

# We were never intended to live the Christian life alone

Colossians 4:7-18

*Pastor Tim Melton*

For the last several months we have been studying the book of Colossians. Today is the last day. We have reached the final verses of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. Before we consider Paul's closing paragraphs, let's think back to what we have studied the last several months.

There was a small church made up of new believers in the city of Colossae, located in what is now modern-day Turkey. The church had been started by a man named Epaphras, who had likely been a convert and disciple of the Apostle Paul while he had been in Ephesus years before. Because of this, Paul was the spiritual grandfather of this young church.

At some point in the early life of this church, false teachings were brought in by Judaizers and Gnostics. While both still talked of Jesus, the Judaizers taught that to be a Christian one needed to become a Jew and follow all the strict Jewish rules, festivals and rituals.

The Gnostics taught of another kind of faith that demanded special wisdom that was available only to the select few. In their theology they had reduced Jesus down to one of the many mediators, alongside angels, through which a believer had to pass to reach God.

They taught that Jesus was not divine, was not the Creator, and was not Lord over all. Both theologies taught that faith in Jesus was not enough for salvation. You also had to live up to their requirements. The false teachings were taking root amongst the people, and the situation was dire.

Because of this, Epaphras had traveled over a thousand kilometers to Paul, who was being held in a Roman prison. If anyone could help, it would be Paul. Although he could not travel to Colossae, Paul could pray and write, so that is what he did.

The book of Colossians was a letter to the church in Colossae that would help them understand the person and work of Jesus Christ and fortify them against false teaching.

As one reads through Colossians, one is amazed by the Supremacy of Christ:

*<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He*

*is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.<sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,<sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

Paul writes of how this same Christ is now in them and how they are in Him. In Christ they are now saints, brothers, forgiven, reconciled, holy, blameless, stable, steadfast, knit together in love, rooted and built up in Him, buried and raised with Him, made alive together with Him, and hidden with Christ in God. They are no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Because of this, they were to be filled with the knowledge of His will. Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. Give thanks to the Father. Continue in the faith. Seek the things above. Put to death what is earthly. Put off the old self. Put on the new self. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. Whatever you do, work heartily unto the Lord. Continue steadfastly in prayer. Walk in wisdom towards outsiders. Let your speech always be gracious. Do everything in the name of Jesus.

With all of that in mind, Paul finally arrives at the end of his letter, the Final greeting.

He listed many different people. Each had their own faith story, and could surely testify to what God had done in their lives, but none of them had grown in their faith on their own. It was alongside others that their faith and calling was nurtured, refined and bore fruit. As we read of Paul's ministry throughout the book of Acts, we see he always seeks to live out his faith and minister alongside others. May we do the same, seeking God both individually and in community.

The list of names in Paul's final greeting is filled with different people who served different roles and who had different stories. It is much like us, but we must take note that whether we look to Jesus' way of life with His disciples or Paul's way of ministry with his co-laborers, the Christian life was never intended to be lived alone.

In this case, all in this list must be commended for their willingness and courage to be associated with Paul during his time in prison. At any time, they could have been turned upon and given much the same treatment as Paul, merely because of their association with him.

*<sup>7</sup> Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. <sup>8</sup> I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts,*

Tychicus is mentioned in two other places in scripture. He is found in Acts 20:4, where he accompanied Paul and others, from Asia to Jerusalem, to deliver the offerings of the churches of Asia to the needy Christians in Jerusalem. We also see his name in Ephesians 6:21-22, where Paul mentions Tychicus in almost the same way as he does here in Colossians. From these verses we gather that Tychicus was also the one who delivered the letter to the Ephesians that we now find in scripture.

The journey with money for the needy churches in Jerusalem and the letters to the churches were important, and at times could be dangerous, as was hinted to in Jesus' telling of the Good Samaritan story.

Tychicus was trusted, with a proven record. In scripture we see that he was beloved. He was a brother in Christ. He was faithful. A servant of the Lord, alongside Paul. He was sent with the authority and credibility of Paul to give a trustworthy report. He was also of such temperament and spiritual maturity to be able to encourage the church in the midst of their struggles.

***<sup>9</sup> and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.***

Paul used the same description of "faithful and beloved brother" as he did for Tychicus. The remarkable difference was that Tychicus was the one who had shown his faithfulness on multiple occasions, and Onesimus was an escaped slave who Paul was sending back to his master, Philemon, in the church in Colossae. We have the whole explanation in the book of Philemon.

Philemon was a slave master in the church of Colossae. Philemon hosted a church that met in his house. Onesimus had been his slave who had escaped and run away to Rome. There, Onesimus had encountered Paul, in prison, and had come to faith in Jesus. Onesimus' faith was now motivating him to return to Philemon, his master, who legally could have had him beaten or even killed. But Philemon was a follower of Christ. Because of that, Paul appealed to Philemon's faith, pleading with him to receive the "transformed" Onesimus back, not as a bondservant, but now as a brother.

The gospel had changed Onesimus' life dramatically and Paul fully acknowledged the new life that God had given Onesimus. Are we able to treat people based on their newness of life, or at times do we continue to treat people or even ourselves based on past mistakes?

***<sup>10</sup> Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you,***

Aristarchus was a Macedonian from Thessalonica. We see him first when he and Gaius are seized by a mob in Ephesus. Paul had preached to the crowds. The metal workers who made and sold statues of the local pagan gods got angry and formed a mob when they feared that their trade might be in jeopardy if the people believed Paul's teaching. When they could not find the Apostle Paul, they seized Paul's fellow travelers Aristarchus and Gaius (Acts 19:29). Eventually they were freed, but it was a frightful time.

In Acts 20:4, we see Aristarchus traveling with Paul and others to bring donated money from the churches in Asia to the needy believers in Jerusalem.

Aristarchus was later mentioned as traveling with Paul to Rome when he was being held by the Romans and being taken to Rome to present his case to Caesar.

Finally, here in Colossians 4:10, Aristarchus is described as Paul's fellow prisoner. Aristarchus had become a faithful friend to Paul, who stood with him through some of the most difficult times. Some scholars, such as William Ramsay, believe that Aristarchus might have even associated himself with Paul as Paul's slave, so that he could go with Paul on his journey to Rome and even stay with him to

attend to his needs in the prison. This might be how Aristarchus was referred to as Paul's fellow prisoner.

*and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him),*

It was extraordinary that Mark was now here with Paul. Here we see that Mark was Barnabas' cousin. The Colossian church was likely familiar with Barnabas, thus Paul is mentioning this connection as he introduced Mark.

On Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, Mark had gone with them, but part way through the trip he had left and returned home (Acts 13:13). When considering their second missionary journey, Barnabas proposed that they take Mark again, but Paul disagreed. The disagreement was so strong that Paul and Barnabas parted ways and never worked together again (Acts 15:36-40). Paul found others to go on his missionary journey, and Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. Now we see that Mark had been disciplined by Barnabas to the point that he was now welcomed by Paul as a co-laborer in Rome. In 1 Peter 5:13, Peter described Mark as a son to him, and Mark eventually even wrote one of the gospels that we have in scripture today. In 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul tells Timothy to bring Mark with him, *"Because Mark is very useful to me for ministry."* What a remarkable change and testimony to the transforming work of Jesus Christ is one's life.

*<sup>11</sup> and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.*

We know nothing more about Jesus who is called Justus, but we read here that these first names that were mentioned were all Jews who have become followers of Christ. They had been a great comfort to Paul.

*<sup>12</sup> Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. <sup>13</sup> For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.*

Epaphras was a Gentile believer who was from Colossae (Colossians 4:12). Epaphras was the one who shared the gospel with the Colossians and likely started the house churches in that area (Colossians 1:6-7). Epaphras traveled to Rome to visit Paul and to tell him about both the fruit of the church in Colossae and the false teaching that had plagued them. Paul spoke highly of Epaphras giving testimony to his struggling in prayer on their behalf and his hard work for the church in Colossae, as well in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. All three of these cities were located in the Lycus River Valley, near one another, in what is today modern Turkey. Although they met as separate house churches, they were linked to one another and were likely started about the same time.

We see Epaphras' name mentioned in both Colossians and the book of Philemon. He is described as Paul's "beloved fellow servant", "a faithful minister of Christ", one who "always struggles in prayer", "is fully assured in the will of God" and "works hard for the believers." In the book of Philemon Paul even describes him as his "fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (Philemon 1:23). While we are not sure if Epaphras was literally imprisoned or spiritually a prisoner in Christ, we do know that Epaphras was faithful in his service to both Paul and Christ.

***<sup>14</sup> Luke the beloved physician greets you,***

Luke was a doctor who had become a good friend of Paul's. He traveled with Paul in Asia Minor during Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:6–11). He also traveled with Paul during part of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:5). Luke had been part of Paul's voyage to Jerusalem and Rome and was the only one with Paul during his later time in prison, mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:11. This likely was because of Paul's periodic physical difficulties.

Luke was well-traveled and well-educated. He had a great command of Greek. He also was the only Gentile to write any part of the New Testament. Luke was the author of both the books of Luke and the book of Acts.

***as does Demas.***

In Philemon 1:24, Demas was listed among Paul's "fellow workers." Here in these verses Paul gives no description of him, only his name. Later, in 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul told how Demas had forsaken him and gone to Thessalonica because of his love for this present world. It is a reminder that all who claim Christ may not be with him, and some who appear to be in the faith will be exposed that they really were not.

***<sup>15</sup> Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. <sup>16</sup> And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.***

The churches of Paul's days did not yet have church buildings. They usually met in homes. Because of this, there could be various house churches in one city. They might know each other and gather together periodically, but they regularly met in homes.

We see that a church met in the house of Nympha, and we also know that a church met in the home of Philemon. At this point there were likely various house churches in both Colossae and Laodicea.

Because of their relation with one another, this letter from Paul to the Colossians was also to be read in the church of Laodicea. We then also see this interesting sentence, "***see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.***" This letter to Laodicea is not found in scripture. Why is that? Should we look for it? Are the scriptures incomplete without it?

The answer to those questions is found when we look back and see how the books of the Bible were gathered. The Old Testament was more easily gathered from writings of recognized prophets and spokesmen amongst the people of Israel. In the New Testament God used a different process.

The path first came from the holy writings that the church used regularly and believed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. Eventually, in the early centuries these groupings of books of the New Testament would be finalized in official church councils, which met to confirm what the early believers and churches had already gathered.

The early believers used guidelines like the following to help them discern which writings were from God:

- 1) Was the author an apostle or did he receive his writings from an apostle?

- 2) Is the book being accepted by the church in general?
- 3) Is the teaching in line with the teachings of Christ and the other scriptures that have already been recognized as holy scriptures?
- 4) Did the book align itself with the divine character of the Holy Spirit?

Remember that many of the eyewitnesses who had actually heard the teachings of Christ, in person, were still alive. This lent itself to verifying which writings were in line with the teachings of the gospel and which were not worthy to be included.

This is our confidence. There are other writings from this time in history, but if God did not lead the early church, who had known Christ and the apostles, to include them in the canon of scripture, then neither should we.

***<sup>17</sup> And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."***

This verse does not tell us much about Archippus or the ministry that he is to fulfill. In Philemon 1:1-2 we read Paul's greeting to Philemon, "Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier – and to the church that meets in your home." This seems to describe a household. It is possible that Archippus was the son of Philemon. Regardless, we see that Archippus had been called to a certain ministry by the Lord, and Paul was encouraging or maybe even exhorting him to fulfill what God had laid before him to accomplish.

***<sup>18</sup> I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.***

At times Paul used a secretary, a scribe or an amanuensis to actually write down the letters that he was writing. For example, in Romans 16:22, we read that Tertius was Paul's amanuensis who penned the book of Romans.

Here we do not know who the scribe was, but to prove to the Colossians that this was truly Paul speaking through the letter, Paul wrote the final greeting in his own hand, so that they could confirm that these words were really his.

Paul then asks that they remember his chains, and he leaves them with the all-sufficient grace of God.

From this final greeting we can learn some important lessons:

- **We need each other:**

The Colossians needed a teacher, an encourager and a protector. Paul needed a scribe, a doctor, a companion for difficult times, and a person who could deliver what he wrote. Mark needed a discipler and a second chance. Onesimus, the runaway slave, needed one who believed in him and would speak on his behalf. Archippus needed an encouraging word to finish the race. The Christian Life was never intended to be lived on our own.

- **We all serve God and each other in different ways:**

Tychicus was tough, reliable, trustworthy and able to encourage. Luke was a Gentile doctor. Mark and Luke were both writers. Epaphras was an evangelist and church planter. Aristarchus was one

you could count on in the most difficult of times. We don't know a lot about Jesus called Justus, but we know that Paul named Justus as one who had comforted him. Together we are the body of Christ. We were never intended to live the Christian life alone.

- **Serving Christ together is difficult, but worth it:**

We saw that Paul lacked confidence in Mark. That Onesimus had run away from Philemon. That Demas eventually forsook Paul and turned to the things of the world. Living in community is messy. It is risky. It is disappointing. It is frustrating. It is painful. But it is the way that God ordained the Christian life to be. Love is our goal and our reward. Those moments when we have passed through the difficulty and emerged more united, more known, more committed, more loved, are those moments that we were intended for.

When Christ is the holder of our hearts, we can risk sharing our lives with others. It refines us. It matures us. It reveals our hearts. It exposes our selfishness. It drives us to Him. It makes clear our desperate need for the grace of God. It calls for forgiveness, patience, generosity and service. But for those who persevere in community, and learn to love others as Christ has loved them, they will find the riches of the gospel and the joy that awaits them. Together is when we enjoy life to its fullest. But only through His grace will community be a blessing.

- **Christ is our hope for community and for life:**

Over and over again in this letter Paul exalted Jesus. Paul writes of how this same Christ is now in them and how they are in Him. In Christ they are now saints, brothers, forgiven, reconciled, holy, blameless, stable, steadfast, knit together in love, rooted and built up in Him, buried and raised with Him, made alive together with Him, and hidden with Christ in God. They are no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Because our needs are met in Him, we can now quit using people, and just love them as Christ has loved us. That is the beauty of the gospel. The vertical love relationship with our heavenly Father spreads throughout all of our horizontal relationships for His glory and our good.

Even though life is less risky when lived alone, it is also less rewarding and less enjoyable. As we grow in Christ, may the grace of God give us everything we need to love others as He has loved us and enjoy life in the way that He has intended.

Picture the scene. Paul is sitting in house arrest, chained to an Imperial guard, and around the room sit his friends. Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus and Mark. Jesus called Justus and Epaphras. Luke and Demas. They talk. They remember. They laugh. They learn. They risk. They pray. They revel in the sweetness of brotherhood that has been forged through trial and tribulation. And then Tychicus and Onesimus gather their things as they set out for the long journey to Colossae to deliver this letter.

May we, too, come to know the security of Christ in such a way that we are emboldened to live the Christian life with others as God intended.

### Discussion questions:

1. What did you find most interesting in this sermon?
2. Why do you think many people find it hard to experience truly deep and rewarding relationships with others?
3. What benefits were gained as Jesus and Paul ministered and lived life alongside others?
4. How does being mature in Christ prepare you for better relationships?
5. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon?
6. What do you need to do in response to it?
7. How can we help you with that?