritual reality, much different from what we experience with our five senses. Our *hope of glory* is hidden in us because it is hidden in him in the form of all wisdom and knowledge. It's in there somewhere, rattling around, waiting for us to tap in and dig our roots down deep. One thing about roots is that they anchor a tree in times of storm. When you grow roots in Christ, it takes time, just as it does for a tree, but ya gotta start somewhere. Over time, your roots will grow deep, and you will weather the storms of life better than you ever could have on your own! It gets doled out to you through one life experience after another. Have you noticed that in one life experience, you learn one thing and something quite different in another? It's easy to start thinking, "Okay, it's time to go through the next thing on God's list." One lesson at a time, folks!

Be patient with yourself and with God. Can you imagine trying to learn everything at once? You couldn't do it. So, God says, "Let's work on one thing at a time, with a few breaks in between. When I'm done with you, you'll be a much better person, and you'll like it." It just makes my head spin, thinking about everything I had to learn and how long it took. There were so many things I did not expect or even know that I needed to learn about in life! But God is faithful, and I am sure glad that

someone smarter than me was in charge. God is so patient with us. It's wonderful. So let your roots grow deep down into him!

Paul adds this, *Let your lives be built on him. When you do, your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.* We're gonna be thankful. Maybe not immediately – especially when this *rooting* experience results in growing pains. But after we see what God has done, our thanks will go through the roof. You can pretty much count on Paul's words being true in the opposite and negative sense, too. If you refuse to let your life be built on Jesus, your faith will not grow, and there will be no thankfulness on your part. This results in a miserable life. Unfortunately, many people become accustomed to it. They get stuck in it. I had a pastor who once said, "All you have to do for your life to get very complicated is ... nothing!" He was right. Try neglecting your teeth, not showing up at work, or never changing the oil in your car. These are all easy things to avoid, but doing so will complicate your life in a hurry. All ya gotta do is nothing. He also said, "Ya gotta work hard at keeping life simple." There's a lot of truth to that!

So, we need to (must) tap into Christ, get deeply rooted, and follow him. This works great, but it can also lead to trouble and difficulty because we can't possibly know what God will take us through next. God says, "Okay, you're trusting me. Terrific! It's time to learn something new and more challenging." Yikes! "I'm going to take you through problems with the kids and financial struggles, which means you'll need to move, and things won't go well with the move..." or whatever he has planned for us. We only find out when it happens. There is no specific road map for us, only principles about who God is, how much he loves us, and that he is fully trustworthy. That is enough, though we usually don't think so. We, naturally, want to know more. But that is not how faith grows ... by knowing the future perfectly.

Your husband may have a stroke, or your wife may have a chronic, debilitating illness. There are car wrecks, natural disasters, and tons of unexpected possibilities. Life is full of it. Right? But it's basically the same solution every time. It is to “let your lives be built on him.” There are always new lessons to be learned, but it's always okay. We can tell God, “I'm gonna tap into you, and I'm gonna watch you work in my life. I'm gonna do the best I can with it, and I'm gonna be patient to see how you are working. It's a little scary, but I will just trust you anyway. I know it's the right and best thing to do.” How we need to respond to God is always basically the same, no matter what kind of trial comes our way. This is our path to “overflowing with thankfulness.” We're not always thankful when we're in the middle of trouble, thinking, “I don't really want to go through this right now, God.” But he replies with, “That's okay. You'll be thankful later.” Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “In all things give thanks!” Notice he is not asking them to *feel* thankful. Instead, he asks them to exercise their will by giving thanks – something they can choose to do. And when we respond this way to God, hard as it might be, it changes *us* more than any situation. The problem is usually in winning over our hearts and minds. That's what needs to change, not our situation. I had a good friend who openly said he was pissed off at God and was angry with him for experiencing prolonged, horrible back pain. Well, he was being honest with God, but God just said in response, “I'm going to allow this difficult situation to remain because I'm doing what's best for you. And when all is said and done, you will thank me for all I accomplished in your life as a result.” And, sure enough, my friend eventually became very thankful. In fact, he was overflowing with thankfulness because that experience changed his life in a way that, perhaps, no other means could have.

Have you ever been in a situation that was tough as heck, and you hated it at the time, but after you got through it, you saw what

happened and how God worked it out? There is nothing sweeter in life ... except, of course, when you're in the middle of it. Perhaps what you learned, you wouldn't trade for anything. But if you're like me, you'd never be wise enough to sign up for it again. I would never choose to go through many things I have experienced in the past. I'd just soon not learn whatever God has for me because I'm a big coward. However, I have to admit that after I look at what happened, I'm always glad that I got through it, learned from it, and became a better person. What I learned was more than worth all the trouble. But still, I'm not sure I have the wisdom and courage to choose to go through it. Perhaps this is why God signs us up and does not ask for our permission! I've concluded in life that either God is smarter than me or I am smarter than him. Seems like a no-brainer!

It always takes time. We don't see the value of what God is doing at the beginning and sometimes not in the middle of difficulties that He allows into our lives. But by faith, we can say to ourselves, "I've been down this road before; I've been in the middle of trials, I trusted God, and it worked out. And now, I'm going through it again, but I will trust God once more by faith. I don't need to feel good about it, and I don't even need to understand it. But I'm going to trust God, believing that the good results that came about last time will eventually happen again this time. That's good enough for me!" So, as we go through life trusting God and giving thanks in everything, we get better at dealing with difficulties. It doesn't get any easier, but we do get better at enduring, knowing God has a grand purpose in it. This is so good to know!

10. Complete in Christ (Colossians 2:8-10)

Empty philosophies (2:8)

Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense. This comes from human thinking and the spiritual powers of this world rather than from Christ. Wow, that's quite a mouthful! Some philosophy is useful thinking. Historically, philosophers have tried to figure out what life is all about. They often come up with pretty good, intuitive explanations for any deeply thinking person. Plato, for example, realized that there had to be one single, ultimate source of all things and that being must be ultimately good and perfect. That, of course, would be God, the creator of all that is. As it turns out, Plato greatly impacted the world's thinking since his days in about 500 BC. Jesus undoubtedly knew of Plato, though this is never recorded about Jesus in the Gospel accounts. However, throughout all ages, the early church demonstrated Plato's influence on them in their writings. But by the time it got around to them, it had become a slightly modified view of Plato called Neoplatonism. Never underestimate the influence Plato has had on the world down through the ages. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (in the early 20th century) went so far as to claim that all of Western Philosophy is but a footnote to Plato!

Paul is concerned about *empty* philosophy and may be referring to those who use some kind of philosophical speculation

to oppose the Good News message that Paul and others were bringing. Back then, and even today, philosophy can be a problem when conclusions that are totally dependent on man's reasoning and wisdom are drawn. This does not mean we should never seek to be reasonable in our thinking since God gives us all a rational brain and expects us to use it. Many of Paul's arguments for God, Jesus, the Good News message, and living our lives all appeal to our sense of ideas not being totally contradictory. We all seek to make reasonable sense of what we are told. We think on a human level – which is the only level on which we can operate outside of what God spiritually reveals to us. I think this is why Paul additionally refers to this kind of rhetoric as “high-sounding nonsense.” He knew that clever people could make irrational and foolish ideas sound appealing. Thus, his warning is for his readers to be aware. We are wise to take this warning seriously today. But in doing so, please don't leave your God-given rational thinking at the door and gobble up every kind of mystical utterance that might draw you into error.

About philosophy

As a Christian growing up in a Baptist Church, I was pretty much taught that any philosophical thinking was dangerous and to be avoided. So, I avoided this until I was middle-aged, when I began to look into everything carefully (as Paul recommends). I took a year to read through the history of philosophical thinking. I started with major works from Plato and Aristotle but then discovered not much was written (except Aquinas) until Rene Descartes (early 17th century) penned his now famous “I think, therefore I am,” He had set out to prove the existence of God, which nobody so far has been able to do, but he made a noble attempt. In doing so, he launched philosophy in a new direction in which there was a flurry of every kind of thinking possible. I think God let it fly, knowing where it would lead. Philosophers

painted themselves into a corner culminating in the writings of the skeptic David Hume and then, finally, Emanuel Kant. Kant, amazingly, was able to combine many conflicting theories into one reasonable system of thought. There were many philosophers after Kant, but there was never much new to add to his work. One big thing Kant concluded was that even if there is no God, we need to believe in one to have a basis for morals and live in a civilized manner. I believe this is one of those *painted corners* philosophers got stuck in, just as God knew they would.

David Hume, for example, wrote a book on *Human Understanding*, and he became known as the *father of skepticism*. Throughout his book, he argued that it was valid to be skeptical of everything and that no one knew anything with certainty. But then, at the end of his book, he had to apply his logic to his own thinking and conclude that he must be skeptical about his skepticism! This is called the *skeptic's dilemma*, and it taught me that when all is said and done, everyone (even David Hume) ends up in the same place before God as a "person of faith." From that day onward, I was never again ashamed of my faith because everyone exercises it to some degree, and no one has a monopoly on truth (except God).

I also concluded that atheists have more faith than anyone. They believe there is no god (which is their God-given right), but it is something they can never prove. This is because it is impossible to prove that something does *not* exist. No evidence can be brought to prove anything's nonexistence. What would it be? So never feel too sheepish around an atheist because they're the ultimate *persons of faith*, for they believe in something impossible to prove. Proving the existence of God is extremely difficult, and no one has been able to do it, except perhaps to themselves. But it is logically possible to prove the existence of something, whereas proving anything to be non-existent is logically impossible.

In this passage, Paul seems to be saying, “Don't let anyone capture you with this kind of thinking. Some of it captures people, becomes a trend or a hot topic, or makes the news, and people start following it, giving it momentum. Many get caught up in such things. We see this in politics all the time. We also see it in religion and in medicine which can become political. It is all quite amazing. Clever speech can be over the top, under the bottom, and in all kinds of other ways. So, as Paul stated above, don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking alone rather than from Christ and God. Human thinking, in and of itself, is not flawed. But when it's *just* human thinking, and God's taken out of the picture, look out because it becomes really messed-up thinking.

Paul had a simple solution. He talked about the simplicity of the Good News message. He did not mean that it was *simplistic*. He just meant that it is not complicated. For him, it was all about “Christ and him crucified.” In other words, it's all about *who* Jesus was and *what* he did – the person and work of Christ! That's why we always need to take everything to God and say, “God, I need to know what you have for me. I'm listening.” We need not wait for everyone else to get on board with seeking God. Some may never get around to it, but it's their loss. Don't let it be yours! However, ignoring other people's ideas and input doesn't mean ignoring them. They are part of how God sometimes works. I try to listen to people and say, “You know, I'm interested in what you believe, and I am willing to consider it. But my bottom line is I have to go to God and tell him that I need to know for myself, by faith, what is true.” Every group of religious people out there claims that all other groups are heretics and false teachers. Usually, their thinking is. “Hey, if we've got the truth and we know that we do, why consider anything else? Everyone out there is wrong, off base, misled, and deceived ... by definition of who we are!” This has been going on forever.

In Christianity, such arrogant thinking ramped up, big time, in the Fourth Century when Constantine declared Christianity to be the official State Religion. He made it no longer illegal, and now they were free to fight each other for power and influence, dismissing each other as false teachers and heretics, even exiling and killing fellow Christians who disagreed. The whole Fourth Century, from about 25 to 85 AD, was in turmoil and conflict. At the end of that sixty-year period, those who prevailed with the help of the state (emperors) forced their beliefs on those who lost, which launched the brutal Roman Catholic church of the Middle Ages. Most Christian groups today are a product of all that fighting and strife and lack of love and grace.

Think for yourself

But we need not worry about any of this. We are free to take it all to the Father (just as Jesus modeled for us), depend on him, and say, “God, if I’m wrong or messing up in my human thinking, please show me through whatever means you choose – even in the quietness of my own heart – whatever it is I need to believe about you, life, and eternity. I will humbly wait, listen, and stay open to you.” God is very faithful to us because he so loves us. He will let you know what to believe and how to live. Will it be different from someone else? You bet it will! Sometimes this is because *you* are right, and they are wrong. Sometimes, it is because *they* are right and you are wrong. But sometimes, this is because God has different solutions for different people. We all have many needs in common, but we all have our own special needs too. God has created humanity with great diversity, much more so than any of us can handle. This is partly why there is so much trouble in the world. But don’t let any of this stop you from asking God to show you what is right for you and then faithfully acting on it. If you have errors, God will correct you in due time and in his way.

Most people believe what they do because somebody told them what to believe, and they trusted that person. They have heard the same things over and over all their lives. This doesn't mean what they believe is untrue; it just means it *might not* be true. Parents, pastors, and other knowledgeable, trusted individuals are all great resources. But this does not make them automatically right. Be careful assuming they are. They are all fallible (as are we) and should not be blindly trusted. At some point in life, we all need to "examine everything carefully" (as suggested by Paul) and think for ourselves. God expects this and gives each of us the equal ability to think things through. Do not squander such a precious gift. Looking into things for yourself, doing your "homework," thinking things through, praying, and seeking God directly in all things will bring you more peace and calmness than all the blind trusting of others will ever bring! Go to God and say, "I need to spend some real time thinking about things and spend some time with you, listening to you. I trust my ongoing relationship with you to be my greatest source of truth and validation. And even if I'm messing up and I'm not getting it right, I believe you will show me because you love me, know me in detail, and will always be faithful to me!"

And so, Paul's bottom line for his readers (and for us today) is not to get derailed by any philosophy that is empty of God or fooled by human thinking that is just "high-sounding nonsense!"

Fullness of God in Human Form (2:9)

In Christ resides all the fullness of God in a human body. Wow! Are you kidding? That is quite a claim. Paul has once again exalted Jesus to the highest possible place for any human being, almost removing him from being a human altogether. This is why some people in the early days of Christianity believed that Jesus was all God and only *appeared* to be a man. Others concluded the opposite: that Jesus was fully human and only appeared to be

God. Still, others believed God was fully manifesting himself in this human being, Jesus, and that in doing so, he is rightly identified as the unique Son of God. The official position, agreed upon by church leaders – but not until over 400 years after Jesus walked the earth – was that he was *fully* God and *fully* man. This means he was not half and half or any more of one than the other. This is an interesting conclusion that emerged from the Council of Chalcedon in 450 AD. They may very well be correct, and many today believe they were, but it seems a bit odd that it took so long to figure this out and that Jesus, nor any of his disciples, nor anyone in the early church, ever came up with this difficult-to-understand (or prove) definition of exactly who Jesus was. It is very human of us to want to nail everything down and wrap everything up in a neat self-contained package. Perhaps this is not possible, and any attempt to do so brings more harm than help.

There are clear limits on the nature of Jesus in the New Testament and about his exact relationship with the Father. Paul expresses his opinion on this several times in his writings. Here, in this passage, he only says that somehow the *fullness* of deity dwelled in Jesus as a human. This is an astounding statement that is never attributed to anyone else. So, it should never be taken lightly. Yet, Paul never explains exactly what he means by this, so we are left to speculate ... and boy oh boy, have we done that for 2000 years! The worst part of this speculation is all the fighting, name-calling, and shunning of fellow believers simply because they do not dogmatically hold the same speculations. And that is all these are (speculations) because the New Testament never clearly spells out the exact nature of Jesus, nor his exact relationship with his Father. Some kind of guessing always accompanies those who dogmatically speculate beyond what is clearly presented. It is conceivable that God could fully reside in a human without that person fully equal to God. But it also seems to be within reason to conclude that if such fullness is present, then equality with God must also be true. This will never get

completely resolved (except in the minds of those who think they have resolved it, even though no such detail is ever found in the New Testament). So, we are wise to let it remain unresolved, take what is clearly said about Jesus, and let him be all he is said to be, but no more. This is hard for some people to do, but it seems like the most honest way to honor Jesus and God for who they are.

But, for sure, Paul believed that all the fullness of God resided in Christ as a human being. This seems to be about as close to “God in the flesh” as anyone can get in their thinking. But keep in mind that this is Paul’s claim, and just because someone claims something does not make it automatically true. So, the degree to which Paul was rightly *authoritative* is an important factor to consider. Those who believe the Bible to be the *very Word of God*, inerrant and infallible, even though it is a product of human writers, will never doubt Paul’s divine authority. In their minds, it *must* be true because it is God speaking through Paul (and the other writers of the New Testament.) And, of course, they could be right, but it seems to be something impossible to prove in any objective way. Others see all ancient writings as errant to some degree, knowing that humans who write them are themselves errant. It is a very difficult task to conclude that the Bible is *completely* free of errors when there are so many obvious problems, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies in it. Any kind of objective study into the history of the Bible, its many varied manuscript copies, how it came about, how many or few copies exist, and from what era they emerged will reveal a huge number of very real problems that are true of all historical writings. However, there are some who insist that there are no significant problems with the Bible, and they accept, by faith, that it is the *very Word of God*. Some have gone so far as to conclude that certain translations are *inspired* by God and inerrant – like the traditional, still popular 1611 King James translation. However, everyone is free to choose what to believe. This is granted to them by God, whether they are right or wrong, and they all must live

with whatever consequences (good or bad) that come out of their beliefs.

Paul then draws a grand conclusion from what he just claimed about Jesus. Perhaps, this is the best explanation for what he means. In fact, it's the *only* explanation that we have. *Therefore, you are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every rule and authority.* If Christ possesses all wisdom and knowledge and God's fullness dwells in him, then according to Paul, we're complete through our union with Christ, who is head over all authority! If you trust Paul, this should be of great encouragement to you. These are good reasons to believe you are complete and whole in the truest sense. But notice that this is not something we bring about in ourselves. God brings this about in us because of who Jesus is, based on our being in him because of the cross. Some will argue that only believers are in Christ. And this is true to some degree. No one *actively* experiences being in Christ unless they believe that they are. But failing to believe something does not render it untrue. The New Testament seems to uniformly claim that all humanity is in Christ and that the problem is not with God failing to include anyone but with humans who fail to realize it in their hearts and minds. If we make belief a requirement for any kind of earning favor with God, instead of letting it be what we do to gain a relationship with him, unearned in any way, we turn faith into a "work," and we are no longer saved by grace (unearned favor). So, I believe everyone is *complete* in their union with Christ, which was accomplished by God through Jesus on the cross. They don't know it because they don't engage with God, by faith, in the completeness they already have in him. It's just not active and consciously experienced.

Think about it ... if you don't believe in God, you're not going to be able to engage with him, be open to him, and gain from knowing him. It doesn't mean he hates you if you don't or that he's going to do something horrible to you after you die; it

just means you're missing out on so many good things he has for you. The problem is on the human side of things; there's no problem with God. He loves you and everybody else, and he dwells in everyone as the God who "fills all in all" (Paul says elsewhere), working to bring everybody into an understanding of himself, having already taken care of the sin problem in this world. He's that kind of a complete and successful savior! The problem is with our own thinking, with our own illusion about life and what it means; there's nothing wrong with God on his end of the deal!

Jesus or Christ?

Paul seems to interchange the names *Jesus* and *Christ*. Sometimes, he uses them together (Jesus Christ), and sometimes, they are in reverse order (Christ Jesus). *Jesus* was his birth name, taken from Joshua in Hebrew, which means "Jehovah (God) is Savior." *Christ* is more of a title – it is not his last name. Ha! "Christos" is the Greek word for Messiah in Hebrew. It means "anointed one" or a special person. A Messiah was predicted in the Old Testament writings to be a special one from God, a deliverer that would someday come. The Jews were looking for this coming Messiah when Jesus emerged as a Jewish Rabi. But they never saw him as this expected one because they were looking for a mighty political leader who would deliver them from the bondage of Rome under which they lived. But Christians saw Jesus as that very Messiah predicted in the Old Testament, especially after his death when they saw him as a different (and much better) kind of deliverer – one that delivers (saves) people from their sins. This is a spiritual deliverance and a spiritual freedom. Physical freedom is a wonderful thing, and we today experience it more than at any time in history. But *real* freedom is spiritual in nature and is much greater than any mere bodily freedom. When we are free in the safety of knowing God,

realizing how much he has done for us in Jesus, it is the kind of freedom no one can take away, even when living in physical bondage or chains, as Paul did while writing this letter.

There seems to be more of a human orientation with the name of *Jesus* and more of his God orientation with the name of *Christ*. Jesus, as a fully human being, could experience pain and temptation, yet there was an aspect of him that was *Christ*, who is perfect in every way. So, some kind of infusion of God and man is found in Jesus Christ. This is what makes him the unique (only) Son of God. No one will ever be able to fully explain this, though some will dogmatically claim they have or that someone in the past has. But we do well to let some things remain beyond our comprehension and not bring them down into some kind of a box whereby they are all carefully and completely defined (at least in our own puny minds). Let God be who he is, do what he does, and just engage with him in the way he has allowed us to do, simply and beautifully, each of us in our own way as God relates to us as if we were the only other being in the universe. It is very personal ... if we let it be!

Jesus came for the first time to be a *suffering* savior, to come and join the human race. He did not come just to walk around and be an example. In his coming, he essentially said, "I have become one of you. I came through the birth canal just like everybody else. Here I am, and I am joined by all of you as fellow human beings, so we are one in humanity. I have become the head of the human race as the new (and final) Adam, replacing him who plunged everyone into ruin. Adam brought destruction, failure, and condemnation to all humanity. But now, in the same way, I bring righteousness and salvation to that same *everyone*."

Jesus has already moved into that eternal realm which we'll all go into someday, since all of us will eventually die just as sure as Jesus did. But then we'll rise from the dead just as he did, with a new body, and we will live forever in that newness of life. As far as I can tell, our new bodies will be like those we have now,

except they will function perfectly and be free from all illness, pain, and death. Many people do not know that the human body was designed to recreate itself and live forever. Our cells are rebuilt and reconstructed over about seven years, and we end up with a whole new body. Cancer is when this reconstruction system goes wrong, and the body begins to destroy itself. But Jesus was victorious over death when he rose from the dead with his new body, and so will we someday!

11. Nailed to the Cross

(Colossians 2:11-14)

Buried with Christ (2:11)

Paul now starts a new subject. When you came to Christ, you were circumcised, but not by a physical procedure. Oh, there's another kind of circumcision? Christ performed a spiritual circumcision, the cutting away of your sinful nature. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. Now, let's stop there for a moment. Is he saying we were buried with Christ when we were baptized as a kid or adult, emersed in water, sprinkled, or whatever? People think that's what he's saying. I doubt it. I think it's something much bigger than that because there is a *baptism of the Holy Spirit*. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said, "There's only one baptism." He listed this along with six other things, of which there are only one. But there's only one baptism? Seems like there are two: water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The solution is that there is only one *real* baptism, that of the Holy Spirit, where we identify entirely with him. Then, there's a water baptism, which is just a symbol of the real baptism of the Holy Spirit. One is spiritual; the other is physical. The funny thing is that the real one (of the Holy Spirit) is the one we can't see. The one we can see (water baptism) symbolizes the other. It gives people something to see and do. This has value for people who like and benefit from rituals.

Rituals are good as long as they don't replace the things they are meant to represent. For example, some religious people make water baptism a requirement by God for salvation. And, of course, this must be performed by some official person in some official institution in order for it to be valid. This should raise a flag in the mind of any thinking person.

You can think of water baptism like this. If I look at a picture of you, it is not really you. However, I might say, "That's Mary (or Jim), but it's not. What I mean, without explaining myself, is that the picture is an exact representation of the real person. It's an image of them, yet there are not two of that person. I can't be friends with the picture, so it is far inferior to the person it represents. But it gives me something to look at when they are away and out of sight, as a reminder of the real relationship we have together. So, it's the same with baptism. There's the baptism of the Holy Spirit, where you are immersed in him, and he indwells in you. That's the real deal. And then there's the symbolic water thing that we do to provide a *picture* of what we cannot see with our eyes.

Rituals can serve a good purpose for those who want and need them. But they are not required by God, especially if we know we have the real thing they represent, and we bask in that! Not everyone can do this. Perhaps it just takes time to cultivate this kind of close relationship with God. I believe everyone can attain this, which is what God wants most for us. But sometimes, lesser things like churches, bibles, rituals, hierarchy of leaders, and many other things can get in the way; don't let them! Seek God directly and get to know him personally. We were all made to have this kind of intimate fellowship with him. It is the sweetest and most wonderful thing you will ever experience. Don't let anyone rob you of it through intimidation, peer pressure, guilt, fear, or insecurity.

Circumcision is the Old Testament version of baptism. It was a ritual that was very physical, but only for males. It emerged from

a male-dominated culture that rendered women something of lesser value and importance in society. The New Testament inherited this culture to some degree, but not fully. Baptism is for everyone, male and female. Paul even said, “There is no male or female in Christ!” However, he retained some of this male-dominated thinking in some of his writings, saying that “women should remain silent in the church” and that he “doesn’t allow women to teach men or exercise authority over them.” This is maintained today in many churches, and they are right (for them) in doing so if they honestly believe that everything Paul (and the other New Testament writers) wrote was the very Word of God, infallible, inerrant, and when they speak (write), it’s the same as God speaking – like how the Old Testament prophets were viewed. Other churches do not hold to this ancient culture and see women as fully equal to men in every way before God. For them, women are just as smart, capable, organized, wise, and able to make good decisions as men.

Like baptism, there are two kinds of circumcision, yet only one real kind – that of the heart, according to Paul. It is the kind of spiritual thing where the old nature is cut away, and the new person we are in Christ emerges. Just like baptism, this is something for everyone, male and female. This is not to say that rituals have no good purpose. Circumcision (which is no longer practiced under the New Covenant established by Jesus on the cross) was at one time something of value to the Jews. Water baptism and the Lord’s Table (the Eucharist, which is the partaking of symbolic elements of bread and wine, sometimes crackers and grape juice), are also activities of value in most Christian churches. The marriage ceremony is a good example of why these rituals have value to people. People want to make a big deal of it when they get married. It is an important celebration and a public statement of a sacred commitment. It is typical to have a big ceremony, rings, and vows. This is not really the marriage, but it visibly represents it for all to witness. Hopefully,

making a big public deal of it will also cause the couple to take seriously what they are about to enter into. The ceremony is not the coming together in union and oneness that marriage is. This is why, in some ways, people who live together and become *one* are just as married in the sight of God as those who formally and legally come together in oneness, even if they don't take it as seriously. They're just married without a ceremony because it's about making a commitment to each other and intimately consummating it. Some people live together, make a commitment, stay together, and, to some degree, are more *married* than others who are married with a license but are not connected or committed to each other. Have you seen this difference occasionally? I sure have. Sometimes I am surprised. But it demonstrates what real marriage is, just like real baptism and real circumcision. Many things in life have a reality beneath the surface that is visibly seen. Never get confused about which is more important and real!

As we move through this letter, Paul will refer to some of this as *shadowing* from the past into the present. But here, Paul says, "You were buried with Christ when you were baptized," and I would say he probably means baptized in the Holy Spirit and spiritually circumcised, which is a cutting away of our sinful nature. Always find and focus on the reality that every ritual symbolizes.

Raised to new life (2:12b)

With him, you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. Get this ... we were raised to new life because we trusted the mighty power of God (who raised Christ from the dead.) That sounds like trusting God is what saved us. But read it carefully. When we trust God, we are raised to new life. We gain a new life

when we trust God. No trust means no new life. Paul mentions nothing about salvation, eternity, hell, or condemnation here. We gain a new life when we trust God and believe in him. How could this not be a new life compared to the old one we had on our own? It is like being born again, and several times in the New Testament, this characterization is used for those who believe. Besides, the actual rising from the dead will happen someday when everyone experiences it at the end of time as we know it. For now, by faith, we experience a type of *resurrection* from our old self that we were into the new self that we now are in Jesus. As Paul said previously about true circumcision of the heart, our old nature has been cut away. This kind of language is used by Paul in all his letters and elsewhere in the New Testament by other writers. Terminology, such as: born again, new nature, new self, in the Spirit, in Christ, and new creation, are just a few. It aligns with what Paul said earlier in this letter that God's secret plan was to have Christ in us! There are many ways to express it, but it's all the same idea. It is God coming in the person of his Son and becoming one with us and us with him. It is the ultimate experience and is exactly what God wanted us to experience in this life and for eternity.

The rising to new life that we have now is only partial and somewhat figurative compared to the final and full raising that we will someday experience. However, what we experience now, by faith, is very real and so much better than living without knowing God and trusting him for everything, now and forever. We were raised with him because he came and joined the human race. What happened to him happened to us. Being ultimately raised with Christ is not something we bring about in this life by trusting God. But we do experience a taste of it in a very real way. Perhaps we can think of it as a big down payment toward all that will come. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he told them that the presence of the Holy Spirit from God was God's way of guaranteeing all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places that

would someday fully come. Today, being raised with him is something we experience, something we only begin to appreciate, but we also realize that when we trust God, it doesn't earn us anything with him. We can't ever earn anything with God because what we have from God is given as a free gift of his grace, just because he loves us! Otherwise, it wouldn't be grace. This distinction is important to understand, and in doing so, it will allow you to trust God fully and quit striving to win favor with him. You can't; you've already got it!

Paul now helps his readers understand how they got into this predicament. *You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature had not yet been cut away.* He is referring to this idea of spiritual circumcision. This does not mean a lot to us today since we were not raised under the Jewish Law, where the ritual of physical circumcision was mandatory. But we can all appreciate what he is saying because he wants them (and us) to know that it's our heart that needs circumcision, that it needs to change. But our hearts do not need to change for God's benefit, though he is pleased and happy for us when they do. He is not *appeased* in some way, warding off any kind of horrible retaliation he was planning. Instead, a change of heart is for us, for our benefit. We are the ones who come out ahead. When our hearts change (by having our old, sinful nature cut away), our lives also change. And it's a work that God does in us. We can participate and make things better sooner. But even if we don't, God will not fail. He has this change of heart in mind for everyone, and he will not give up or abandon anyone until all have been saved (delivered) from sin and their old nature.

We can decide to trust God anytime. God surely doesn't prevent us from coming to him. In fact, Jesus said, "Come unto me, all of you who are heavily burdened, and I'll give you rest." Not only is everyone invited, but he is such a full and complete savior that he goes out to find that one last lost sheep out there,

eventually saving everyone just as he planned and desired to do. We can decide to get close to God, but in the short run, he leaves it up to us, knowing we will appreciate all the more the salvation we will have someday when it happens. We can't lose, and neither can God. But we can temporarily miss out on a better life, one with peace, joy, and freedom. These are not just religious words; they are a huge reality when we finally learn to completely trust God (the best we can, which is good enough for him) and realize all fear is gone and that we have nothing to worry about. However, it is human to be concerned even when we know, eventually, everything will be made right. This life is a struggling journey.

Keep in mind that God's not up there saying, "Okay, if you do what's right, then I'll love you, and I won't do something horrific to you when you die." That's not how he operates. He has no reason to. He is God, and he is self-sufficient, not insecure or one who holds petty grudges. He loves, and love always acts in the best interest of the one who is loved. We just miss out on the joy of a life of walking daily with our Creator. So, there is this aspect of our choosing to follow Jesus and trust God, and we benefit greatly from it. Remember that faith doesn't *merit* us anything with God but *gains* us something that we haven't earned. We need only to open up and say, "God, I want to know you better."

Canceling the record against us (2:13b)

Because God forgave all our sins, he made us alive in Christ. He canceled the record of the charges made against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. Look at this verse very carefully. God canceled any record of the charges against us, that is, our personal history of sins, and took all of them away

based on what Jesus did on the cross. In effect, our sins got nailed to the cross when he was nailed there. He took all sins on himself.

But what is this “record of the charges against us?” When I was a kid in a Baptist church, I was told that God was keeping a record of everything I ever did wrong and that it would be read out loud on judgment day. That’s a lot to put on a kid, especially if it’s not true or distorted in some way. This is nothing less than fearmongering and is a long way from loving or presenting God as love. I’m sure those who told me this were sincere and trying to help me become a good person. But is this the best (even right) way to accomplish this? Is this how God works, through fear and intimidation? Someone probably played this mean trick on them when they were young; it shaped and molded their view of God – maybe even restrained them some – and then passed it on to me.

Sure, God cannot help but keep track of all I have done wrong (and of everyone else) because he knows everything. But is this what he focuses on? Is he that petty, or is he a God who is determined to save us from all those sins that he knows about, wants them cast as far as the East is from the West, and wants us free of them and the penalty that comes with them? Any penalty for sin comes from sin, not God. All he brings is correction, wanting only the very best for everyone. To this end, he works and never gives up until all are saved, just as he intended and planned. This is the Good News message about Jesus and the cross. In this passage, Paul describes it so beautifully ... that our sins were nailed to the cross with Jesus, and we no longer are to be ruined by them. Some people will temporarily be ruined by their sins (and all of us to some degree), but eventually, the effects of our sins will all be gone because Jesus has taken them away for eternity.

About seven times in the New Testament, it says that God does not exercise favoritism; therefore, someday, everyone will give an account for what they've done, good or bad, in this life. If

there is any accounting in eternity for our sins, it will be to show us all that God saved us from. It will be a great and good day when grace is fully understood. In this way, we will be giving an account for our sins, but they will not be counted against us... just numbered so we can see how much God loves us and how great his saving work for us was.

What judgment means

It is wise to keep all of this in mind and not mingle the idea of God nailing our sins to the cross with the popular idea that God's going to get ticked off and do something horrible to people after this life in what we call *judgment*. When you hear the word judgment, what do you think it means? Most people are taught that it is God punishing people eternally. But that's not what this word means in Greek (the language in which the New Testament was written.) It simply means "to make an accurate assessment." Now, for sure, someone who judges can also decide to punish sin in some way for some reason. That would become part of the judgment. But still, it is not what this word means. God will someday judge all of us, but for what purpose and to what end? Think about the moral excellence of God. It is the highest possible. Think about his love, grace, mercy, kindness, and goodness. Shouldn't any kind of judgment, condemnation, and punishment be seen in this light of who God is?

The idea of God being a judge behind a big bench, rendering a verdict for (or against) everyone, someday in eternity, comes from Anselm in about 1000 AD. For him, it was a big legal issue that God needed to punish unrepentant sinners in order to restore the honor they took from him by sinning. This was the culture of his day, and so he interpreted God as one like the heavy-handed legal system judges who ruled back then.

When we make a judgment *about* something, we're accurately assessing some situation and actions. And so, God's going to

accurately assess everything that happened in our lives, good or bad, and that's a good thing. That's what love does. God will be saying, "Here's what happened and what part you played in it." We will need a summing up of our lives so we can put in perspective all that God has done in us, for us, and in spite of us. Basically, he will tell us, "Here's where you messed up, and here's what you did right." But he will also make clear the salvation we received from him by grace, that we are totally forgiven based on all that he did through Jesus on the cross, wanting to make sure we understand how marvelous his saving grace is.

So, judgment doesn't have to be bad, and it seems wise to seek the good things God is accomplishing in judgment. He is a good, and only good, God. However, judgment can include some action on God's part that we deem harsh in our limited understanding of what he is doing and why. In his letter to the Romans, Paul told them to notice God's goodness and severity. He recognized that, from our perspective, God does things that appear good and severe. But he tells them to notice *both*, not just one or the other. Perhaps he is telling them that God is good in his severity, severe in his goodness and that both of these work together to accomplish his perfect will in their lives. Isn't this what we do in society when we bring proper judgment against someone for committing a crime? Don't we have as our goal some kind of reform or correction for a criminal? This is why we call such places penitentiaries, correction facilities, and reform schools (for younger criminals). We don't torment them to try to regain the honor robbed of us by the criminals, do we? God does not need to do this, either. In fact, we have laws against "cruel and unusual punishment" that act as *pure retaliation* with no corrective purpose whatsoever. God can be no less magnanimous and is even more loving, gracious, and one who seeks restoration – much more than we could ever be. God's kind of judgment is accurate, doesn't ignore things, and considers all the facts in each individual case. His judgments are never too much or too little,

but always the best thing for each person, for all humanity, to accomplish his grand purpose in this world.

Judgment can't be a condemnation *against* us for our sins because they've all been taken away by Jesus on the cross! And if we think about it, what was taken away? It wasn't the sins themselves since we all still experience them daily. Jesus dying on the cross to take away sins was not a *preventative* program. If it was, it failed. Instead, it was a taking away of the *penalty* of sin, which comes from the sins themselves. Sin is what punishes us unmercifully ... not God. He is always working to do the opposite, to save us from our sins and from ourselves. We are our own worst enemy, not God. He loves us and wants us to all be made whole.

The Father did not punish Jesus in place of us as an act of God trying to restore his lost honor. The Father wasn't up there having Jesus beaten bloody and crucified and then adding to his misery by pouring out his wrath on him, tormenting him in some cosmic way. God never seeks any kind of satisfaction in this way. His desire is not, "Someone must experience pain for all those sins committed out there, even if it is someone innocent!" What kind of justice is that, especially in light of the fact that the word *justice* in Greek means "to make things right?" How could it possibly be making things right to inflict agony on an innocent person in place of others who are guilty? Instead, Jesus was willingly taking on all of our sins in some mystical way far beyond our comprehension. Peter wrote, "He who knew no sin (was innocent) *became* sin on our behalf." God does not need to retaliate against sinners to regain his honor, nor does he need to inflict pain on an innocent person instead of the actual sinners. He only needs to save, restore, correct, redeem, and reconcile sinners whom he so loves, never giving up or abandoning them until they are fully healed, made new, and restored. That was his purpose forever in the past and what he came to this earth to

accomplish. It is something totally good, perfect, and loving, with only the goal of saving the world.

According to the anonymous author of *Hebrews* (a New Testament book), Jesus “atoned for *all* sin, for *all* time!” It was a timeless atonement that covered every sin committed by anyone who ever lived or ever will live! He took on himself the penalty and consequence that sin brings on us; he didn’t take away some kind of retaliation that God wanted to bring against us. But we still experience sin within time itself because we’re actively sinning. No one can prevent sins that have already occurred, and no one can take away sins that haven’t happened yet. But what *can* be done is to remove all that accompanies our sin, all that ruins us and would potentially keep us in misery forever. We’re not judged for our sins because that has been done once and for all by Jesus, and he will never need to die again for our sins. However, this does not change the fact that we “reap what we sow” in this life and that our sins, shortcomings, and failures have very real and serious consequences.

People have different views of all this, just as they should have and are entitled to. Since these are all matters of a spiritual nature, there is no real objective evidence to prove God’s actions or intentions either way. Whoa, to anyone who thinks they can definitively speak for God, and many out there do. Some of them are religious leaders, some very secular. Others write books and have tape libraries or podcasts. The degree of certainty they have and the amount of personal conviction they experience is between each of them and God. I need not criticize any of them, nor do I want to. I just try to bring *all* the facts into play (whether I like them or not), ask good questions (which is important for everyone to do), and then simply state what I believe, confessing that I cannot objectively prove anything in the spiritual realm. However, this does not mean I do not believe it is all very real, and perhaps even *more* real in many ways than all we see, hear, and experience with our five senses.

Yet, I cannot help but conclude that God is that one singular, unique, unparalleled source of everything. He always acts in goodness, love, and perfection throughout the universe and beyond for all time, past, present, and future (if there is any sense of time for him at all). Because of this, we are wise to look for and expect the very best things possible from God, even when things look negative, and we want something better. In essence, we need to give him the “benefit of the doubt.” Why wouldn’t we? Who else deserves it more? Why tag God with the worst possible things that anyone could do to someone else when there is no objective proof of it, only speculation by some? Doesn’t our most basic intuition built into us tell us that God has to be better than that?

Judgment (plus any condemnation, punishment, and justice) must be consistent with God's grace, forgiveness, mercy, and love. It must be, or God is totally inconsistent with himself. It comes down to God is either good ... or he is not! There is only good in those actions by God that *appear* to be negative (judgment, condemnation, and punishment). These are always hard for people to endure, now or in eternity. They can even result in some kind of destruction! But the only kind of destruction that God involves himself in is the good kind, where something must be destroyed before something else better can be restored. God is determined to destroy sin *in* us, not us! Paul wrote to the Romans that “God “condemns sin in the flesh.” This is a good kind of *condemnation* by God – needed to bring us into perfection like himself. When we are all dead and gone, and this life is over for everyone, after this old world has served God’s purpose, he's going to have a whole new group of people. We will still be the same people we are now, but we’ll be finally perfected! He’s not going to judge, condemn, and torment people forever (as is popularly believed), where things are never made right and remain forever wrong. The word *justice* in Greek means “to make things right.” God's going to make things ultimately right and not

leave them wrong with so much unfinished business in the lives of people he loved and came to save.

Paul's big point in the above passage is that God "canceled the record of the charges against us." It does not matter if he's keeping some record of everything that was done wrong, and this record gets canceled. Whether an actual record is kept or there is simply an accumulation of God's infinite knowledge, either way, it all got nailed to the cross with Jesus as the one who bore our sins – all of them. If when we all get into eternity, and we're still being held accountable for our sins, then Jesus didn't literally nail them to the cross. What's against us is sin itself, not God, and not some record of sins. Sin is our destroyer, not God. His only desire is to save us from our sins. What a wonderful savior he is! He's not *against* us; he is *for* us. He wants the best for us and wants sin out of our lives. He wants it eradicated forever. He's not up there saying, "How dare you sin and not believe in me. I need to do something awful to you in retaliation." That seems like a puny view of God. Instead, he wants to correct sin and heal sinners, not destroy them just to show them who's boss!

12. Victory on the Cross (Colossians 2:15)

Disarming Spiritual Authorities (2:15)

The next thing Paul talks about is how God emerges victorious. *In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities.* In what way? Always consider the context of Paul's writings. It is amazing how many religious people read a verse, ignore the context (immediate and broader), and make it say what they want – usually to impose some preconceived concept of what they believe. Paul just got done saying that any record of charges, any cumulative effect of sin, has been nailed to the cross with Jesus. This is how spiritual rulers and authorities are disarmed. All that weighs down and destroys us has been nailed to the cross and taken care of so we can go on and live life to the fullest – what Jesus called the *abundant life*. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities – whoever or whatever these were. Whether or not we can explain these accurately, I think we all sense some kind of willful beings, cosmic forces, or some kind of enemy within ourselves that hinders and works against us. Paul identifies these as “spiritual rulers and authorities.” I'm not convinced that all problems, temptations, and bad experiences are exclusively the result of some fallen, depraved spiritual entities. It could very well be that the majority of our problems and struggles are with ourselves. We all tend to be insecure, fearful, guilt-ridden, and angry in our finiteness. Most

of this comes from within ourselves, though it might be exploited and aggravated by some kind of spiritual forces or beings outside ourselves. Jesus once said, “It is not what goes into people that messes them up, but what comes out of their hearts,” – a heart that is depraved, deceived, and works against us. It may be that we are our own worst enemy, and it is ourselves that we need to be saved from, not an angry God, as so many religious people believe.

So, context is key. It is always helpful to explain any verse that might otherwise be misunderstood when taken in isolation. Context is always the best way to explain a previous or following verse. Remember, every author tries to convey their meaning clearly, even though many are not very good at doing this. All we can see is what a person writes, so take advantage of gaining a broader, more inclusive view of what is written. I always like John 3:16 as a supreme example of context needed and context often ignored. To understand verse 16, it is wise to at least look at 15 and 17. But looking at 14 and 18 and beyond is even better. No writer can say it all in one verse (though we like to think they can). People often hold up isolated verses as some kind of official and complete summary of an idea or concept or of some spiritual truth. But to accomplish this, such a single verse is usually accompanied by a heavy dose of speculation and guessing. In many cases, a great deal is imposed upon that one verse to make it “stand up and walk on all four,” as Chuck Swindoll used to say. In other words, we make verses do and accomplish things they really cannot do!

Some of us are taught to quote verses all by themselves, out of context, and we end up attaching meanings that are not in them nor intended by the author who wrote them. And this is the scary part: most people just go along with it and don’t seem to mind as long as they hear what they want. Are we willing to seek the truth at all costs and follow the facts wherever they lead? We are always better off when we do, but the pain of changing our thinking and

admitting we've been wrong is at stake. Few people want to pay such a high price, so they just go with the *indoctrination flow* in their institution of choice! But, on the other hand, observing the context of any writing will provide safety in how you understand any verse, and it will guard against lifting verses out of their context, kicking and screaming, begging to be read accurately. Listen to them!

Never-ending punishment?

The whole concept of eternal punishment (never-ending torment) is a way of telling people they just aren't worth God's extra effort to save them. But this is just a big lie, and it's an effective one, too, because a lot of people live in fear; they sell God way short on his saving abilities. They conclude, "He tried to save us, but it didn't quite work, and it's still up to me to get saved." Their thinking is that Jesus died and took the penalty for sin, but then it essentially didn't work because they think they still must do something in thought or deed. And if they don't, they're gonna get tormented forever for sinning too much or not believing enough in Jesus or God. Essentially, in their minds, the "New Covenant in Christ's blood" didn't fully work to take away sin. Otherwise, everyone would be saved, and that can't be in their thinking because they want to know that their own act of faith is the bottom line in their salvation. But this does not ring true. If what Jesus did on the cross was a real atonement for real sins, and they were all nailed to the cross (as Paul claims), and Jesus fully took care of mankind's sin problem, then those sins can't still be lingering in eternity.

Now, this doesn't mean that there won't be some people who still don't believe when they slip into eternity. They may continue to have a bad attitude toward God, and it will be, as C.S. Lewis said, "The doors of hell are locked from the inside!" The idea is that people in hell don't want to be in God's presence, and for

him to force this on them against their will would be greater torment and, therefore, something love cannot do. That's fine if that's the way it will be. In CS Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, people in hell are invited to get on a bus anytime, come up to heaven, and see how good it is compared to what they experience in hell. In this scenario, God welcomes everyone and says, "I love all of you, and you're separating yourself from me. Come and experience a much better, peaceful, joyous experience. I'm not preventing you – you're choosing it." That's what I call the *abandonment view* of eternity, and there are many who believe this, as did CS Lewis. It's a little different from *annihilation* or *eternal torment*, two other popular views. This is a view of God abandoning people to their own decisions. It is certainly a better and more God-like view than *annihilation* or *eternal torment*. But both of these views *require* God to give up on saving people, as does the abandonment view. Only one view of God *eventually* saves everyone, just as he planned and claimed as his desire in the New Testament. Paul calls this "salvation by grace, not by works so that no one can boast." His idea is that God alone does the saving; therefore, no one can brag about saving themselves in any way whatsoever. It is the only view that does not end up with God forsaking or abandoning people who he claims to love so much.

Like all conclusions about spiritual things, I cannot prove what the truth is about eternity, and I believe no one else can either, even though they claim to know with absolute certainty. And, perhaps somehow, they do. But I reasonably doubt it based on all I know about people, including myself, and how obviously limited we are in what we know. The older I get, the more I realize how little I know. But this makes me trust God all the more! I believe that after we die, our old nature is gone forever. This was the very purpose of the cross and Jesus rising from the dead, causing all of us to someday rise from the dead as he did into the newness of life. The only thing left is the *new creation* we will fully be in Christ (something we can now only realize by faith).

Everyone, no matter how sinful and rebellious they were in this life (and we all are to some degree), will automatically want to know, love, and be with God who created them, and they then will fully see him as their savior. With their new nature as a result of dying and being resurrected, there will be nothing to keep them from instinctively confessing, “God, I love you, and thank you for saving me! I sure as heck did not save myself. This was something you did *for* me, completely as an act of your grace. I did not earn it in any way by faith or work (or lack thereof). Now I understand your love for me, and I will love you forever.” I believe a whole lot of people will get there and say, “Wow, this is terrific. I had no idea this was in store for me. All that I went through in life was well worth all that I now have and will have forever.” Even those who were believers in this life are going to find out their faith didn't add one little ounce to what Christ did for them. What he did for them, he did completely by grace (God's favor, unmerited by them). Essentially, we believe in Jesus because he did something for us; he didn't do something for us because we believe. Don't get this backward!

Falling away from grace

Back in verse thirteen, Paul wrote, “You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. If that isn't grace, I don't know what grace is because Paul said we were *dead* and unable to save ourselves! We were not dead physically but spiritually. We couldn't do anything, so it was God who made us alive with Christ and forgave all our sins and wrongdoings. That's grace, and it's the same language Paul used in his letter to the Ephesians when there he wrote, “By grace, you've been saved, not of yourselves, and salvation is a gift from God.”

Some people believe we can fall away from grace because of a verse in the New Testament letter to the *Hebrew* (Jewish) believers. Falling out of, and completely away from, God's grace is impossible. But it is an accurate warning in the letter called "Hebrews" that we can fall *away from* grace. This is something we can do in our own minds and hearts. It is not God, in any way, withdrawing his grace from us. But we can choose to resist, ignore, and avoid God. He does not usually stop us, knowing we will learn things we can't learn any other way and that we will eventually realize we need him and that he was there all along. This is so much better than any kind of quicker action by God, where he forces us to do something against our will. Sometimes, the shortest way to a solution is the longer way, which takes more time but is so much more effective. God knows this, and in his wisdom, he often acts hands-off, allowing more life-changing time to pass. We need to have this kind of wisdom and patience with ourselves and others, letting things take as long as needed to get things done right. God plays the surer, longer game in life.

Though we can choose to change our minds and hearts toward God, God's disposition toward us never changes. It can't, and he doesn't want to. He is always focused on loving us and bringing out the best in us, no matter what it takes or how long. We are all capable of falling *away* from God's grace (not falling *out* of it) even after walking close to him. This is often triggered by a difficult and unexpected life experience that can last for a long time. Most people have gone through what some call a "desert experience" in life, where God seems distant. It is a time when they experience little or no growth in their lives. But none of this changes God's disposition toward us, and unbelief never chases him away; we just lose a closeness with him which is so very precious.

This unconditional faithfulness on the part of God is what grace is all about. It's always there and always does what it needs to do, no matter what we do. That's the beauty of it. God's love

and presence are not dependent upon us. Still, we can grieve God, even thwart him to some degree – but only to the degree that he allows it. *Grieving* God and *thwarting* him are words Paul uses elsewhere to describe the freedom God has given us, knowing he will work through it eventually for our benefit. God has a mind, will, and emotions, just like us. Yet, God is not like us; Instead, we are like him. We were given the attributes we have because we are put together in God's image, reflecting in some limited way who he is. It doesn't make us *equal* with God, but it does make us *like* him in many ways. Other parts of his creation are not like him and are not made in his image. He is the original mind, will, and emotions; we are only limited versions of him. But we matter to God. What and who we are is important. God thinks, decides, and feels. When he created us, he made us limited versions of himself. Therefore, we think, decide, and feel.

God is *just* in all he is and does. It is perfect justice, but it doesn't mean he can't be grieved. And even when God concludes, "Wow, I'm grieved that you're so easily turning away from me," it doesn't mean he hates us or will give up on us in any way. However, he's not static and is void of feelings. God is dynamic, more so than us. We get our ability to feel deeply from him. The only difference is that his feelings are perfect and based on his unlimited knowledge. We usually fly blind in life, knowing and understanding only partially. I don't want to humanize God in any way, nor make it seem that he's like us. Instead, we're like him. He's made us like himself in many ways. To a limited degree, we can look at ourselves and understand something about God. We are not altogether different from him in every way. This is important to know as we ponder that by nailing our sins to the cross, it was in *this way* that God disarmed spiritual rulers and authorities, no matter what they actually were.

Publicly shamed (2:15b)

Paul now reveals more about these spiritual rulers and authorities. *He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.* As always, the context bears out what Paul probably thought when he said (back in verse 14) that the spiritual enemy wants to keep a record of all our sins, reminding us of our failures and keeping us downtrodden. But now he is reminding his readers that Jesus, in effect, nailed our sins to the cross by his death. So don't let anyone, human or spiritual, remind you of your sins. They are no longer attributed to you. Though you've all sinned, and you're going to sin in the future, you have already been forgiven for all of them! God is perfect and complete when he saves. He leaves nothing un-nailed to remind us, plague us, or draw us back into living a defeated life because he has "shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross." But this doesn't mean we don't sin or never will in the future. We will, and sin will mess our lives up somewhat. But God has already forgiven us. This is good news!

Some will say, "Well then, if they are forgiven, people can sin and get away with it!" My response is, "Go ahead, sin! But there are consequences. Which sins that will mess up your life did you want to commit? You gain nothing by sinning – except perhaps some cheap thrill that will not last and will leave you worse off. When we choose to sin, we lose big time, and no one ever gets away with it. The fact that God has forgiven sin does not change the fact that there are serious consequences that come with it. God wants better for us. Others say that God's unconditional forgiveness gives people a *license* to sin. But it doesn't. We were issued a license to sin when we were born, and we have all exercised it! But where did it get us? God is now issuing a license to *do what is right* and benefit from it daily. And with that new license, he brings his Spirit to indwell us, guide us, and keep us close to himself.

13. Christ Has Set You Free (Colossians 2:16-23)

Shadows of reality (2:16)

Paul begins with some warnings in verse 16. Don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink or for not celebrating certain holy days, new moon ceremonies, or sabbaths. These requirements are only shadows of the reality yet to come, and Christ himself is that reality. This is just like the baptism verses we looked at previously, where the *real* baptism was that of the Holy Spirit, where we are immersed in and fully identified with him and with Jesus. Paul is saying that all this religious stuff (rules, regulations, rituals, special days, and ceremonies) is, at best, only shadows of the real things to come. These things were dear to the hearts of the Old Testament Jews, but they were only pointing to something truly important that would come in the future. And that reality was Jesus, who came as the predicted Messiah (Christ), Son of God, and Son of Man. But, according to Paul, none of these are not required by God.

However, if religious people still want to have rituals and special days, that's okay. But they shouldn't depend on them to make them right with God; only Jesus (the reality of all previous symbolism) can do that. Most churches perform rituals of some

kind every Sunday or Saturday. For many people, these things are very rich and meaningful. I don't care for them too much, but I fully respect that these are meaningful to many others. Even though it took me about sixty years to realize it, I now fully experience the reality that all these symbols represent. So why would I need the symbolic rituals? Well, I don't, and God certainly does not require them. You do not need them either unless you find them helpful, encouraging, or significant. However, for many others, these are important practices, and I affirm them in their choice to engage in them. But please, do not *require* them for me or anyone else. Sadly, many people do.

I went to an Orthodox Church here in town about a few years ago. I found them to be lovely, wonderful, humble folks. They have a very different mindset than that of the Western (Roman Catholic) Church. However, I noticed that this Eastern Church (Orthodox) seems to hold a gentler view of God and eternity. They are also less authoritarian than what developed in the Western church. They never installed anyone like the Pope to oversee them. They maintained more of a “Jesus is our Chief Shepherd” perspective.

They had a service that was an hour and forty-five minutes long, standing up the whole time. I was impressed, but I also wondered why. Was it to prove their sincerity about God? Does he even require such a thing? Is he that demanding and formal, or can he be our *friend* – just as Abraham was called the “friend of God?” I think the latter of these two is true because this is what I experience in my daily walk with God. Jesus means it when he invites people to come and hook up with him in life, saying, “My load is easy, and my burden is light; there you will find rest.” I told the Orthodox pastor (tongue in cheek) that I had quit believing in hell ... until I attended their agonizing service (which was otherwise quite good). He chuckled graciously. Man, oh man, standing up for almost two hours is a challenge! It reminded me of some of my basic training experiences in the Army when I was

just 19. Interestingly, they repeat the same liturgy every week; they say the same prayers and do the same responsive readings. It kind of drives me nuts. What they do is not my personal preference, but I fully respect how they choose to worship, believing they love it, sincerely love God, and want to honor him. For me, I have found that the only honor God asks of me is to put my trust in him, walk with him daily, and genuinely love others. That is so sweet! I must confess that I sat down a couple of times in that service to take a break since I believed that standing was not something God required of me. There was an older lady across from me who did the same, and I could read in her eyes, “Yeah, I’m with ya, brother!” Perhaps I gave her permission in some small way to remain seated. Maybe I also relieved her of a burden that is not found in God but in man with his desire to *appease the gods* – an attitude that can so instinctively come and find us.

And so, Paul encourages these Colossians not to let anyone condemn them for what they don't drink, for not keeping holy days, or for failing to perform any other kind of ritual. “These rules are only shadows of reality to come, which is Christ himself,” he tells them. Jesus is that reality. Don't trade in the real deal for a bunch of symbolism. Bad trade!

Paul continues his warnings. *Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud, and they are not connected to Christ, who is the head of the body. He holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it. We're all together in this thing called the body of Christ, and we're all connected spiritually by joints and ligaments – obviously figuratively. But the key is that God nourishes the whole thing. He is at the center and is the ultimate source – not churches, institutions, popes, pastors, and certainly*

not us. Keep this one thing in mind, and it will keep you out of trouble. It is easy to lower our spiritual eyes from God down to mere men. This is because we can see them with our physical eyes, where they (and their institutions) can loom larger than life!

Free from rules (2:20)

Now Paul gives his solution to avoid falling into the traps he just described. *You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world, so why do you keep on following the world's rules, such as don't handle, don't taste, don't touch? Don't chew, and don't go with girls who do! Don't play cards, don't smoke, don't drink, don't dance. Don't, don't, don't!* There are some legitimate *dos and don'ts* in life, like: don't cheat on your spouse, don't hurt other people, and a few other good guidelines. But don't overdo the don'ts! There's no end to all the laws, rules, regulations, and commands people can come up with. Some exist in order to have a civil and safe society, church, or family. I live in California ... need I say more? It is a beautiful state, and I would not live anywhere else unless I had to, but there are way too many laws and too many people in charge who want to control other people's lives, sometimes down to the smallest detail. It is partly understandable: they're just trying to make their life easy as they try to govern and keep things from spinning out of control. I appreciate this aspect, but at what cost to our freedom? Please, keep the control to a minimum ... in church and government!

In this passage, Paul says that we've *died* with Christ (even though we are all still physically alive) and that Jesus has set us free. The spiritual powers of this world – and they're the ones that govern all these rules (extending even into our spiritual lives if they can get away with it) – are good at bringing people under legalism, making them feel guilty (even though we are the ones

who allow this), and trap people into religious and civil bondage. When this happens, people are not free. Many religious people live in spiritual bondage. They think, "I'm really spiritual," but actually, they're fooled into thinking that if they are subject to a bunch of legalistic rules like "don't handle, don't taste, don't touch," somehow God is pleased with them and maybe even *appeased* in some needed way. However, it is true that *some* enjoyable things are not in our best interest and should be avoided. We all know what these are, and they may even be different for different people. I've had friends who must never take even a sip of alcohol, or they will become alcoholic again. It usually took many repeated, hard-learned lessons for them to finally come to this conclusion. But it, wisely, becomes a big *don't* for them. Other people, perhaps most people, can drink alcohol in moderation and never have a problem. For them it is not a *don't*. So, we need to be careful judging others, especially in the grey areas of life.

Martin Luther once said, "Obey the Bible and do whatever you want." Careful with this one, but there's a lot of truth in it. There aren't that many things in life that are wrong for us to do before God. Mostly we are free to live and enjoy all aspects of life as a wonderful gift from God. He just wants us to not hurt ourselves or others. Other than that ... go have fun! I can sense, as I write this, all those overly religious people out there cringing, having been contained all their lives in spiritual bondage, being taught that every aspect of life has to have something wrong with it.

Paul goes on to say, *Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.* They're passing away. If you overeat or consume too much sugar, it may not be good for you, and you may be wise to make some corrections. But *food police*? Please, no! There's more legalism out there, in and out of church, than anyone can handle without getting choked on

it. But those who govern this way do so because it is their best path to controlling the lives of others, even *saving them from themselves*, which is not their job!

Paul just wants people to be free. I find that in his writings, he fights this battle on both ends of the spectrum. On one hand, there is the bondage of sin. It can consume our lives when we indulge in it without any real wisdom and discipline. Both of these great qualities are found in our being in Christ, which is a major theme for Paul. On the other hand, at the opposite end of the spectrum is legalism. It is the bondage to too many rules, regulations, and requirements that people place on us, never intended by God in any way. God is the only one who wants us to be free more than Paul does. Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!" This is exactly where real freedom resides ... *in Christ*, nowhere else. So, find a balance in your life. Avoid the extremes of both sin and legalism.

Rules that only seem wise (2:23)

Paul continues. *These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline.* Do you see how holy this all sounds? There was a time in the history of the church (and it is still happening today in many ways) when religious people believed that the more they gave up and the crazier they were willing to live, the more they honored God. This was known as "aestheticism." Some of them went so far as to live in a little box way up on a pole above all the rest of the world, doing nothing but prayer and meditation and staying away from temptation. But I'll bet temptation in some form came and found them in their minds and hearts where it can't be shut out. I respect their right to do such things, and perhaps it was the right thing for them to do. It is between them and God where it belongs. What kind of *pious pole sitting* have you seen (and done)

in your life? It is easy to do, and we can slip into it without realizing it. Perched in the high and lofty *pole box* of our minds, we've all looked down on those "dirty rotten sinners" out there who are so far away from God (in our thinking), which makes our perch box all the loftier. But God is not far from them and will never leave or forsake them until he fully restores them and brings them into his presence to live with him forever. I believe such people will be more eternally thankful for their *salvation by grace* than any of the rest of us ever will be! My church upbringing was good and served me well all my life, protecting me from many dangerous and foolish things. Still, I can't help but feel that I was taught to be a bigot, condescending, and intolerant of anyone who was not firmly planted in my religious bubble. Have you ever felt like this? If not, do some serious evaluation; you might gain a new perspective that will bring you amazing freedom!

But for me, isolated, pious, aesthetic living would be throwing God's precious gift of life back in his face and trying to establish a righteousness of my own when he has provided complete perfection for me. Such righteousness is only in Jesus, God's only Son, fully begotten from out of God's own being (unlike us who were created from nothing), so that I can live free, enjoy life (as much as possible), and experience peace that is beyond my understanding. What a bad trade they made, trying to *appease* a God who does not need appeasing. He is a God who only wants us to trust him and return the love he has shown for us. Their "strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline" was their own self-righteous badge of honor, effectively saying, "Man, oh man, I'm bringing it for God! Right?" But Paul is saying, "Don't be fooled by this. It may seem wise, but it really isn't."

Paul further clarifies this by writing, *But these things provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.* Wow! If this is true, then they are wasting their time doing something that

doesn't work. Have you ever fallen into this trap in some area of your life? I sure have, and I'm sure you have too. If you think you never have, then you have an even bigger problem! Ha! In fact, seeking "strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline," they probably drove themselves in the opposite direction. Nothing makes us want to sin more than focusing on our sin and trying hard not to. Even Paul once said, "When the law came and said, 'Do not covet,' it made me want to covet all the more." We should never give into sin or seek it in any way, but trying hard not to and focusing on our sin will never bring us real success. In fact, it will tend to aggravate our problem. The only real solution is to turn to God, the one who created us and loves us, trust him the best we can, and decide to live in Christ (and allow him to live in us). That's it. Remember, earlier in this letter, Paul said that God's secret plan was "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

If you try to stop yourself from doing anything and everything bad, focusing on your sins and flaws, you'll probably want to do these things even more. This can cause a tendency to go to extremes, and you may get into even more trouble. I attended a church once where two of the six senior pastors (over a twenty-year period) and two highly respected layman leaders all fell into immoral indiscretion. That alone is bad enough, but the destructive fallout on others was huge when this was happening while they were still serving as ministers, claiming that Jesus is the answer to life's problems and that following him in obedience is what they do and recommend to others. Jesus was hardest on hypocrites, far more so than on mere sinners!

I do not know to what degree this next observation was a factor, but I noticed that two of them were raised as missionary kids. Not all missionary (and pastor) kids bust out of their religious bondage in some kind of destructive behavior, but many do. In fact, "missionary kid" and "pastor's kid" are well-known labels used to explain the higher-than-average rebellion in these

unexpected victims of their upbringing. Billy Graham's son was such a statistic. Eventually, he got his life straightened out, but it took a long time and a lot of pain for himself and others. I used to visit a light security facility for young criminals in Nevada County, and I was amazed while talking with them just how many were pastor or missionary kids. Some were raised in a very legalistic home. It seemed like more than average to me. The point is that when *law* and sin are emphasized rather than love and grace, which are much stronger and more effective, any human being trapped in such bondage will do almost anything to bust out. These men who were in leadership at my church, even though they were middle-aged and beyond, something drove them to a life of hypocrisy. They genuinely desired to be in ministry, loved God, and loved people, yet they were compelled to live a hidden life of breaking the *taboos* imposed on them for so long!

Legalism

This is what Legalism does to people. However, Paul identifies one small advantage to The Law in his letter to the Galatians. There he said. "The Law was a guardian until grace came along." Legalism is insufficient and troublesome; trying to keep the law is not the best solution in life. But there is a degree of protection in it, according to Paul. If someone is fearful about breaking some law (spiritual or civil) and is worried about any consequences that may come as a result (from God or man), their behavior might change enough to cause such laws to act as protective *guardians*. But they are not very good ones, and grace is a much better and more effective reason for doing what is right. Sometimes, in society, only the law is understood by some people, and for the sake of having a safe and sane society, laws must be created and enforced, or there will be chaos. As Paul wrote in one of his letters, "The state makes use of the sword for good reason."

There is a legitimate role for government when it is acting in the best interest of those governed. It can restrain crime and wrongdoing. But it is very different in the spiritual realm. God does not primarily govern with a heavy hand or in retaliation and harshness. To the degree that he occasionally acts in severity, it is always in the best interest of those he is disciplining and always with correction and restoration in mind. Love is by far the most powerful and effective force in the universe, whether it is God or man who is acting in love. Immediate results are not always attained when they are sought with patience and love. But eventually, love wins because it “never fails” (according to Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians).

Tithing is a huge legalistic item for many religious people. Don’t get me wrong; it is good for people to support a ministry (or any endeavor) they believe in. The New Testament is clear that those who *labor* in teaching, leading, and shepherding are “worthy of their wage.” But this assumes that they are good people with good motives. Not all who are in “ministry” (which means *servicing*) have pure motives. We have all seen this on TV and other places, and we are wise to be very selective about who and what we financially support.

But for some, tithing (giving ten percent of your income) is required by God; if you fail to do so, something bad will happen to you, or God will withhold some blessings. Perhaps this is true. It’s way past my pay grade to decide this for others. All I can say is that if you believe this, then by all means ... tithe! However, Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians that we are not to give reluctantly or under some kind of compulsion. Instead, he encourages people to *give willingly* because “God loves a cheerful giver.” God does not need our money. He wants our heart, and if we cannot give out of a good, loving, helpful, supportive heart, then we are better off not giving at all until we see the value in giving ourselves and our money cheerfully. Unfortunately, some churches get so desperate for funding they turn to using guilt,

fear, peer pressure, and legalism, painting God as an intolerant being who demands us to turn loose of our money. I have found that God can use money to ensure certain aspects of success in any organization. But I have also found that some of his best teaching and training come from a *lack* of funds or having only enough to stay operational with nothing to spare. This develops a good kind of dependence on God that we all so badly need. Often, too much money can ruin ministries and lives. Just look around! Where is the focus of organizations with lots of money?

Tithing can also have a vicious cycle, just as there is in all legalisms. Not everyone is in this cycle, and there are many (perhaps most) who give cheerfully and are free from legalistic bondage. But many get stuck in a rut. After tithing, they feel relieved because they have (in their mind) kept the requirement set by God. They feel they are good to go for a short season and will not face any retribution. In effect, they have bought their way out of trouble by *appeasing the gods*. At that moment, they're happy, no longer under any guilt about stewardship of their money ... until it's time to tithe again. Then, they repeat the cycle, always including a period of unhappiness and stress.

Such legalism, guilt, and *appeasing the gods* are typical in religion. Look no further than modern-day Catholicism to see how it works. Make no mistake, genuine repentance and getting back into fellowship with God is a wonderful thing, and we all need to do this occasionally because we are still struggling with our old fallen nature. But, doing this need not be a vicious cycle. Roman Catholicism developed a clever way to accommodate this vicious cycle of guilt and relief, which never gets resolved. People in this cycle live their lives all week, guilt-ridden by sin – some of them excessively. But then, at the end of the week, they can visit a priest in a confession booth where they confess their sins, getting absolved of them by the power (supposedly) vested in that priest. They leave feeling better, but then they start the whole cycle over again each week. I have always wondered about John

and Bobby Kenedy, both good Catholics who shared Marlyn Monrow as a mistress. Did they confess each week, only to repeat their invigorating affairs knowing the confession booth (and relief) awaited them within seven days?

Perhaps for others, there may be a little bit of the *guardian effect* that Paul talked about in his Galatian letter. Legalism is better than nothing, even though it falls far short of the real solution. This solution is only found in knowing God's love and grace, walking with him daily, living *in Christ*, and therefore wanting to do the right things for the right reasons! In some other churches, legalism is not pushed on people, but there may be plenty of it to be felt. Hey, we all tend to bring it on ourselves in an attempt to deal with all the guilt, shame, and insecurity that plague us as fallen, needy human beings. I am no exception. But the question is how much we give into it, traffic in it, and allow it to be imposed on us by well-intentioned people who are also living under it. There have been times when I attended church (and there are many good ones out there), but I could not shake the feeling of a hint of legalism in an otherwise good sermon. I realize many preach, *aiming at the heart* rather than the head, with the purpose of convicting the listener of sin for their own good, hoping they will repent. I was taught this in seminary and even tried to practice it a few times many years ago when I was asked to preach. But I learned that there is something much greater and more effective than any kind of legalism, fearmongering, and guilt enhancement (even though this is not always the conscious goal of the preacher.)

There have been many times, after hearing a pretty negative sermon with a few glimmers of hope in it, that I had to (emotionally) take off the proverbial *backpack of burden* that was placed on me slowly as the sermon developed. Sometimes, it is so subtle that it cannot be seen as it comes. But what I had to do, mentally, was take that heavy backpack off and leave it in the pew where it was first placed on me. The result was always a wonderful

contrast because I realized, “Wow, God, I'm no longer weighed down with that burden, and I am free in you, in Christ, to do what is right for the right reasons. As I proceed onward in my life, I can fully trust and depend on you and know that you have already forgiven me ... which makes me want to live for you all the more.” From that church service, I walked out and breathed a new breath of fresh air, both physically and spiritually!

Such preachers usually have good intentions, trying to get people to improve their old nature (the flesh) that they still possess. But they never can improve it! The *flesh* can never be improved; it can only someday die when we die, and we will be free of it forever. That will be a great day. Only the new person we are in Christ is perfect. It also cannot be improved, but only because it never needs to be! Trying to improve our old sinful nature is a futile battle we will never win. Give that battle to God, who will, eventually, win it for us through death. This alone is our hope, and it is a good one. So instead of trying to improve the *flesh* (our human nature) and get it to do what it's supposed to do, you now live in your new life in Christ. It is by far the best decision you will ever make in this life. In his letter to the Romans, Paul said, “Consider yourself dead to sin.” He didn't say we don't sin. He didn't even say to quit sinning (because we can't in this life). He just said to *consider* yourself (see yourself as) dead to sin – inactive, irrelevant, not under its control. We can do this because Christ took care of our sins. We can now consider ourselves dead to sin, even though we're still sinning. Consider yourself dead to it and live in the new person that you are in Christ. He put you there! In this, there is real freedom and peace – real peace that makes you smile and chuckle, realizing where you are now and that you did not accomplish this on your own. It's amazing and wonderful.

14. Life Hidden in God (Colossians 3:1-6)

Now let's launch into Colossians Three. This is about halfway through Paul's letter. He gets more practical and personal here, less lofty and theological. The last half was about who Jesus was but also about the problems with Law, rules, and impositions on people's spiritual lives. Now he turns his focus toward an alternative to living under constraining rules, where there exists little freedom.

Paul presents the solution, just as he does in all his letters. Jesus said he came to *fulfill* all requirements of The Law, and in doing so, he rendered it nonapplicable to us. This is why Paul repeatedly contrasts Law and grace, wanting his readers to realize just how totally free they are *in Christ*. So, this means that now we don't have to keep all those rules and regulations Paul listed previously (holy days, ceremonies, don't touch, etc.). We are free to do some rituals if we want – and many people want to – but they are not required by God, and they can't save us. If you don't like rituals, don't do them. Be free. Not required! Many people practice them thinking they are earning something with God, or they do them out of guilt, fear, peer pressure, or habit. Paul always highlights what Christ did for us (something we could never do for ourselves) and how the law doesn't work to save anyone. But what is worse is the presence of those who want to take people back under some kind of law and control. He ended Colossians Two with this, which sums it up: "These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and

severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires." Okay, great, so what then is the solution, Paul?

Focus on things above (3:1)

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your focus on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. This should be our focus. Don't focus on your sin. Don't focus on all the *dos and don'ts* that others try to impose on you. Yes, acknowledge that you're a sinner and repent of it. Turn from it. Like John said in his first letter, "If you say you're without sin, you're fooling yourself. You're a liar." We're not without sin, but the focus shouldn't be on our sin and how horrible we are or how we will fix it by trying hard not to sin. I hate to tell you this, folks, but we're all going to sin until the day we die. We might get to a place where we *sin less*, but in this life, we will never become *sinless*. But that's okay; Paul has a solution. It's realizing that we've been raised to the newness of life in Christ, and therefore, we can set our focus on what is real about God and the heavenly realm in which he exists. This is where Jesus now resides as the one victorious over sin by raising from the dead. What extremely good news this is, and it is easy to see why Paul was so motivated to go out and tell people about it. It is life-changing; it changed his life, and he knew it could change everyone's life.

Realize, also, that we can never make our flesh (our old sinful nature) into something spiritual, good, and perfect. It needs to go, and someday it will. We will, eventually, be free from not only the bondage of sin but the very presence of it. However, we are, in one very real sense, a perfect spiritual person in Christ. And this is the dilemma that Paul talks about in Romans chapter 7. There he complains, "I don't do what I know I should, and I do what I

know I shouldn't. It was a very real, ongoing struggle for him, just as it is with us. Then, at the end of that seventh chapter, Paul asks, "Who will free me from this body of death?" His answer was simply, "Thanks be to Jesus, our Lord."

And so, in this part of his letter, he says the same thing. "Set your sights on realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand." That is his solution, which, to many, seems too simple and passive. But it works, and it works mightily in the lives of those who will set their sights above and leave behind all the nonsense of trying to perfect ourselves in our own effort. We can't!

Paul restates his simple but powerful solution this way: *Think about the things of heaven, not things of the Earth.* This might just be the crux of our whole problem. Where is our focus? What do we dwell on? Proverbs says, "As a person thinks, so they are!" Well, here Paul is saying that wherever we place our focus (heaven or earth, now or eternity, physical or spiritual) will determine our well-being in life and beyond. There is always a tension between the material world and that other spiritual realm that we all know exists in some form. Few people, now and in history, have been able to conclude that "all we see is all we get." For most people there is a strong sense that there's got to be more, something very real beyond just what we can see. But it is a world we can't see, can't measure, and can't prove. This, too, is a problem for most people. I think this is exactly why there are so many agnostics in the world who seem to conclude, "There's something greater and higher out there, but I don't know who or what that is." I often think of myself as an "agnostic believer." Notice I did not say "believing agnostic." I am a believer, partly because I cannot help it in light of all that I encounter in life, but also somewhat by choice. We all must choose to believe or not, even though that choice is something hard. I am rightly agnostic about what I believe because I cannot objectively prove any of it.

Perhaps this is the engineer in me coming out. Yet, I cannot deny the spiritual realities that have seemed so real to me since I was a little kid, long before I had studied or tried to think anything through. I just conclude that God wants it this way – too much evidence out there to deny his existence, yet not enough evidence to avoid all doubt. Perhaps there is great wisdom in creating a world where we are required to think, ponder, reach, and grow. Perhaps anything less would render us less than all we can be.

As for atheists – complete materialists? There aren't very many now, in history, nor in the very darkest corners of the earth when discovered. Few can deny that we are spiritual beings living in a material world. However, all struggle with it. It's actually hard to be an atheist. You gotta believe there's nothing else out there in light of all the mind-blowing things we see and know about. Just a few of these are: the expansive universe, the miracle of childbirth and growth, the undeniable intelligence present in DNA, the weirdness that exists on the quantum level, and the mystery of human relationships with all the love, hate, and confusion we all experience in them. And how did this all come about, with all its richness and beauty? All by itself? That's a heavy lift for any atheist.

However, I'm impressed with how much faith atheists possess, believing against the odds that there is nothing beyond all that we see. But I am sympathetic toward them when they conclude there cannot be a God in view of all the extreme evil in the world. They rightly ask themselves how a good God can sit idle and watch innocent little kids be abused and put through horrifying experiences. Way too many of them live in war-torn countries. Anyone who is not taken aback by this is not thinking or not being honest! But other than this, the amount of faith required by them to believe there is no God of any shape or kind is extraordinary. To me, they are the ultimate persons of faith since they believe in something that is impossible to ever prove: the non-existence of God. Nothing can be proven not to exist!

What evidence could ever possibly be brought forth to prove it? There isn't any. So, Paul encourages his readers to focus on things above instead of things of this material world. We are all better off, by far, doing that!

You have died to this life (3:3)

The title of this commentary was taken from this passage. Paul elaborates a little more on life hidden in God. *You have Died to this life and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.* That's where our real life is. In Christ! Nowhere else, even if we do not believe we are hidden in Christ. God put us all there; no denial can change that. But who would want to deny this once such a wonderful thing is realized? Just rest in it; bask in it. But life here on earth is indeed a struggle; it's difficult but important. It matters to God, and it should matter to us. It's not a waste of time. Life is not about this life ... but it includes it! However, our *real* life is hidden with Christ in God. That's where life is now for us spiritually and someday in eternity. In the future, we'll be 100% there!

Someday when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory. Pretty cool stuff, huh? That's a good solution, Paul. The law is of no help in conquering a person's evil desires. It is not the solution. Not law, not keeping the law, and not even *trying* to keep it. Not the law of God, nor the laws of man. You'll never succeed that way. Instead (says Paul) focus on Christ. Find your hidden life in him.

Now Paul gets more specific and practical. *So, put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, or evil.* Paul almost sounds like he's going back under the law to be saved. But

he's not. He's just saying that choosing not to do these things will save us (deliver us) from a life of entanglement in sin that is so destructive. Clearly, Paul believes the only way to accomplish this successfully is to "set our minds and hearts on things above," on Christ, as the place where we choose to abide. He's not saying we're gonna be able to do this with perfection. Our lives aren't hidden in Christ by "putting to death our sinful desires." Our lives are hidden with Christ in God by God's doing! Any effort we make that finds success will be the result of what God has done for us. We are now able to put to death things that would otherwise destroy us because our lives are hidden in him. Only then does it make sense for us to "put to death our sinful desires."

Look at all the people out there totally engulfed in sin and all the personal destruction that comes with it. Mostly, they don't even know what they are doing, how destructive their life is, or that there is an escape from it. In fact, most of them know nothing else; it is the only life they have ever lived. This is how badly we all need to be saved by God. On our own, we do not seek God or salvation. God must open our eyes and have us realize our needs so we can turn to him and find peace and freedom. Eventually, this is what God will do with everyone, either now or in eternity; he's not going to fail to save his world; this was clearly his ultimate goal.

Knowing our life is in Christ, it makes sense that we should (and now can) put to death sinful, earthly things lurking within us. In other words, we can choose not to feed them. We'll never get rid of them completely, but to the degree that we *can* put this stuff to death (now that our life is hidden in Christ), we are wise to do so. We will be so much better off. We can all fall into a moment of anger or wrong thoughts. Resentment towards someone or some event from the past may come up in our minds and make us feel angry and anxious. This is all normal and very human. But it is an opportunity to grow, learn, and get a renewed perspective on our new life in Christ. Do not let such experiences

defeat you. Again, as Paul exhorted, set your mind on things above, not on earthly things that can overcome and discourage you. So, to the degree that we can live in our new life, with our new thinking, we should “have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil.” Those seem to be the big dogs in life. All of the New Testament warns repeatedly about them. It is not that we should *focus* on them, but we need to be *aware* of them. Sensuality is prominent because we are all *sensual* beings. I mean that in a positive sense. We all have senses that bring things, both good and bad, into our being. Some things are just our thoughts. But it is our senses that feed our thoughts. Good input can cause good things in us, but the bad version of this is also, unfortunately, true,

There are many things that are tempting for us, that stimulate us in some way. It could be a cool movie to watch; we watch the big screen for the big experience. But then there are many other sensual things. Sex within marriage is always acceptable in the New Testament. But it adds caution and warnings about anything outside of that. Otherwise, there's no limit. It's not sexuality itself that's the problem. Sex is a good and wonderful gift from God. It allows people to get as close and intimate as possible – something we all desire and need. It's the *context* of sex that can be the problem. Who, what, when, where, why, and how are always considerations. God is not trying to limit us from anything good; he just wants to protect us from things that are bad and will end up in disaster. The intense nature of sex lends itself to extremes on both ends of that spectrum (too much vs. too little). The one big key in sex is the element of commitment. Without this, sex becomes cheap and loses its value. It becomes just a cheap thrill and nothing more. I told both of my kids when they were teens that they can never have someone very special (sexually) and at the same time experience a lot of variety. No one can, and everyone must choose – and choose they do! When we engage sexually, with little or no commitment, we're just treating others

like a toy, which is very tempting because it's quite fun as a toy. Such satisfaction in sex is usually mutual, so it is easy to fall into this second-rate view of it. But have we made a good trade? Have we traded in something amazingly good and satisfying for something easy and essentially worthless (except for some quick gratification)? I think this is God's motive: to deliver to us the best things possible in all he has made and not have us ruin or cheapen them in any way. The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews warns those who "choose to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." Well, we have all made that choice, big or small, at some time in our lives. But in the long run, it won't go well for anyone who takes that shortcut.

When God chooses to act in severity about such foolishness, his motive is always to correct us and keep us away from harm. In such action, he's not saying, "How dare you disobey my commands?" even though we have foolishly dared to do so. He's not like that; he does not need or want to be. Instead, he's saying, "My dear child, you're destroying yourself and missing out on so many good things I want you to have. Let's get this out of your life. Let's get rid of this junk. This has got to go. I'm not just asking you; I'm going to step in and take action because I love you. It may be a long, tough road for you, but I'll never give up on you, stand by, or let you fail. Eventually, my love will win."

Some of us have experienced severe discipline by God, maybe for waywardness, maybe for hurting ourselves or others in some way. Most people have gone wayward to some degree sometime in their life. God may have a purpose in allowing a season of sin so that we will learn. But eventually, he will take action. It is what love does. My wife, for example, is a super good person. Her morality exceeds mine manyfold. I think most men realize they married *upward*. Most guys marry in an *upward* direction because women tend to be a little more morally upright than men and often smarter. Men are kind of plagued with lower morals, perhaps as God's way to humble them for their own

good. However, women have their own set of issues that God deals with.

The anger of God (3:5b)

Don't get greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater worshipping the things of this world. Greed is the same as idolatry? Actually, this makes sense. When we are greedy, it's because we want more than we have. We want more because we are focused on what we want; whatever we are focused on becomes our god, and when it is not the one true God of the universe, it is idolatry. The reason God does not want us worshipping other things or beings is not because he is petty and self-centered. Quite the opposite. He knows we will never be truly happy, free, and at peace when our focus is on mere things and beings that can never satisfy us and love us. God hates idolatry because it ruins us, not him.

Anything can be an idol; it is always something we want as a result of our greed. I have several of them hanging on the wall behind me. They are all beautiful guitars. For others, it might be something else. Anything can become an idol; anything we can get greedy about. Money, power, things, people, sex, influence – all these and more are candidates. None of these things are wrong in and of themselves, but when they become our focus, out of proportion with other things in life, and take a place in our heart beyond even God, that's when we're in trouble – not so much with God but with ourselves. It is a type of betrayal that we don't even recognize for what it is. Possess things, but make sure they don't take over your life. Again, God's not saying, "How dare you have an idol instead of me! He's saying, "I don't want you worshipping an idol because it's going to absorb you and destroy you."

In the movie *The Hobbit*, we all remember Gollum panicking when he lost his powerful ring, reciting to himself, "Oh

my precious!” It owned him, absorbed him, and ruined him. This is a perfect example of what happens to us spiritually when things, persons, or positions in life own us, even though we may feel empowered and stimulated materially. We are being fooled, and it is usually way down the road that we realize the damage done. I have met too many people over my lifetime who regret how little time they spent with their kids, being absorbed by some comparatively worthless endeavor, only to discover later in life, when it was way too late, that they did not know their kids and vice versa. The song *Cats in the Cradle* by Harry Chapin spells this out in anguishing clarity. Whether it’s a guitar, a person, an ambition, a figure carved by hand, or whatever it is, it will ruin us if it comes about out of a greedy heart.

Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. Now, of course, many people will say that this is the retributive justice of God. They firmly believe it's right around the corner, and when it comes, most people will be forever tormented for their sins and unbelief. Essentially, they are saying that God is done with them and is going to throw them all away like some kind of meaningless junk, like a piece of used toilet paper or a dirty, torn, used garment. What is worse is that in their thinking, God does not just abandon them; he goes further and intentionally annihilates them or inflicts never-ending punishment. This is a horrible view of God, and to tag him as one who will forever be known as the meanest, cruelest, most unloving being in the universe is an unbelievably bold assertion. This is especially offensive to God’s goodness, high moral character, and faithfulness in light of the fact that no wording in the New Testament *requires* anyone to draw such low conclusions about God. This does not mean that people cannot choose to interpret passages that speak of judgment, condemnation, and punishment in this extremely negative way; they can, and they do. In fact, this has been the

traditional view of God and eternity since the end of the Fourth Century.

A phrase like “the anger of God is coming” is ripe for such extreme interpretations. But why do this? What motivates some religious people to conclude such horrible things about God? It is overwhelmingly uncharacteristic of God in the New Testament as a loving Creator who “desires all to be saved” and “sent his son into the world to save it and not condemn it.” I believe people do this because they have been told this same message about God all their lives (just as I was until about age 60). No opposing view is ever allowed – or they present them as heresy and false teaching. We draw these horrible conclusions about God simply because we hear them over and over rather than being encouraged to look at *all* the facts carefully and reasonably. When this happens, the results are predictable, which is exactly what is desired by those imposing such ideas. It is called *indoctrination* (putting something in), and it is a far cry from *education* (bringing something out).

However, Paul makes it clear that there is some kind of *anger* on God's part concerning sin in the world. In an early part of Paul's letter to the Romans, he wrote, “The wrath (anger) of God is being revealed against all unrighteousness of humanity.” However, notice that the target of God's anger is not people but their sin and unrighteousness. God's anger is not *against* us, it is against sin and actually *for* us! God is angry about what sin does to us, and it makes him want to do something about it because he loves us. But what it makes him want to do is not retaliate against us with no corrective purpose in mind. No, he wants to save us, restore, redeem, and reconcile us to himself. His goal is to get destructive sin out of our lives and make us whole.

Back when my kids were still living at home, I was rightly angered when they sinned. I didn't hate them or want to retaliate against them in some way. Quite the opposite, I loved them and wanted to get sin out of their lives because it was ruining them. It

wasn't about me; it was about them and their well-being. My anger was rooted in love, and so is God's! I wasn't just angry to be angry. It wasn't a matter of, "How dare you dishonor me," and it's not that way for God, either. We got this kind of thinking from Anselm in about 1000 AD. He believed that our sin dishonors God and that he can only regain his honor by doing something horrible to people as punishment, inflicting pain on them as what is due. But this is a puny, self-centered view of God. He is much more magnanimous than that. Love always acts in the best interest of the one loved. It never focuses on itself.

So yes, God is angry about sin, but his anger is based in his infinite love. He is angry *for* us and *about* us, not *against* us. There would be something wrong with him (he could not be God) if he didn't get angry and was just complacent. Love does not sit back, ideally when things are wrong. Love takes action, good action, and corrective action. God is essentially saying, "You are all sinning; you're messing your lives up. But I love you so much, and I've got to do something about it. So yes, I'm angry, but for good reason." It is good that God gets angry about sin. We need not slam him to some negative extreme, rendering him the worst possible being in the universe just because he's angry. He's angry about sin because he wants to do something about it! He has, and he will.

The Book of Revelation

However, others will read a verse like this and see the anger of God coming in the form of a big throne or a judge's bench with a lake of fire in the background, waiting for God to eternally torment all who are objects of his anger. This kind of imagery comes primarily from the New Testament Book of Revelation. However, there are several facts to consider before jumping into this book and blindly accepting all that is written in it. First of all, this book was not widely accepted in the early church before the

Fourth Century. In fact, only about twenty books now included in the New Testament were seen as authoritative early on in the church. These were: the four Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, the Thirteen Letters of Paul, First Peter, and First John. The other seven books were not universally accepted until 367 AD when Athanasius determined the New Testament canon (official books) in a letter he wrote. However, even the great reformer Martin Luther rejected these same seven books for various reasons. The Book of Revelation was one of these rejected books.

The second fact about the Book of Revelation to keep in mind is that it is clearly a *failed* prediction. The author, who is identified as John, may not have been the disciple of Jesus. The main theme of Revelation is that God will soon (in their lifetime) bring judgment on Rome for persecuting the Christians of that day. The reference in it to the “city on seven hills” is clearly a reference to Rome. More importantly, there are many clear statements that the horrors presented in this book will soon occur. The beginning and ending chapters claim that “these are things that *must soon* take place,” and that the readers of this book need to “pay attention to these predictions because the *time is near*.” It also states that those who crucified Jesus would witness his second coming. Additionally, this book (unlike Daniel of the Old Testament) should *not* be sealed up, implying that the predictions of judgment were eminent. Clearly, the second coming of Jesus in judgment did not occur as predicted, so I take the book of Revelation with great caution. Nowhere else in the New Testament writings is this kind of angry retaliation by God presented so vividly and forcefully.

The big problem with concluding that the anger of God is some kind of retaliation is that it makes God our enemy instead of sin being the enemy that destroys us. God is the one who loves and saves and has no other disposition toward his creation. Anger is the correct emotional response by God and is really his *love in action*, taking care of the problem of sin in his world. Otherwise,

it leaves us needing to do something to alleviate ourselves from the anger of God that will result in our destruction, abandonment, annihilation, or never-ending torment. None of this is who God is! It also means that salvation isn't by grace, and it's not by Jesus. It puts into question if Jesus really did "take away the sins of the world" on the cross. It renders Jesus as a savior who only provides an *opportunity* for salvation, making people only *savable* (as I was once taught in seminary.) This puts salvation, ultimately, on us. It makes our act of faith the very means that saves us and alleviates us from having something horrible happen to us at the hands of an angry God. The Puritan preacher, Johnathan Edwards, once preached a sermon titled, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." In it, he describes God dangling sinners over an open flame about to drop them into never-ending agony. This, to me, is a sick, disgusting, distorted, and perverted view of God. But it is the view that was popularized by Augustine at the beginning of the Fifth Century and became a weaponized tool used by Roman Catholicism in the Middle Ages to scare and control the masses of ignorant Christians. On October 3, 2019, Baxter Kruger published a sermon on his website titled, "God in the hands of angry sinners." In it, he reverses the roles and shows how some religious people (today and in history) have turned God into a monstrous being who carries out their angry bidding that God himself never does, wants to, or needs to do! Instead, salvation and the atonement of Christ were "taking away the sins of the world." In his Second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf." What great and wonderful news this is for us!

15. A New Nature **(Colossians 3:7-11)**

Become like your Creator (3:7)

You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. But the time has come for you to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and foul language. Don't lie to each other. You have done away with your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. So now put on your new nature and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. That's a great contrast between the old person we once were and the new person we now are in Christ. There are two parts – the taking away of the old and the bringing in of the new. These usually happen at the same time, though one can ramp down as the other grows. But make no mistake, we all still have that old nature to some degree and will be plagued by it as long as we live. Paul did, too, and he lamented it in his letters. But he never let the old nature defeat him because he focused on the new person that he knew he was in Christ. Realizing this and gaining from it daily was his goal for everyone. When we put on this new person that we are in Christ – which God does for us, and all we do is accept it and experience it – God sees us as perfect, even though we know (and God knows) that we are imperfect in this life. It's a spiritual thing, and that's important, perhaps the most important thing in life.

“Be renewed,” he tells his readers, “As you learn to know your creator and become like him.” Wow! Really? In one sense, we are like our creator because we are in Christ, the one who is the mediator (bridge) between God and man. Yet there's still this other aspect of *becoming* like him, which takes time and may go on for eternity! Our behavior and our minds still need to change, even though we are perfect in Christ. This is, perhaps, the greatest dilemma in our spiritual journey. How can we be perfect, and yet we need to improve? We only get a glimpse of how this all works. We know we are not fully perfect with no flaws, yet we experience this new wonderful life that tells us we are okay with God. How can this be? We will not fully understand or appreciate this till we have to move on from this limiting life here on earth.

Paul told his readers in Rome to renew their minds. That was what needed to change, not God and not the new person God has made us to be. But our minds can be made new, resulting in new thinking and perspectives. We just finished comparing the end of Colossians Two with the beginning of Three. It is one of Paul's main themes ... law vs. grace, dos and don'ts vs. setting our minds on higher things. Here's the solution: don't dwell on your sin. Yes, recognize you're a sinner, but don't fall into the trap of, “I'm such a terrible piece of junk. I'm worthless,” and then spend all your time, energy, and focus on trying not to sin. You won't be able to. There is that aspect of “put to death your sinful nature lurking in you.” But notice, he first says, focus on who Christ is. Get that down first. That's your main focus. And as you're doing that, you also have the power to say “no” to this other stuff. Don't go there, says Paul, but you will. I wish we could all be successful every minute of every day. But that will not happen in this life. So, admit when you sin and stumble spiritually, but then get back on track with God. Go live in the new person you are. We always have a choice. But when we choose poorly (and we will), God does not condemn us; he just starts anew with us and lets it be a teaching moment in life.

Christ is all that matters (3:11)

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you're a Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric or civilized, slave or free. This list could easily continue with: male or female, rich or poor, smart or dumb, Republican or Democrat, etc. The point is that it doesn't matter. Everyone is given new life in Christ, and their situation, orientation, or status impedes no one. It leaves no one out and leaves no one behind. It includes everyone and excludes no one. This is how complete God's saving work is. Some people object to the idea of salvation being *universal* in its scope. But salvation is accomplished by a God who is universal in every way. His wisdom, knowledge, power, presence, love, mercy, and grace are all universal. Even the atonement of Christ was universal. Didn't Jesus die to save all people? Wasn't it "one sacrifice for sin for all time" (according to the anonymous author of the New Testament Book of Hebrews)? Why wouldn't the *results* of what God does also be universal? Could he ever do anything less? That's the beauty of who God is. He rises above all such nonsense about failing or doing only a partial job when he saves. However, this does not mean that all these various categories of people are fully on board and appreciative of the salvation and new life God has given them. People can decide to shun and ignore what God has done for them, but it doesn't change what he has done. They just miss out on all the goodness God has brought into their lives by his grace.

The ultimate solution and identity are in Christ, so all other identities do not matter. That's a wonderful unifying thing. This is because religion divides and relationships unite. There's an aspect of religion that James talks about in his letter; it is all about helping widows and orphans and anyone who is in need, like those impoverished. He calls this "*true religion*," which was always Jesus's priority. However, there is another aspect of *true religion*

mentioned by James; it is to work on your own spiritual life. Watch out for others, but don't go around being a *fruit inspector*, making sure other people are producing the kind of fruit in their lives that you think they should. Instead, be a fruit inspector of your own life, paying attention to what you are doing and that it is the result of your new life in Christ. These two aspects of religion (helping others and monitoring your own life) are good. But outside of these two items, religion has serious problems and tends to divide people due to its condescending, intolerant, and dogmatic tendencies. We have all seen this. Sometimes we even see it in ourselves! Religion divides: relationships unite!

Religion can divide churches, societies, and families, sometimes even nations. It has been the basis of many wars, and even Christians have gotten caught up in its zeal. Look no further than the Crusades to see this in full display. It divides people from other people and Christians from non-Christians. Relationships, on the other hand, unite people with each other. When you have a relationship with God and encounter somebody else who also does, it will unite you with them. It can't be avoided because you have the most important thing in life in common. I don't care if someone is a Republican or Democrat; they can have different political associations and different approaches to solving problems, and if they do, that's okay with me. I will do everything I can to have a meaningful, respectful relationship with them, believing we can learn something new from each other. This is what a real relationship is all about – mutual respect, listening (the honest kind), finding common ground without giving up your own values, and not condescending to others, letting them hold their genuinely held beliefs. This applies in the religious realm, maybe even more so. Politically, I am more of an independent person rather than a party loyalist (There is nothing wrong with party loyalty; it is a matter of personal preference.) In fact, I'm glad there are two sides, and I hope neither side becomes so weak the other side dominates. There is a healthy equilibrium and many

checks and balances when everyone has someone questioning them and bringing out the other side of issues. Most unbridled extremes are dangerous, except for love and grace. You can't get too much of those when they are genuine and not just platitudes.

Love is the key

The great key that unlocks real love is when we realize Christ is in all people, loves them (and us), and that we need to love them, too. It's about that simple. When we see life as composed of two groups: those in the *in-crowd* and those who are *out*, we lose the ability to love others because our love becomes conditional. But God's love is never conditional. Sure, we must do something to actively engage with God and enjoy all the wonderful things he has given us. In that sense, there are people in different stages on the whole spectrum of knowing God. But in God's mind and heart, there is no such spectrum when it comes to his love. He never loves some people more than others. He loves everyone the same; it is an infinite love. His love is not based on anything we do or think. God is fully aware of where everyone stands with him in their own mind and heart, but it never changes his disposition toward us (any of us), who he could never love any more than he does now. He *is* love! God embodies all that love is, and he does so in Jesus, who has the "fullness of God dwelling in him."

This is the key to genuinely loving everybody out there, even our enemies (according to Jesus). This does not mean we must *like* everyone, what they do or how they treat us. We are not commanded to *like* people; but we are commanded to *love* them! Liking is far inferior to loving. If we love others genuinely, all else falls into place, and we will have the kinds of relationships that we should have, even with those we don't like. Love always acts in the best interest of the one loved, even when that love is not

appreciated or rejected. Isn't this how God loves us and how he so loves his world?

According to Paul elsewhere in his writings, God is “all in all.” In other words, he is fully present in everyone, always at work to eventually save and restore them because he loves them unconditionally, no matter how sinful, evil, rebellious, and wayward they might be. All are equally made in God’s very own image and, therefore, are of infinite value to him. He can never give up on anyone, abandon them, annihilate them, or worse, torment them forever, giving up all desire to redeem and make them whole. Never let anyone *sell God short* to you.

Christ is all that matters (3.11b)

At the beginning of verse 11, Paul told his readers what *doesn't* matter – what their human status is (Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric or civilized, slave or free). Now, in contrast, he says what *does* matter. *Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.* Pretty simple and consistent with Paul’s main theme in all his letters, that Jesus is all that matters. Put him first in your life; everything will fall into place, even when things are going badly! Earlier in this letter, he stated this same principle: “Christ in you the hope of glory.” Remember? Another similar passage I referred to above says, “God fills all in all.” How could we ever conclude that God would, in any fashion, separate himself from any part of his creation that he so loves? Could he ever do this and still be God? How did any of us ever learn and accept such nonsense, such a low, incomplete, and failed view of God?

This “all in all” passage was often used by early Christians prior to the Fourth Century. After that time, many things changed; Christianity, which was a simple faith, became an officially institutionalized religion. But these early Christians used that verse a lot, believing that someday God will completely fill

everyone in some spiritual way. In other words, they believed that God would eventually fix all things and all people. It is inconceivable that God would abandon, annihilate, or forever torment people while he is completely filling them with himself! These early Christians knew this, and it is why they believed God would eventually save everyone, though he might need to take dramatic actions in their lives to accomplish this. Many of them believed that God would do some of this corrective work in the next life, after death. But they believed it was temporary and would not be pure retaliation on God's part with no corrective purpose whatsoever. This kind of negative thinking about God did not become popular until the fifth Century as a result of Augustine's mammoth writings titled *The City of God*. He became very influential in the Roman Catholic church that emerged in the Middle Ages, matched by no other figure in history except Paul!

So, these early church believers believed that God would eventually fix it everything wrong and make everything right. Did they believe something too difficult for God to accomplish or something out of character for him? Not a chance! In fact, there's a passage that says when Christ finally brings the world in submission to himself, he will submit it, along with himself, to the Father. This will be the final and complete result of his accomplishment on the cross. It's all going to be good, and this is what these early Christians believed. They were not into the idea of hell and damnation by God. Most of them believed there would be a period of time after people die when God will purify them by fire. They could be right, or it could be that once we are all in that eternal state, God reconciles everyone and everything to himself by fully revealing his love and raising everyone into a new life. But the point is that they viewed God as one who never gives up on correcting, restoring, and making people whole until the job gets done. God brings judgment (makes an accurate assessment) for the purpose of correction, healing, and making things right. The problem with eternal punishment is there's no

corrective purpose in it whatsoever. Can God have any kind of purpose with no correction – just pure retaliation? Will he someday give up his desire for all to be saved and say, “I’m going to get back at you, and I’m going to keep getting back at you forever? I will never let up even if you repent because your opportunity to do so expired when you died.” Does this match the majesty and the magnanimity of God that he alone possesses? I don’t think so.

But there are a lot of people who think somehow it does, and somehow this yen-yang (really good and really bad) view of God makes sense to them. I just respond with, “Okay, if that’s your view, I will respect it. I’m in no position to speak for God, so I won’t. But I believe him to be bigger and better than that.” I have discovered that most people secretly hope for, are attracted to, and even have an intuition that God is totally good, saves everyone, and makes things right. This was my hope and mindset as a little kid growing up in a Baptist church. But it wasn’t until I was about sixty that I fully realized that God was perfect, successful, loving, and good beyond my wildest dreams. He turned out to be everything I had hoped for and more. I believe that in eternity, we will discover that we have only scratched the surface of how wonderful and amazing our Creator is. We will never exhaust the resources of his greatness and creative genius! Many people who have been indoctrinated all their lives in a mean, failed, retaliating, cruel view of God often tell me, “That’s just too good to be true.” My response to them is always, “Well, if it’s that good, it can only be God!”

16. Bound Together in Perfect Harmony (Colossians 3:12-15)

Make allowances for faults (3:12)

God chose you to be the holy people he loves, so clothe yourselves with tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. That's a lot to ask of anyone. Mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience are all hard things to do, even in the best of times. And in a discouraging crisis or during an episode of unfair treatment by a friend, boss, spouse, or church leader ... it's darn near impossible to *clothe ourselves* with such greatness! These excellent human traits do not come naturally to us. All we have to do to fail at them is ... nothing. However, whenever we are able to be merciful, kind, humble, gentle, and patient, especially in the midst of trouble, it will take care of 90% of our problems in life because 90% of the problem is *ourselves*! It is not always the other guy, though it always seems like it. Even when it is, how we respond makes all the difference in our lives and in those who cause us trouble. Do what is right, and don't worry about others out there who are doing what's wrong, especially when it affects you. They have their own issues to worry about and work through. We need not be slaves to our sins and weaknesses just because others are. Don't lower your

standards to try to fight against them in some foolish way or be like them.

Instead, says Paul, “clothe yourselves” with correct responses (difficult as that might be.) Be the bigger and better person, not in arrogance or condescending but by taking on the good human qualities that were in Jesus. According to Proverbs, a gentle answer will turn away anger from other people, amazingly. Be merciful toward others and be kind, even when they don’t deserve it – maybe even *especially* when they don’t deserve it. Don’t respond *in kind* (the same way they treated you.) Instead, respond *kindly*! Get a little humility going on and realize, “I don’t have this all figured out. Maybe they are right about something in this mess we’re in.” Be gentle and patient with them. Usually, *patience* just means shutting up and waiting. But that is hard for most of us to do.

Paul ups the ante on what we need to do that will be best for ourselves and others. *Make allowance for each other’s faults.* Oh, ouch! It just got harder. Are we to make allowance for others when they are wrong? Are you kidding? What kind of nonsense is that? Well, it’s God’s kind of nonsense, and we will never see the value in it until we do it out of a good, kind, and loving heart. It is impossible for us to see the advantages of these excellent instructions when we only hear them and never get around to doing them. We must *experience* making allowances in order to see the value in it. It is not easy and does not come naturally to us. But this is exactly why Paul tells his readers (and us) to *clothe* themselves with those higher and better human qualities he listed, based on the fact that God chose them to be the holy people he loves!

Other people need to make allowances for our faults, too. They will not tend to do this anymore than we will. But when we are the first to do this, it can profoundly affect their thinking, disposition, and how they respond to us. Treating people well,

especially when they know they do not deserve it, can be very disarming. Try it sometime. It may not result in someone else softening on the spot, but it will make them think, and next time or in a situation with someone else, they might remember how kind and gracious you treated them. This is one of the many ways in which we can selflessly make the world a better place, never forget that we are the body of Christ, and we are how he gets around in this world today, inadequate as we all may be. But this is how God chose to do it. It is not through specially gifted people, popes, pastors, or gurus. It is through all of us, just regular ordinary people, through whom God desires to accomplish extraordinary things!

Paul now lays it on thick, but he does so for our own good. If we will just listen to him and choose to do this one difficult thing, our lives will be so much better. *Forgive anyone who offends you.* Oh, that's even harder than making allowances. They did the offending. They don't deserve forgiveness! They need to repent first, then I'll think about forgiving them! Fortunately, this is not how God deals with us – though many religious people tag God with such indignity. I think they do this in an attempt to avenge those who they see as enemies vicariously through a mean, vengeful God who does their bidding for them. I don't think it is completely intentional on their part, nor do they fully realize what a lowly view of God they hold. Usually, it is a result of long-term indoctrination by others who taught them this lowly view of God. In fact, it is usually well-intentioned, though terribly misguided, and they just pass on what they were taught, never questioning their view of God and where it came from.

But here, Paul tells his readers to become as good and magnanimous as God himself. Look again at his list: clothe yourselves with tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; make allowance for each other's faults; and forgive anyone who offends you. Wow! These are

characteristics of God, and we do well to take these on ourselves to whatever degree we can. But never forget that Paul's ultimate solution is not to just try harder. That seldom works, and when it does, it is limited in its success. Instead, he always has people focus on being *in Christ*. That is where to power of success lies.

So, what happens when we forgive somebody that offends us? What are we essentially saying to them? What is the message that comes out of our lives and interactions with others? What is forgiveness? Even if we don't say the words "I forgive you," what does it mean to forgive? Forgiveness is letting go of any offense endured. This is not easy to do and is usually not our first response. We are saying to an offender, "I am *releasing* you of any obligation to me," – assuming they were wrong, and you were right, and they actually did offend you. Sometimes, when we take offense, it is misguided on our part, and the problem is with us. Watch out for this. When this happens, it is time to go have a heart-to-heart chat with God and get a correct perspective.

God is love, so let go and let love reign supreme. Release people of any obligation you think they owe to you and quit holding it over them in resentment. Resentment is not healthy. Sometimes we forgive someone, and they don't receive it. They may respond to our forgiveness with, "Why are you forgiving me? I haven't done anything wrong!" Well, there are two things to consider. First, they might be right. Go talk to God and find out. But you must go to him with a humble and open heart, or you won't hear a word he says in his quiet, calm voice. But secondly, even if their denial results from their own blindness, just forgive them anyway! Don't push. Express an *attitude* of forgiveness. It need not always be expressed in words. Perhaps respond with, "If you didn't do anything wrong, that's great. Let's go from here!" Defusing human emotion is almost always the right thing to do, even if you must give up some of your precious turf. You'll be "making allowance for each other's faults and forgiving anyone who offends you."

Remember, God has forgiven you (3:13b)

Paul now delivers his death blow to our ego and self-centeredness. *Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.* God has already forgiven all of us more than we'll ever forgive others. This realization should stop anyone in their tracks who even thinks about holding grudges. There is a parallel passage in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. (See my commentary titled *The Mysterious Plan Revealed: An optimistic, conversational, thought-provoking commentary on Paul's letter to the Ephesians.*) At the end of his fourth chapter in that letter, he wrote, "Be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."

In doing this, we're also seeking peace. The New Testament writers all tell us to seek and pursue it. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Sometimes we just need to humble ourselves and say, "Hey, I was wrong; I apologize." We do it for the sake of peace. However, when you know you are not wrong and are attacked, it is usually best to stay silent – the kind of silence where our body language is not screaming at them. A calm, peaceful assurance is all we need to portray. Perhaps it will spread. But more often than not, we are partially wrong. Own up to that and do not focus on where others are wrong. Oh, this is so hard to do when what they have clearly done wrong is so obvious and seems like it needs to be exposed. But just deal with your end of it. Sometimes, we are tempted to say, "I know I was partly wrong, but you..." then we list their sins and undo all the good that could have come from humility, admitting our fault in it, staying silent, and letting God work. It might not feel good at the moment, but it is usually the best thing to do. This is a clear case where "less is more." It is hard because we want to hold them accountable. Resist this temptation; just take care of your end of the problem and shut up. The weight of the burden will shift to them without them realizing it, and you will be free! They will feel, even if only

subconsciously, that you've forgiven them, loved them, and you're not holding anything against them. Only shutting up will accomplish this. Occasionally, something can be said on our part, but we need to be gracious and not just excuse ourselves, blaming others.

Love and forgiveness have a very powerful effect on people. They might not get it for a week, a month, or a year. Perhaps never in this life. Then again, they might come back later and say, "I was wrong," but of course, you'll be thinking, "Why didn't you tell me this before?" Resist the temptation to think that; just be happy that they are making progress in their journey with God. Undoubtedly, someone was once patient with you, and you may have never been aware of it. Pass onward the goodwill. I have experienced this thing of having people come back after they have had a huge paradigm shift. It takes time. I have also been the one who experienced that shift. It is very humbling, but that's always a good thing.

Let peace from Christ rule (3:14)

Paul now delivers his bottom line and the most important aspect of all he has previously written about spiritual clothing. *Above all, clothe yourselves with love which binds us all together in perfect harmony.* It seems to always come down to a few basic ideas for Paul. One is Christ – that is, Jesus. Another is *grace* as opposed to a law of any kind from God or man-made. But above all is love! In his first letter to the Corinthians, he defined what love is in detail, and at the end, he placed love as the greatest thing, even over faith and hope. When we love – and it's gotta be the genuine kind, not the flaky stuff that is superficial – it will bring perfect harmony that will bind people together in a way that nothing else can. But it can only bind people together perfectly when the love that binds is also perfect, and that is probably never true, except for a few precious moments. But

perfection is a wonderful goal to strive for, and the degree to which we can love each other perfectly is the degree to which we will live in harmony with others. It is worth all the effort we can give it. The alternative is strife, disharmony, inefficiency, broken relationships, and unhappiness.

Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.

This is, perhaps, the key to love. Once again, it always goes back to Christ, back to Jesus, living in him and for him, and getting our eyes off ourselves and onto God, where ego and selfishness die. Peace that comes from Christ ... that's the only place that it can come from. When it rules in our hearts we then can "clothe ourselves with love which binds us all together in perfect harmony." Think about the best thing that could rule in your heart, mind, and soul. Wouldn't it be peace? Think about how clearly you could think and how free you would be from stress and distraction; it is every person's dream. Everyone in life is seeking peace. Why do we go to work, acquire wealth, and attempt to control our lives in some way? Aren't we all just seeking peace in some way, shape, or form? What good is money, power, fame, or control if we don't have peace of mind and relax, knowing everything is good and will turn out well? It is about having a "sense of well-being!" This only comes from Christ, knowing him, and living as the new person we are in him. All other attempts at peace are illusions or short-lived. Real peace means no worry, no churning, no angst, no gritting our teeth. When peace rules in our hearts, there is calm and quietness, even in the midst of turmoil. Paul elsewhere calls it "the peace that passes understanding." When you experience it, you can't explain it or even know where it comes from, except you know it comes from God, even when someone is beating up on you verbally. You can just let them, rise above the situation, and know God is in charge and at work in your life and theirs.

Many years ago, I found myself in a difficult situation with some church leaders. Partly, I unknowingly brought it on myself, but partly they were reacting in self-preservation, fear, and anger. I was very surprised and was not sure exactly how to handle it since they were long-time friends, some of up to forty years. However, in a very unique way, God told me just to love them and not defend myself in any way. Well, the more I loved them and did not respond in kind (but instead responded kindly), the angrier they became. After many meetings with them, they finally told me that I needed to “bring my arguments to support what I believe and stop falling on my sword.” But I told them I had no desire to do that, nor did I need to oppose them in any way. I told them I loved them and let them respond in whatever way they believed they should. This made some of them even angrier, and they told me that they were.

But quite honestly, I wanted to either fight back or boogie out of there altogether. But God told me to stay in the situation and just love them the best I could. I think they wanted me to fight them because it would justify their fighting me. But the more I loved them and the more they pushed on me, the more I saw how much they needed to be loved. So that’s what I kept on doing for about six months. The proverb, “A gentle answer turns away wrath,” became a precious guide for me. They were words to live by, and they served me well. Twenty years earlier, when I was middle-aged and feistier, I don’t think I could have done this. Instead I was about age 60 at the time, having walked with God for many years and learned to trust him. He taught me the value of loving others in difficult situations. God wastes nothing in our lives and always has something important to teach us every step along the way of our journey. Things are pretty good today – fifteen years later – especially after learning so much and pondering all that God did in my life and theirs. There’s nothing complicated about loving – it’s just not easy because it’s not our

nature to love. Unconditional love is very powerful, and it is the kind of love with which God loves us!

Paul has one last thought about peace. *As members of one body, you are called to live in peace and always be thankful.* There are two big things here that work together. Be at peace and give thanks. Paul sees both as actions we can decide to take or not. He did not tell them to experience peace and feel thankful. Those are generally out of our control and will. But we can decide to *live* in peace by how we choose to live. Look at all the things he has listed previously. We can choose to *give thanks*, even when things are not going well and we do not *feel* thankful.

It's not that God needs us to do these things. He is self-sufficient and unaltered by our failures and shortcomings. But he does care about us, very much so. He wants us to choose to live in peace and choose to actively give thanks; we do so for our own benefit, not his. We are the ones who gain the most from our decisions and actions. How we live and what we choose changes our lives and the lives of those around us. When we live in peace, we are letting things trend toward calmness – as much as is humanly possible. Much of peace, or lack of it, is far out of our control. But we can have a big effect on the environment and situations around us when we choose wisely how we live. And giving thanks when we don't feel thankful? This changes and softens our anxious and bitter hearts. Try it sometime. It is totally unnatural and not easy to do, but you will see some immediate results in your thinking and your inner-most being. There is an amazing calmness in thanking God for everything because you are telling yourself that God is in control and has a good purpose in what he does and allows.

17. Representatives of Jesus (Colossians 3:16-17)

Richness in the message about Jesus (3:16)

Now on a more positive note, underscoring the only real solution in life, Paul wrote this: *Let the message about Christ in all its richness fill your lives.* He's kind of saying the same thing here but a little differently. He just told his readers to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts, and now he is saying, let the message about Christ – which is the Gospel, the Good News message that Jesus died on the cross and saved the world – to let that richness fill their lives. When the Good News message is fully realized, it is life-changing. It's not that the message is complicated or hard to understand; it's more of a matter of being hard to receive. First, we are all skeptical of anything that seems too good to be true. The Good News message from Paul, with all the freedom, joy, and peace that comes with it without having to do anything to earn it, is certainly hard to believe for anyone living in this fallen world. I have many Christian friends who shave off and diminish some of the greatness and completeness of this Good News, but they only do so because (like me) they have been taught all their lives that it can't be *that* good! But it is, and God is a God who saves and never fails. His love will not allow him to do so.

But also, this Good News is hard to receive because we want to play some meritorious part in it. Small as it may be, we want to know that we earned something in the salvation God has brought and that we can take a little bit of credit for being good enough or believing enough to close the deal with God. But Paul, in all his letters, insists that God's saving work is completely unearned by grace; therefore, we can never brag or claim any merit in God's rescuing efforts. But this just goes against our pride and ego. If we can claim just the smallest part of earning in God's act of saving us, then we will save ourselves from complete humility and having to thank God completely for the salvation we have. In our fallen, selfish, sinful nature, we never want this kind of complete dependence on anyone, let alone Almighty God. But when we (again by God's grace) "let the message about Christ in all its richness fill our lives," we will never trade in all the peace and freedom that comes from that for a mere ego boost and feeding our self-reliance. The sweetest experience we can ever have is realizing that God did it all and that all we can do is correctly respond. It is like being cuddled in the arms of our loving mom when we are little tykes. Too bad we cannot *test drive* all this before we receive it. I think more people would be saved sooner if we could. But perhaps they would be gipped out of the overwhelming joy and surprise that comes from actually being saved and not just trying it out.

It reminds me of the *leap from the lion's head* in the Indiana Jones movie *The Last Crusade*. The small notebook written by his father told him what to do ... to step out in faith while standing on a ledge over a huge canyon. He took a big breath, placed his hand over his heart (perhaps to contain its racing throbs), closed his eyes, lifted out his leg, leaned forward, and let whatever was supposed to be there support his weight. And it did! Such is our leap of faith into believing God will hold us up and save us when we trust him. Notice it is not our act of faith that saves us; it is the solid support and foundation of God, who is already there

and has already saved us. Our faith just allows us to experience what is already true about God and what he has done in Jesus! Therefore, there is no merit or earning in our faith. It is just our admitting that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves (even our act of faith) and that God alone saves and gets all the credit, glory, and thanks.

So, let the richness of Christ – the Good News message about him – fill your heart and make room for all the good things that God wants you to experience in life. All the crap, angst, struggle, fear, anger, and insecurity are what gets driven out to make room. Let Christ fill your heart, and he'll make more room for better things – more time, efficiency, peace, and joy, with less struggle and trouble.

Counsel each other (3:16b)

Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom God has given you. No human being is the official, ultimate counselor, except perhaps Jesus. Paul is up there on the list, too, but sometimes (by his own admission), he expresses his opinions and is clearly a product of his own culture and times. However, the timeless principles in his writings shine so brightly. Jesus is physically gone, but he promised to send the Holy Spirit – that is, the Spirit of God himself to be with us, dwell in us, comfort us, and teach us. John said in his first letter that there is no teacher (ultimately) than the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that human teachers are not helpful or should be ignored. But accept them all with caution – just as you should this commentary. All human teachers are flawed in some way, mistaken in other ways (though often sincerely so), and are limited in their knowledge and wisdom. Always take everything to God, who will never mislead or fail you and will straighten everything out for you in due time as you seek him.

But in this passage, Paul tells his readers to counsel each other! What? Without a license, seminary degree, or guru status? Yes! God can and does work through all of us, and often the best advice and guidance is from a friend who knows us best and loves us most. We can teach and counsel each other at different times and in different situations. There have been people I have helped, and then other times I needed them to counsel and teach me. We are all in need of counseling and help and are all able to bring that needed help into the lives of others. Never sell yourself short. Never assume that some kind of formal training is better than good old *life experiences*. Think things through carefully, taking everything to God where real learning and preparation happen. I appreciate well-trained people who are needed in special circumstances. But don't fall into the trap of thinking that only some pastor, priest, or other kind of official leader can do the job. Paul is clearly saying that this is a job for all of us!

A friend that I talked to the other day, who has cancer, told me how much I had helped him and encouraged him. But then I told him that I hadn't told him anything he didn't already know. I was just reminding him. This is what usually happens. Seldom do we learn anything really new. We just need to be reassured of what we already know that might be fading slightly. However, whenever I encounter such people in this special way, I always get so much out of it. It is not all just for them. Someone once said, "In teaching (encouraging, counseling), you'll be taught." And as we deal with other people and teach them in some way, we're kind of hearing ourselves saying. "Wow, I need to remember that!"

Singing spiritual songs of the heart (3:16b)

Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. You don't have to go to church to do this. It is a great place to sing songs in thankfulness, but it's not the only place. In fact, it isn't always to best place! Sure, you get

pianos, guitars, and drums, plus a bunch of good singers leading worship, but you can do it all by yourself. You can be in the car, out in nature, or in the quietness of your own thoughts and heart, never even using your voice at all. The exhilaration of being alone with God is like nothing else. I have friends who meditate or spend time in prayer. Songs of the heart can emerge anytime, in any place, for any reason. You can even sing off-key by yourself, and God will not care. It is your *heart* that he sees. A trained voice that is focused on itself, or one not focused at all, is no match for the voice of a person once apart from God, now singing from a heart full of joy and thankfulness.

Now, does God need to hear those songs? Does he in some way require them (or some other form of worship?) There is no reason to conclude any of this if God genuinely loves us. But does he appreciate and enjoy any attention we give him, in an unselfish parent-like desire? Sure! Isn't our own experience with our kids, when they do something for us in their own clumsy way, that they please us fully? Of course. We wouldn't ever think about requiring them to worship or pay attention to us, threatening them with some kind of punishment if they fail to do so. It is no different with God, except his acceptance of our affections is so much more pure, beautiful, and good. He is not some kind of needy god who must have someone glorifying him to feel good about himself. In fact, his desire for us to worship him and sing spiritual songs in our hearts is much more for *our* benefit than his. We are happiest, most content, and most secure when we are in his presence, unafraid and experiencing his love. This is what he desires for us, and it always involves him. We can never be satisfied apart from God any more than an ember can keep on burning away from the fire in which it originated.

My friend with cancer eventually died. When I first met him some years before, I happened to say something to him about why God wants our worship and praise and glorify him. I told him it is not because God is an egomaniac that needs it. It's

because he knows we're going to focus on something, worship something, praise something, and if it's anything other than himself, it won't be best for us because all other things are meaningless and temporary. A relationship with God where he is the focus above all else lasts forever; we know it, and it totally changes our perspective of life while we are here on earth.

So, the reason God wants us to glorify him is not because he's saying, "Oh, bring it! Yeah, I'm feeling it now – all that glory, honor, and praise!" God only wants us to do this because it's what's best for us. When we glorify God, and we're focusing on him as our one and only Creator, everything else will fall into perspective. How could it not? My friend found this concept of God to be revolutionary. He was raised to fear God and see him as an angry being with a long list of requirements, demanding that everyone glorify him because he deserves it. He said he'd never thought about God this way before, which became a huge turning point in his life. When he died, he did so in peace, knowing that God loved him and only wanted the very best for him in this life and the next one!

Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of Jesus, your Lord, giving thanks to God the Father through him. When I was a younger man, I remember having this verse mounted on my technician workbench, where I could see it daily. For me, it fit perfectly when I was sometimes required to do things I didn't want to do. It helped me do my job for a higher reason than just to make a living. Since Paul starts out with, "Whatever you do..." I knew this applied to all areas of life, including my job. Have you ever been in a job you did not like or one you liked but had unwanted duties or an unreasonable boss? Well, here is the answer, and it is a good one. It always brought everything back into perspective for me, especially when things got tough. I must admit, there were times I wanted to rip that stupid verse down and throw it across the room. But I never did.

I got over my tizzy. Besides, if I did ... then what? Who do I turn to and follow if not God? My boss? Some rock star whose personal life is messed up even though he can wail on the guitar? Perhaps just follow myself! Nope. Tried that once. Failed miserably. Following God, putting him first, seeing life through his eyes, and singing spiritual songs in my heart was the only way to go. I am so glad today that I kept following God the best I could as I aged (though I never did it perfectly). It has always served me well!

18. Wives, Husbands, Fathers, and Children

(Colossians 3:18-19)

Introduction

Paul now turns his attention to some practical aspects of relationships, particularly wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. He deals with marriage first, and in doing so, he advises the wives and then the husbands. He provides pretty much the same information near the end of his letter to the Ephesians, in the same order of wives then husbands. Why does he speak to the wives first? Isn't he one who believes the husband is the head of the home? Why not address them first, then wives, then children? Perhaps he wanted the husbands to read what he had for the wives before he told the husbands his advice to them. Maybe he knew that was the best way to get a man's attention, also knowing their tendency to assume they know it all and that wives are somehow lesser in value. But there is no way to know for sure.

So, after Paul gets the advice to wives out of the way, he then gets down to business with the husbands, based on that advice to the wives. They need this in their minds before they hear what Paul has for them and take it seriously. It was a male-dominated culture back in those days, much more so than it is today in our modern world. Paul will have revolutionary suggestions for

husbands who were all raised to believe women were in some way lesser in value and ability than men; this came out of a misguided conclusion based on the fact that men are generally (but not exclusively) *physically* stronger than women. This superiority of men was easy to carry into all areas of life, even though it was not true. And it was easily enforced for obvious reasons. Paul will tell the guys they need to love their wives and “never treat them harshly.” Wow! What a concept. Equality for all despite gender. Going against well-established cultural norms was just as hard for them as it is for us today. Women were mainly just possessions, perhaps cherished in some cases, but someone to provide offspring, cook, and do the less desired work in society (also less important in the minds of men). The only people lower were slaves. Paul will deal with this subject, too. Men who could afford it had multiple wives – one to do the cooking, one for washing clothes, and a favorite (younger one) for sex outside of childbearing. Women today, though still not fully seen as equal, are rightly thankful to Christianity for being the historical basis for their social liberty. It took way too long, but there has been steady progress since the Renaissance, through the Reformation, into the Enlightenment, emerging only recently in society and even many churches. Jesus was as supportive of women as his society would allow. But he broke with many established traditions and was part of many non-conforming actions that got him crucified. Jesus was a threat to all that was wrong in that day.

Submit as is fitting (3:18)

Paul addresses wives first. Although Paul was not quite ready to fully embrace the equality of women in every aspect of life, he seemed to go much further than anyone else in his day and continued something Jesus started, which is still evolving today. *Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting for those who belong to the lord.* Hmmm.... Well, it is worth noting that he

qualified this idea of wives submitting. He wants them to submit in a way that is good and pure, for the right reasons, as everyone should do before God. Notice that he did not say to submit to their husbands just like they do to God. Instead, his angle is submitting in a *fitting* way, with all the goodness, mercy, grace, kindness, and love associated with God.

A parallel passage is at the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In it, he starts out by telling husbands and wives to "be subject to each other." In that letter, this seems to be the foundational principle on which he bases his advice to wives and husbands. I think it is reasonable to assume he also has the same thing in mind here in his Colossian letter. Ultimately, it's a submission to each other in Christ in different roles and ways. As we will see, Paul does not give men a pass or blank check in how they conduct themselves in marriage; in fact, he seems to have even a higher bar for husbands than just equal submission with their wives.

He goes on and writes, *Husbands love your wives and never treat them harshly.* He has much more to say to husbands in his Ephesians letter, like loving their wives as Christ loves his church. As I said, Paul sets a very high bar for husbands! It is worth your time to go and read that letter if you haven't. It will be a good commentary on what Paul writes in this letter, filling in a lot that is missing. But here, he only wanted to deal with the tendency of husbands to be harsh. A lot of this still goes on today, even in churches, perhaps especially in some church settings where male domination still rules the day.

However, it is worth noting that in any business, home, organization, club, political party, or nation, there must always be some kind of leadership and oversight. Without it, there will be chaos. There is always some kind of head or ultimate authority where the proverbial buck stops. But this does not mean such

authority needs to *lord over* others, be mean, cruel, or always have their way. That is not real leadership ... its selfishness.

I remember acting as the *head* of my family; though I am not sure I wanted the job; I was raised to believe it was. So, I did my best. However, I concluded early on that in order to be a good head of my home I needed to always act in the best interest of my wife and kids. Needless to say, I did not do this perfectly, but I always tried to. I found it to be a very difficult thing to do well. Looking back, I think I falsely took too much upon myself, good intentioned as it was, but needlessly so. A more balanced relationship with my wife in the headship (not that there was none) would have been better, but we all live with an upbringing we did not choose, and we spend most of our lives sorting it out and making needed corrections. Sometimes, I feel like life is a training experience, but once when I finally got sufficiently trained ... I was out of a job! I was in training raising my kids, and by the time I started to get good at it, they were gone! I have told them many times that I learned more from them than they did from me, even though they were not trying and were just being themselves. Life seems to have many purposes built into it by God that are much different from ours and different from what we expect.

I didn't get to spend all our money the way I wanted and have everyone always do what I wanted. That's called *selfishness*. Good headship always acts in love, and it thinks about those who are under their care. It never says, "I'm in charge here, and you all better obey me ... or else!" Instead, it's a headship where you're acting in the best interest of those you are supposed to be serving by doing a thankless job of keeping things on track (if you can!) So, when you are under some kind of human authority, know your human rights granted by God and never give them up. But also go ahead and let that person in charge care for you so that they can be successful for your own benefit. If they are a good

leader, it won't be about them, and it does not take long to see if this is where their heart is.

It is like Paul wrote earlier, “In all you do – including submission to good people who are in authority over you whether it's at work, at church, parents, spouses, police, or club president that you have voluntarily joined – do everything as unto God who is the ultimate authority, and always a perfect one.

A good leader

Being a good leader is seldom a fun job. It is usually functionally essential for the good of all. Most people don't want to do it, and the few who do range in motives from very good to very selfish and narcissistic. We see this full range in politics, and I am always surprised at how poorly people sometimes select leaders. There was a book that came out many decades ago titled *The March of Folly* by Barbara Tuchman. It is a real eye-opener. In it, she chronicles throughout history, from Troy to Vietnam, how civilizations have made amazingly poor choices in leaders they support and follow, only to their own loss and destruction. She characterized it as, “the paradoxical pursuit of government policies contrary to their own best interest.” A book worth reading!

Real leaders don't get their own way; Anything but that! It's like when you go on a trip, and there's a bunch of people in the car, you're driving with the steering wheel in your hands, and you can exercise your leadership in two ways. One way is to look back at the passengers and tell them, "Shut up, buckle up, and I'll let you know when we get there." This gets the job done but not well, and sometimes not at all. People can start complaining, fighting, and grabbing the wheel. Pretty soon, you're all in a ditch or worse. The other kind is what I call *servant leadership*, and it says something like this, “Hey folks, where would you like to go, and where do you want to stop? Do you want to take the scenic route

or get there sooner? Let me know. Let's talk it over and come to an agreement." Even doing it this way has problems, but not as many, and it is the right way to treat people. This kind of leadership says, "I'm going to get us all there safely, but we're going to decide together where we go, how, and when. I'm just the guy at the wheel serving you all in this important way. I have the privilege of being the one taking the responsibility to drive the car." And such a person has tremendous control over others. The question is: In what way will that person wheel control over others? In their best interest or selfishly?

So that's two very different kinds of leadership. I find this kind of headship and leadership promoted in the New Testament, not the selfish kind, *lording* their authority over people. In fact, The New Testament consistently warns against such attitudes and practices. It is modeled after God's leadership as one who loves and always acts in the best interest of those who are objects of his love, not himself. And this is the kind of love, leadership, and headship a husband and father should exercise if he and his wife choose this kind of marriage. Other people choose to have a more mutually controlled marriage. And that's great if they can pull it off. It is not easy, but the more in that direction a couple can go toward shared leadership, the better off they are. However, I have observed that in any joining of two people living together in close proximity, one of them will always be ultimately in charge and act as head of that union. This is not always formally agreed upon, but it will happen somehow to some degree. Paul is just trying to make what is inevitable run smoothly and in the best interest of both individuals. I commend his effort.

Unfortunately, the advice of "submit to your husband" with no safeguards or qualifications has been greatly abused, perhaps in the context of church life more than anywhere else. It can get blown way out of proportion by some people in some religious groups, even to the point that women buy into it, fooled into thinking that even God somehow sees them as lesser in value and

less able to match the superiority of men. Paul states very clearly, “Husbands love your wives and never treat them harshly.” In a way, this says it all. But in his letter to the Ephesians, he spells this out in detail, even saying that husbands need to love their wives as Christ loves his church. I must admit, this was something I was never able to do, but I have given it my best shot each day now for nearly fifty years. The rest, I leave with God where it belongs!

Pleasing obedience (3:20)

Paul now shifts his focus. *Children, always obey your parents, for this pleases the Lord.* Dads tend not to be nurturers. Moms naturally are. Dads can really frustrate little kids, and that's why Paul, in his next section, warns dads, “Fathers do not aggravate your children, or they'll become discouraged.” However, dads have other tendencies and traits that are essential for kids. Usually, it's because they aren't quite as nurturing and will toughen the kids up a bit. *All mom and no dad* isn't best and we see the results of this in society today. However, *all dad and no mom* produces a different set of problems. Both mom and dad, male and female are needed; God has designed it this way. Neither gender is equipped to be perfectly balanced and bring everything into a child's life that is needed. My wife and I learned early on that she brought what was missing in me, and I brought what was missing in her. Still, we struggled with letting the other have too much influence at the expense of our own. But once this is appreciated, you can have a pretty good marriage and family life. But this is hard to learn when we're young, inexperienced, and just starting out. But this is exactly what life is about ... a journey of learning and growing.

The New Testament gives very few details about marriage or raising children. When I first realized this many years ago, I thought it was odd since both of these areas of life are complicated and challenging. But then I realized that the New Testament writers (like Paul) taught principles about life that could be applied to any situation. Otherwise, the New Testament would have to be the size of an encyclopedia to sufficiently cover all topics in detail.

When I was newly married, I wanted to look up all the passages in the New Testament about marriage so I could become a good husband. I was shocked to discover that there were only a few that gave any detailed information. The most complete passage was at the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. But even that passage was limited to just a couple of paragraphs. However, one verse stood out to me. It said, "Love your wives the way Christ loved the church." So, I did a study on how Christ loves his church (and all people). Suddenly I had a more information than I knew what to do with. But it was all in *principle* form and applied to just about every area of life. That was the beauty of it; what I needed to know about marriage existed in principles scattered throughout all the New Testament writings! The same spiritual principles apply to many topics in life, including marriage and raising children.

Fathers do not aggravate children (3:21)

Fathers, don't aggravate your children, or they'll become discouraged. Notice he doesn't tell the women to avoid doing this. That's because women are more nurturing and generally do better with the kids. Dads do okay, too, but not like moms. Maybe this is because they alone carry their children to term, dads are a part of the whole thing, but not like moms. Moms invested every moment of every day, with all the aches, pains, and discomforts, while dads went off to work to finance the whole project. And,

hey, some women do that, too! But every woman who had a good man appreciates the heck out of him during that long, difficult haul. Many women must go it alone! There needs to be a male figure in the home, not because he is just more of the same kind of parenting but because he brings the *opposite* kind, which is essential in the development of every little boy and girl, sometimes in different ways.

I so loved my son and daughter (and still do), but they were each special in different ways. A dad and daughter have a special thing going on, just like a mom and a son. Switch things around, and those relationships are also special. However, moms and daughters, as well as dads and sons, are often less complementary because they are the same gender. This is not bad or wrong; it is just the consequence of how God set it up. We all work through it as parents and children and are all better off because of it. God brilliantly designed it far beyond what we can understand or appreciate.

Kids can get too much nurturing from mommy and need to learn some resilience from a dad. However, in instinctively providing this needed training, dads can easily frustrate, exasperate, and discourage their kids even though this is not their goal. So, Paul gives fathers this unique warning. I'm sure there are many other warnings he could have issued, but this one was at the top of the list in Paul's mind because of the extreme and lasting damage it can cause. Many little kids who grew up and became adults are still working through some of this damage later in life. They can go to counselors all they want, and sometimes they can be of some limited help, but only God can fully heal and make us whole in spite of our brokenness.

And, as we have seen, Paul's solution is always centered on the person of Jesus and understanding that we are a new, perfect, and complete person in him. How else could we ever be made whole and win victory over any distorted identity imposed on us that we have of ourselves? Do we think we can pull ourselves up

C Clifton Jones

by our own bootstraps? Gravity will never allow it no matter how hard we try. It always takes a greater external force that is perfect to lift us up out of failure and despair. We are involved in the process so that we can learn what grace is. But it is always God who does the essential work and gets the credit!

19. Slaves & Masters (Colossians 3:22-4:1)

Genuine submission (3:22)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything you do. Oh, how I wish Paul had started out by saying, “Masters, release your slaves. It is wrong for any human being to own another. Never forget that we are all children of God with unalienable equal rights!” But he didn’t, and I do not know if Paul was capable of having such a high view of God’s creation. Despite all his insight into the grace of God and the Good News message about Jesus, he was still a product of his own times and culture (just as we are today). This is a very hard thing for anyone to completely escape, but God works around and through such limitations in all our lives. This was also true of Paul.

He lived in a world where slavery was common; he was stuck with it and couldn't physically free all who were enslaved. So, I think he dealt with it realistically, perhaps telling them, “Look, you're in slavery, and you can't free yourself from it, but here's the best way to live with it and discover the kind of *spiritual* freedom that is far superior to anything physical.”

After he told them, “Obey your earthly masters in everything you do,” he added this: *Try to always please them, not just when they're watching you. Serve them sincerely because your ultimate respect is for God, not them.* In the original

Greek text that Paul wrote, he used the word *fear* instead of *respect* in that last verse, which can be misleading. True, many slaves genuinely feared their masters. But others were treated quite well, almost like a trusted family member, even though they were not free. Paul purposely wants them to contrast their fear of an earthly master with the *reverence* (often called *fear* in the New Testament) that they had for God. God is not to be feared in some negative way, cowering in the corner, waiting for some kind of retaliation. That is not how God operates, even though many people present him in this way. He does not need to be seen as some kind of vengeful, retributive monster who accomplishes his purposes and goals through fear, intimidation, and violence. Instead, he always desires people to be saved, restored, healed, and made whole. He did not send his son into the world to condemn it but to save it (according to John in his Gospel). And that's exactly what he did in Jesus on the cross. In his infinite love, he will never fail to accomplish all he set out to do in this fallen world that he so loves.

God allows some people to be enslaved and others not. Seems unfair, and perhaps it is, but it is what he allows in accordance with some kind of eternal purpose. I think Paul is trying to encourage slaves in the difficult situation they are in. He wants them to know that real freedom is spiritual and in their heart. Ultimate freedom is not civil liberty, physical in its nature, important as this is. Some people are totally free, in a civil and physical sense, yet they're not free in their hearts. They are slaves to all kinds of things, much worse than being in under some human master, bad as that is. Then, there are those who have been in some form of human slavery, but in their heart, they are free in Christ. They have the kind of freedom no one can take away. This is exactly how the old *negro spiritual* songs were born. They came out of the Southern slavery era. These folks, though heavily burdened physically, knew they were free and rich in a more important way, and they sang about it. They understood spiritual things more than the selfish, greedy landowners who

lived in luxury, went to church, read the Bible, and found in it a false justification for the slavery they imposed on so many others.

Paul then adds this in his advice to slaves. *Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord.* This is very much like what he wrote earlier to his more general audience. “In whatever you do, do it to the glory of God.” That applies to everyone, but to slaves in a very special way. They were required to obey; this was harder than what free people encountered. But attitude is everything, and it can make the difference between living a relatively peaceful life and one full of strife. One way or another, these slaves would be required to do their jobs. This is no different from most jobs we have all had, except we have been free to quit and try to find a better one. These slaves had no such luxury. So, in having to do things for someone else, Paul knew that the key to experiencing real freedom was in their attitude and perspective on their slave-oriented way of life. It would be one thing for Paul to tell them, “Have a good attitude when you do your work.” This could help them endure their unjust confinement to some degree. But when he adds a very good reason: “as though you were working for the Lord.” This changes everything. This brings it all into focus and gives them the biggest perspective in life anyone can have. There is something powerful in seeing life in the context of who God is. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul told them that he could “do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” It is the same kind of idea here.

This works for us today, too, if we will let it. Seeing life in the big picture of who God is, his love for us, and what he has in store for us in eternity shrinks our problems down into proper proportion. When we walk with God and live *in Christ* every minute of every day, we are a real “Christian,” not just on Sunday but every day, all day. It dominates our life in a good way and in the best way!

Paul gives any slaves that might be reading (or hearing) this letter one final thought that puts it all together. *Remember that the lord will give you an inheritance as your reward and that the master you serve is really Christ.*

God has no favorites (3:25)

If you do what is wrong, you will be paid back for the wrong you have done because God has no favorites. This idea in the New Testament is that someday there will be a judgment at the end of life (or in the afterlife) where God will judge everybody according to what they've done, good or bad. This idea is repeatedly stated. I can think of about seven places in the New Testament writings where this idea of God having no favorites is presented. Some translations say, "God is not a respecter of persons." This does not mean he has no respect for people but that he does not elevate a special respect for one person over another. This is the closest thing to saying that God acts fairly. No matter who they are, all persons will be judged for all they have done in life, whether good or bad. At first glance, this can look like a mean, vicious God out to punish as many people as he can – as if the whole goal of his existence is to be some kind of cosmic cop. Many religious people see God this way, but it is mostly because it is how God was presented to them since they were small children. That is a very hard thing to get away from, and it is even harder to read passages in the Bible accurately without accusing God of being, ultimately, the meanest, cruelest, most revengeful being in the universe.

So, God has no favorites; he treats everybody equally and loves everybody the same, and there's going to be a judgment someday. But this judgment is a good thing, just like everything else God does; it is always good and only good. In the Greek language (the language used to write the New Testament,

including all of Paul's letters), *judgment* means "to make an accurate assessment." We are often taught that God's judgment means, "I'm mad at you, and I'm going to send you to hell forever for your sin and unbelief!" But making an *accurate assessment* of people and events in life is a good thing. We all need to be evaluated (even though we hate it) so that we can see how we are doing or how well we have done in the past. Many places in the New Testament say that judgment is about both good and bad, not just the bad stuff we have done. There will be as much commendation as there will be condemnation.

God is the kind of God who deals in truth, so he will give an accurate assessment of everything we've done in life so that we can understand and realize the good and bad of our actions. This is a good thing. We all need an accurate assessment of ourselves; there is no way we could ever do it. Eventually, we will all be completely saved by God's grace, even though we do not fully experience it in this life. We're saved by grace no matter what we did and didn't do in this life because God planned to save us long before he created us. He knew we all would fall into sin, and he let that happen because he also knew that giving us a great deal of freedom would bring about the best for all of us, as messy as it is for God to allow this. We could never know or appreciate love, grace, mercy, purpose, or meaningfulness if we never went through all we are going through in this life. God's purpose in judgment (accurate assessment) is not to try to catch you doing something wrong so he can do something horrible to you in response! It's to give you an accurate assessment of who you were, who you are, and what you did in life with an attitude of "let's get all the truth out where it can be seen" so that we can know what it is good and bad and get some closure.

Masters who have a master (4:1)

In Colossians Four, Paul turns his attention to slave masters. With husbands and wives, he started with advice for the wives, perhaps to clear the way of any excuses when he advises the husbands. Maybe he is using the same strategy here; he started with advice to slaves, and now he deals with the masters. Perhaps he wants masters to deal with their area of greatest struggle. Shamefully, some don't even experience such struggle, but they should! *Masters, be just and fair to your slaves. Remember that you also have a master in heaven.* It is not what I wanted to hear from Paul, but who am I to tell him what to write? He claims to have received direct revelation from Jesus in some way. Was it in some spiritual experience, or did Jesus actually meet with Paul in his resurrected body out in the desert? No one can say for sure, based on the lack of details given in the New Testament writings or anywhere else. It's hard for me to imagine that Jesus would have a discussion about slavery and not tell Paul to do all he could to oppose it. I base this on everything we know about Jesus, what he taught, how he lived, and the very high value he placed on all people equally. Jesus was always an advocate for the downtrodden, weak, struggling people who were so often taken advantage of and possessed so much less than so many others.

However, it seems some believers were also slave owners. Based on how Paul addresses them, he is appealing to their consciousness and awareness of the God they believed in. However, there was a very common slave culture in that day. It was accepted just as it had always been in the past – even in ancient Greece, where much of our Western world's modern thinking originated. All cultures are greedy and self-serving to some degree. We are blessed today to be free from much of this, but certainly not all of it. The fact that we see some degree of consciousness concerning “human rights” makes a huge

statement. In ancient times, such a concept would be laughed at, where *might makes right* ruled the day.

I think Paul was attempting to make this slavery situation the best it could be since he had no control over it. If a master was also a believer and believed he had a kind and loving *master* of his own in heaven, could he treat his slaves with the same kindness? This implied question by Paul is closely related to what he wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, in which he said, “Forgive others because God has forgiven you!” This should hit any thinking believer hard, especially those who own other human beings! Any time they get mad and want to retaliate against their slaves, they need to stop and think, “Wait a minute now, God's forgiven me of a lot. Can I turn around and not forgive others, especially those I have more control over than I should, giving me the tendency to abuse my power?” Any master who might be able to think this through to this degree would take pause and respond kindly rather than harshly.

20. Live Wisely (Colossians 4:2-25)

Be devoted to prayer (4:2)

Devote yourselves to prayer. Keep your mind alert and your heart thankful. That's an interesting combination. A mind that is alert and not dull in some way, and a thankful heart. The question is: what do you think being alert and thankful has to do with prayer? Being alert and thankful are not the first two things most people would expect to be at the top of the list, although thankful seems to fit well. Wouldn't zeal be at the top? How about humble or kneeling? Do we need to be alert so we can hear God? Many would say being in a state of meditation or even some kind of mystical trance is best. Maybe the alertness has to do with thinking about what you say in your prayers and not just rambling or citing some prescribed, prewritten prayers.

Another interesting thing about these two aspects of prayer is that one has to do with the mind, the other with the heart. When I mentioned this contrast to a friend, they reminded me that the head and heart are only about six inches apart. Perhaps this Paul is saying, "Get your mind and heart in sync. Too much of one or the other is not best." If prayer is all heart, we will feel deeply, but have we really thought through what we are praying about and using the brain God has given us? If prayer is all thinking and logic with no passion and mystery involved, can it ever be a sincere prayer from the heart? Perhaps it's like love and

relationships. Yes, we need to love someone with all our heart, engaging our emotions, but if it is just deeply felt with no aspect of thinking it through, it can end up disastrous. How many people fell in love with someone and gaged it completely on how they felt? Many lovers, after reality sets in, experience huge regrets. It's because they never thought it through. It is normal to get emotionally engaged with somebody and be thankful for them, but make sure your mind is engaged (alert), too. Sometimes, and always to some degree, when we fall in love, it is only infatuation. We may not even know the other person enough to truly love them! So, the mind and the heart work together quite well in relationships and prayer. After all, isn't prayer a relationship with God?

Pray for us, too, that God will provide many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. If you want to read about Paul's whole idea about God's *mysterious plan*, take a careful look at his letter to the Ephesians. That letter gives a lot of detail about what God's mysterious plan is all about. My commentary on this Ephesian letter of Paul's is titled, *The Mysterious Plan Revealed*. Check it out; You'll like it

The first time I encountered this idea of God having a mysterious plan, I did not understand it, so I mostly dismissed it. I think this is what most people do. In this Colossian letter, Paul identifies Christ as the focus of God's mysterious plan, and indeed he is. In the Ephesians letter, Paul reveals the plan itself, which was to bring Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) all into one group in Christ. This means all humanity where no one is left out or singled out. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul warned them that his ideas about God would appear foolish to those who do not know God and do not believe in him. There is a *spiritual understanding* that takes place when people believe. Everyone I know who trusts God and considers themselves to be in Christ all sense this *spiritual* understanding. My theory is that this is not

some impossible-to-understand realization that God infuses in people when they believe, but the opposite. Nothing is difficult or hard to understand about Jesus and the Good News message about him. We just need our minds and hearts cleared of all the clutter so we can see what is there. Paul called this the “simplicity of the Gospel.” He was not saying that the Gospel is *simplistic* or empty in some way. He means that it is not complicated in its basic presentation, and anyone is capable of understanding it. Jesus died on the cross to take away the sins of the world. All we can do is choose to believe it, say thanks, and enjoy a relationship with God who loves us. That’s it!

But to an unbeliever who has not received this simple message, it looks like nonsense to them. How could some human being, at any time in history, die on a cross and take away our sins? Good question, but it is asked because this message looks like foolishness to many people. God does not blame them, nor do I. The cross is how God chose to *demonstrate* his love for his world, and the only way we can find out it is true is by turning to God in belief and asking him to show us. Billions of people have done this, and they experience a relationship with their Creator that is better and more satisfying than anything else in life. As one friend told me, “We have to view it with the lens of love, and then it will all come into focus.” It isn’t something that can be figured out logically or intellectually. Instead, it takes our whole being: mind, heart, and soul. As Paul wrote earlier in this letter, “All the treasures of wisdom are hidden in Christ.” Our life is hidden with Christ in God. It's about Christ in us, the hope of glory!

Paul goes on. *That's why I am here in jail. Pray for me that I will proclaim this message as clearly as possible.* He wanted to share this Good News message about Jesus in such a way that others would understand it and have their lives forever changed. This was always Paul’s goal. So, what we say and how

we say it matters, too. We need to be as clear as we can, but sometimes that's hard to do.

Make the most out of life (4:5)

Looks like Paul leaves the hardest advice for last. *Live wisely among those who are non-believers.* Living wisely among people who do not share your beliefs is tricky. This is true for anyone of any faith. This is why we gather with like-minded people. Perhaps the only thing more difficult than living wisely with unbelievers is ... living wisely with fellow believers! Ha! On one level, this is funny because we have all experienced it. On another level, it is tragic. Why do you think there are so many denominations within Christianity? There are tens of thousands! One source claims there are over 45,000. Of course, this would include all the very small groups that have a separate identification, but the point is well made.

Paul is always an advocate for unity among believers; this is a major theme in his letters. In the latter part of his letter to the Romans, Paul encourages his readers, “Be at peace with all people.” The unknown author of the New Testament book of Hebrews wrote this, “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone.” Both of these passages include everyone as the target of unity, not just believers. In the middle of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said. “Strive to attain a unity of the faith,” based on who Jesus was. There are many more passages about unity in the New Testament.

I think Paul wanted to establish the need for unity before he continued on to say this: *And make the most out of every opportunity.* Without unity, the pursuit of opportunities in life will become a selfish pursuit. We need to be patient with others and love them as God does – to whatever degree that is possible.

Somebody was loving and patient with us at some point in our lives. Do you remember what a positive impact it made and how your life may even have changed as a result? Love, patience, and unity are powerful things when employed. More often than not, this is not easy. So, look at situations with people – especially with fellow believers – and use your alert mind and thankful heart in prayer, and ask yourself, “How can I make the most of this situation, not for myself but for the good of all and to the glory and honor of God?” Alone, we are not going to make much of anything. Instead, living wisely among all people (believers and unbelievers) will allow God to more successfully work through us to make his world a better place; this is what “making the most out of every opportunity” is all about. But never forget that even when we don’t, it doesn’t disadvantage God any. We just miss out on being part of what he is doing.

Okay. Now Paul is giving some details, some particulars. *Let your conversation be gracious and attractive to others so that you give the right response to everyone.* How easy is it to give the wrong response? It takes no effort at all. How many times have you said something, only wanting to take it back a moment later? There are many ways to describe this. One is, “Ready, shoot, aim!” Another is “putting your foot in your mouth” and “putting your mouth in gear before your brain.” Think before you speak! That’s good advice. James put it this way in his letter, “Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” Look at the order. Listen first, hold your tongue, and keep your anger in check. Do you realize how many problems in the world (big and small) would be avoided if these three simple things were observed? Try it in your own life. Memorize this verse and meditate on it. Make it something forefront in your mind. It will serve you well!

Notice, it's not so much the words you choose that matter. It's *how* you communicate (gracious and attractive) more than *what*

you communicate. In fact, sometimes, we're better off not using words at all. Someone once said, "Share the Good News with people, and even use words when you have to!" Using the best words in the world, having the best articulation and accurate details, and yet not being gracious is a pretty worthless endeavor. Pay attention to what people are saying and how they are saying it. We all give wrong responses to people, sometimes subconsciously. But when we observe ourselves and others carefully, it is eye-opening and instructive. We're just a *noisy gong* when we're not loving people genuinely – and they can usually sense this in us. That's what Paul called it (a noisy gong) in his famous chapter on love that he included in his first letter to the Corinthians. We're just making noise when we do not love others. But some people are very proud of their *noise* and how they can articulate all the Five Points of Calvinism, the Four Spiritual Laws, or maybe even the Nicene Creed! You can stack them all up, but if there's no love in it, people don't even hear what we are saying because it is just noise to them. Love cuts through like nothing else, even when the words are lacking. It has been claimed that over 90% of what we communicate to people is without words. 55% is via body language, and 38% is by the tone of our voice. Do a little pondering, and you'll find this to be true.

Occasionally, some people are more gracious with us than we are with them. This can be because it is instinctive to them, they have a kinder temperament, or because they have read Paul's definition of love, and they are doing it better than us. But it doesn't matter. All we can do is the best we can at this stage of our lives; that is all God wants. We can go ahead and speak our clumsy words with a genuine, gracious heart, and an attraction will be seen in us that's not who we are ... instead, it's Christ in us! Paul's ideal goal is the right response for everyone.

Faithful helpers (4:7)

Paul will now begin going through many personal things about people, even naming some of them. It's a nice touch because it reminds us that Christianity is about people. It's not just about doctrine, formality, institutional oversight, rituals, hierarchy of leaders, and creeds. It's a *people thing* because that's what it is for God. It's about people, their relationships with each other (as well as with God), and how they work with others in close proximity. This is always what counts. The rest is just necessary overhead ... well, some of it is anyway. Some of it just gets in the way of what is important. Watch out for this; it is very subtle!

Paul will now start closing his letter with important things that could easily be overlooked. *Tychicus will give you a full report about how I am getting along.* Sometimes, it is impossible to express in mere words all that is going on in someone's life. This is why we all need direct communication and not just texting, email, or *snail-mail* letters. So, Paul's not even going to attempt it here in his letter. Never forget that a personal visit, when appropriate, means so much more to people than anything else. It takes time and effort, which are limited commodities, unlike writing or sending money (not that there aren't times when this is best). *He's a beloved brother and a faithful helper who serves with me in the Lord's work.* This is a trusted guy that Paul believed could give an accurate account of what was going on in Paul's life. *I have sent him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are doing and to encourage you.* Wow! This was his sole mission, trusting him to give information, something that can have ill effects if not conveyed correctly. Have you ever had someone else speak for you or about you? Cringe! Sometimes we need to trust other

people with precious and sensitive information, knowing that God has the whole situation covered. We all need encouragement, and these folks needed encouragement from Paul. What better way than to send somebody who could tell them firsthand, passionately, accurately, with the best of body language, tone of voice, and mannerisms? None of this is possible in a mere letter.

I'm also sending on Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, one of your own people. Onesimus was a fellow that Paul rescued from a very dire situation. He was a runaway slave, and Paul wrote to the slave owner, Philemon, advocating for Onesimus. It is Paul's shortest letter, but it has a huge message about grace, redemption, and self-sacrifice. Check it out sometime! *He and Tychicus will tell you everything that's happening here.* So, these two fellows are Paul's messengers who can best express what's going on. This is a reminder to us that real people, in person, can communicate important things better than in writing. *Aristarchus, who is in prison with me, sends his greetings. Mark, Barnabas's cousin, also does. As I have instructed you before, make Mark welcome when he comes your way.* These are all good examples of how to treat people. *Jesus, the one we call Justus, also sends his greeting.* Jesus was a common name in that day, but Jesus of Nazareth gave this name new meaning. So, to distinguish this other *Jesus* person, they called him Justus. I remember a baseball player named Jesus Alou. Religious Catholics in South America still name their kids Jesus. There were two other Alou brothers who were good ball players: Filipe and Matty. These two were also given names from the New Testament (from Philip and Mathew, two disciples of Jesus).

These are the only Jewish believers among my co-workers. Remember, Paul was ministering to the Gentiles, to the non-Jews.

However, some were *Jewish* Christians who came out of Judaism and followed Jesus as the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Paul, at one point in his evangelistic career, decided to turn his attention exclusively to Gentiles throughout the civilized Western World. But he was content to allow these Jewish believers to continue many Old Testament practices as described in the Law of Moses. He drew the line whenever anyone made these practices mandatory for salvation since he knew it to be *by* God's grace *through* faith in Jesus. Paul's attitude was, "It's all about being one in Christ, but if you've got a Jewish heritage and you want to continue Jewish customs, that's fine. If you're a gentile, you've come to Christ, and don't know anything about the Jewish laws, you need not worry about them. They are not *required* by God for anyone."

He had at least these two Jewish believers on his team and said the following about them. *They're working here with me to expand the Kingdom of God. What a comfort they've been. Epaphras, a member of your fellowship and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends his greetings. He always prays earnestly for you, asking God to make you strong and perfect in Him. He is fully confident that you are following the whole will of God. Sometimes, we can read passages such as these and gain insights into how to pray for others. Epaphras was one who always prayed earnestly, asking God to make others strong and perfect in Christ. His prayer was based on the fact that he knew these folks in Colossae were following the whole will of God. I can assure you that he prays hard for you and also for the believers in Laodicea and Hierapolis. This guy was one who prayed for many different groups of people. Perhaps he discovered some value in prayer that most people miss!*

Pass it on (4:14)

Luke, the beloved doctor, sends his greeting, and so does Demas. This is the same Luke that wrote the Gospel ascribed to his name. He also wrote the Book of Acts, which chronicles the beginning of the church after Jesus rose from the dead, plus a *travel log* of Paul's journeys throughout the Mediterranean region. Both are New Testament books. *Please give my greetings to our brothers and sisters at Laodicea and to Nympha, along with the church that meets in her house.* Here's a lady who hosted a church in her house. Don't forget that the *church* is not a building or location. It's the people! Various church members go to a building each week to attend services. Then when the service is over, the "church" leaves the building! Never forget this.

After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter that I wrote to them. In other words, trade letters. These letters that Paul (and other Apostles) wrote were circulated around and copied. Many copies were probably made, but no copies have survived that existed when the original documents were written. The original letters, themselves, also did not survive. In fact, we have very few copies before 200 AD! There are about five known incomplete copies of the New Testament prior to that time. The oldest copy dates back to about 125 AD. It is one fragment from the Book of Revelation, but it is only the size of a credit card! It is very popular in Catholic and Evangelical circles to claim that the New Testament is "without error in the original documents," implying that what we have as copies may not be free from errors. But they are trying to convey that when the original authors wrote their documents, these were perfect in every way and that we can reasonably trust what we have today. However, this assumes that no significant changes were made

during the copying process over the years. So, inerrancy is a problematic claim because it is easy to find *some* changes that were made in the copies that were handed down to us throughout history. The biggest problem is that there is no way to know for sure what changes *may* have been made that we don't know about! The 150-year gap between the original documents and the time we began to have copies, in any significant numbers, is more than long enough for people to make changes if they wanted to. We know some did want to make changes (and made them) because we can compare copies and see that they differ in many places. However, many Christians believe that God oversaw the preservation of the New Testament writings and that what we have today is reasonably accurate. Either way, what exists today is all we have, and all we can do is study them and ask God to show us anything we should accept or reject.

I, personally, have found the New Testament to be reasonably reliable. I'm not sure *inerrant* is a very good way to characterize the New Testament since we do not have the original documents, and only these are considered to be without error. But I have also found the New Testament writings to be unlike anything else in history, and I have done a lot of reading over my lifetime. Paul's letters, for example, are so practical and helpful that it is hard for me to believe that God did not have some hand in creating and preserving them. This is not proof of reliability, but it is strong evidence. So, I tend to trust them and live my life by them, but I always go directly to God for any final conclusions. God has never let me down or misguided me in any way. However, there are many problems that exist in the New Testament writings, just as there are in any set of ancient writings, Therefore I always read them with some degree of caution, knowing that the ultimate truth cannot come from a book, only from the God who is now present, always has been, and never changes!

And say to Archippus, “Be sure to carry out the Ministry the Lord gave you.” It looks like Paul has special instructions for this fellow. We have no specific idea what needs to be carried out. But Paul is encouraging Archippus to be faithful to God in his work. This is an encouragement that we all can and should give to each other. In other words, pass it on!

Final greeting

Here is my greeting in my own handwriting – Paul. Apparently, Paul did not actually write this letter, assigning that task to another. He signed off in at least one other letter using this method of authentication. He may have had problems with his eyes, and probably had someone else do the writing. Maybe, Barnabas; it’s hard to say for sure. But to ensure everyone knew this letter was actually from himself and wasn't a fraud, Paul wrote a closing line including his name.

Remember my imprisonment. May God's grace be with you. End of the letter, and it's a good one! So many great themes were presented by Paul. Like most of his letters, the first half is more informational, and the latter is more practical. You may recall that Paul laid out in detail the majesty of who Jesus was, identifying him as one who pre-existed and was even the Creator of all that exists. This makes him God, or one very close to being God. One popular theory that developed fully in the Fourth Century is the Trinity. Here, the Father and Son (Jesus) are equal in every way; both are completely God, yet there is only one God. Of course, like any well-thought-out speculation or theory about God ... it *could* be true! However, the illogical nature of the Trinity and the fact that it was not developed in any detail until over 300 years after Jesus and his disciples walked the earth is a huge problem. Also, none of the commonly used terms like “God the

Son” and “God the Holy Spirit” are ever found in the New Testament. Only “God the Father” is found. However, the New Testament does use “Son of God” and “Spirit of God.” Why make up new terms that are not previously used just to support an alternate view of God? Additionally, the term “eternally begotten” is never used in the New Testament to describe Jesus as God’s son. In the NT he is only referred to as the “only begotten” son of God. There are many other such problems, but these are good examples. The obvious question is: why did they need to invent new terminology to support their idea of God being Triune? Why not just stick with the language of the New Testament and go no further? The answer seems quite simple. After Constantine made Christianity the official state religion, all the Christian leaders of that day began to fight each other over doctrine and, therefore, over the control of people. Interestingly, before that time, there was only an undefined idea about the relationship between the Father and the Son. The earlier Christians were contented to take at face value all the terminology in the New Testament that presented Jesus as the Son of God in a *subordinate* role. Many passages in the New Testament seem to favor this, like the one in the later part of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, “When everything is in submission to the Son (Jesus) then he himself will be subjected to the Father who subjects all things to himself.” This seems pretty clear, and this is supposed to happen long after Jesus was no longer on earth in the flesh. The timeframe is after Jesus has returned to the Father and is no longer in his limited human form.

However, most Christians today are comfortable assuming that those in the Fourth Century got it right. And, of course, that is a possibility – but not necessarily true. The doctrine of the Trinity was not officially declared until 381 AD at the Council of Constantinople. Then, in the subsequent years, the church proceeded to impose this doctrine on everyone, enlisting the help of the emperor. This was the beginning of *mixing church and state*,

and it resulted in the brutality of the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages.

But then Paul turned to a more practical presentation in the second half of this letter. You may recall how he started out Colossians Three with, “Since you have been raised to new life in Christ, set your focus on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the honorable place at God’s right hand. Think about the things above, not the things on earth, because you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.” This passage is the one from which the title of this commentary was taken: *Life Hidden with Christ in God*.

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