

Walking

in Christ Jesus, the Lord

A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Word-Filled Women Bible Study
Second Presbyterian Church · Fall 2021



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Walking in Christ Jesus, the Lord

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Grace to You
Colossians 1:1–2

Paul writes to the local church at Colossae from prison, probably in Rome (Col 4:18). He writes to these specific believers, with a view toward also encouraging other local churches in the surrounding areas (Col 2:1; 4:16). The letter’s salutation names both Paul and Timothy as authors, but Paul’s repeated use of the first-person pronoun (“I”) shows that he is the main author.

Even though Paul likely has never met these Colossian brothers and sisters to whom he writes, he writes with deep pastoral warmth and affection (see, for example, Col 2:1–5). One of Paul’s ministry partners, Epaphras, first shared the gospel with these men and women at Colossae, which is Epaphras’s hometown (Col 1:7–8; 4:12; see Phlm 23). Tychicus and Onesimus carry Paul’s letter to the Colossian local church (Col 4:7–9), along with carrying Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and to Philemon (Eph 6:21–22; Phlm 1, 12, 23).

Why does Paul write to this congregation? Paul has heard a report, most likely from Epaphras (see Col 4:12), that some of these new believers are being led astray by false teachers. Some recent converts have begun walking in a gospel that is different from the gospel they received at their conversion.

False teachers have infiltrated their local church and are claiming that for a person to mature spiritually and morally, he or she must supplement the simple gospel. These false teachers argue that, for a believer’s “progressive sanctification,”¹ more is required than the gospel of Jesus Christ. They must add to the good news of Jesus. Specifically, in addition to the gospel, believers need to adopt a series of rigorous religious regimens and strive for super-spiritual insights. Theirs is a brand of “Jesus plus” religion.

Against these false teachers, Paul insists that a Christian grows by the same means he or she first received spiritual life, namely, by Christ Jesus the LORD. The very source of our spiritual new birth continues to generate our spiritual maturation. Paul most succinctly articulates his central idea at the letter’s fulcrum: “*Just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving*” (Col 2:6).

Many of us may be nodding our head in doctrinal agreement with Paul on this point. But it is one thing to assert Christ’s sufficiency for our whole salvation and quite another to embrace his sufficiency in our experience. The truth is that you and I often look everywhere other than Christ himself for our spiritual growth. We dilute the pure milk of Christ’s gospel (1 Peter 2:2) with supplements that become toxic once we add them.

So, as we study Colossians, we will ask God to search our hearts, expose our brand of “Jesus plus” religion, and lead us to embrace the Lord Jesus more gladly than ever before.

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 1:1–2 and respond to questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read the whole letter of Colossians; Questions 1, 3–4
- **Day 2:** Read Col 1:1–2; Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–31; 21:40–22:21; 26:1–29; Question 2
- **Day 3:** Read Col 1:1–2; Question 5, 9–10
- **Day 4:** Read Col 1:1–2; Questions 6–8
- **Day 5:** Read Col 1:1–2; Questions 11–13

¹Theologians distinguish between “progressive” and “positional” sanctification. *Positional sanctification* refers to God’s instantaneous act at a person’s conversion to set him or her apart as belonging to God’s holy people, which makes him or her a “saint.” *Progressive sanctification* refers to a believer’s maturation process by which he or she gradually becomes more like Jesus Christ.

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud).

1. **Describe** one of the most meaningful letters you have received personally. Who wrote the letter to you? What was the letter's occasion? What made the letter so meaningful to you?
2. In Col 1:1, Paul introduces himself and Timothy as the letter's co-authors. It soon becomes clear, however, that Paul is the main author (for example, see how he concludes the letter in Col 4:18). Paul introduces himself as "*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*" and Timothy as "*our brother*."

To get a clearer picture of Paul, especially his conversion story, read Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–31; 21:40–22:21; 26:1–29. (Paul is called "Saul" prior to his conversion to Christ.) To get a clearer picture of Timothy and his relationship with Paul, read Acts 16:1–5 and 2 Timothy 1:1–7.

In light of this background material, **what strikes you** about the way Paul introduces himself and Timothy in Col 1:1? *Make at least three observations.*

- a.
 - b.
 - c.
3. After introducing himself and Timothy, Paul identifies the letter's recipients in Col 1:2 as "*the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ at Colossae*." Both words for "saints" and "brothers" in Col 1:2 refer to men and women. In the letter's original language, the way to refer to men and women is by using the masculine plural form of the word.

What does Paul mean by calling this group of believers "*saints ... in Christ*" and "*faithful brothers and sisters in Christ*"? Put these expressions **in your own words**. (For further context, see Ephesians 2:17–19 and Romans 8:14–17.)

"saints in Christ":

"faithful brothers and sisters in Christ":

4. Believers in Christ around the world and across the ages belong together to “*the church of Jesus Christ*.” We all belong to one family in Christ together. That is why, for example, Paul can call believers at Colossae whom he has never even met “*brothers and sisters*.” At the same time, the “church universal” (as it is sometimes called) takes expression in particular assemblies in particular locations, the “local church.”

Paul is writing this letter to a specific group of believers in a specific place, “*at Colossae*.” He is writing to a local church. (See Col 4:15 for an example of another local church, meeting in Nympha’s home in a different city.) These believers would read Paul’s words aloud in one of their gatherings.

Here we catch a glimpse of a family, assembled together to receive verbally inspired instruction and encouragement from their heavenly Father, through his appointed messenger whom he has sent.

The first explicit message Paul communicates to this local congregation is “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father*.” **Put in your own words** what Paul means in this context by:

“*grace from God our Father*”:

“*peace from God our Father*”:

5. What does Col 1:1–2 **mainly** reveal (even implicitly) about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

TOOLBOX | Theme

Discerning a Passage’s Main Revelation about God

The Bible is a thoroughly God-centered book. It is theological literature. That is, Scripture mainly focuses on revealing who God is, how he acts (past, present, future), and how human beings can and must relate to him. **Preeminently, the Bible reveals God’s character and ways as displayed in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and in his Son’s gospel.**

Since every biblical author aims to reveal God’s person and work, believers who desire to *hear, do, and retell this Word* ought to focus our attention on what every passage of Scripture tells us about God. We aim to make progress in seeing Scripture’s God-centeredness so that our hearing, doing, and retelling of Scripture will likewise be God-centered.

Setting of Colossians



Paul's first and second missionary journeys



Paul's third missionary journey



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Colossians Overview Chart

Key Verses: Col. 2:6-7

| | | | |
|----------|---|----------------------------|--|
| 1:1-2 | Greeting: Grace to you and peace | The fruit of the gospel | “ As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.” |
| 1:3-14 | Paul reports his prayers of thanksgiving and petition | | |
| 1:15-23 | Christ Jesus the Lord’s preeminence and reconciling power | The heart of the gospel | |
| 1:24-29 | Paul rejoices in Word ministry’s suffering, for the church’s sake | The ministry of the gospel | |
| 2:1-5 | Paul struggles for full assurance among Colossians and Laodiceans | | |
| 2:6-23 | Walk in Christ Jesus the Lord, including by rejecting false teaching | The way of the gospel | |
| 3:1-17 | So seek what’s above, where Christ is, by putting to death what’s earthly and putting on the new self | | |
| 3:18-4:1 | Order your lives according to Christ’s Lordship | | |
| 4:2-6 | Seek the advance of the gospel among unbelievers, through prayer and your everyday lifestyle/speech | | |
| 4:7-18 | Relate to one another in the church according to the gospel Final Greeting: Grace be with you | | The partnership of the gospel |

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

6. If you are not a believer in Christ Jesus: What is at the **core of your identity**? That is, what mostly defines who you are and how you view yourself?

Have these things **always** defined you, or has your identity **changed** as you've grown older? Explain.

To what extent is your identity **secure and reliable**? How do you know?

7. If you are a believer in Christ Jesus: When we recall Paul's identity prior to the Lord Jesus's appearance to him on the road to Damascus, we readily affirm that *only* by the will of God has Paul been transformed into "*an apostle of Christ Jesus*." It is astounding that a former persecutor of the church would become Christ's messenger to the church. And yet we believers in Christ Jesus recognize that our being made a "saint" is just as astounding as Paul's being made "an apostle." Only *in Christ* could we ever actually be called "saints." And only *by the will of God* (not our merit) could we ever be united to Christ.

Reflect on a few particulars of your story. If you were to explain to someone that you have received your new identity of being "in Christ" *only by the will of God* (and not your own merit or will), what **details of your story** would you share to illustrate that truth?

What **other things compete** for your core identity? That is, what else do you allow to define you, other than your relationship with God in Christ?

What do you find particularly **challenging about embracing the new identity** God has granted you in Christ—rather than operating out of an identity that is not entirely shaped by God's love for you in Christ?

8. Paul’s salutation not only touches on matters relating to believers’ personal identity, but also our corporate identity. Paul shows in the letter’s salutation that the connections among Paul, Timothy, and the Colossian believers are *family* connections—the most basic social unit. They are a family of redeemed sinners whom God has made saints in Christ. Most profoundly, their family connections among one another exist because of their family connection with God himself. In Col 1:2, Paul refers to God as “*God our Father,*” who extends grace and peace to his children, and in 1:3 Paul refers to God as “*the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” So their Father is ... Jesus’s Father too!

Through the gospel, Jesus has made each of us who believe in him his family. Specifically, we are a family of redeemed saints *in him*. Believers in Jesus Christ have been adopted into the very family of the Triune God. We belong.

The primary relational context God has given us to grow in Christ is the relational context of family-in-Christ, especially our local-church family with whom we meet regularly to stir up one another to love and good works.

If you are a believer in Christ, to what extent does **your belonging to his church** shape the way you view yourself and the relationships you build?

What are some **challenges** you are currently facing with respect to loving and serving your fellow “sibling saints” in **your local church**?

9. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what’s **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*
10. Practically, how will you rely this week on the **resources God provides you** to trust this truth about him? *Consider how this passage indicates certain divine provision for believers’ ongoing and ever-deepening trust.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God’s Word by writing out a prayer to him.
Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart’s meditation.
Let the passage’s revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

11. In what ways have you seen your neighbors and people in your city **grappling with questions and issues relating to identity**? Give at least four specific, concrete examples.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

In one sentence each, apply a specific truth from Col 1:1–2 to each example you listed above.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

12. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

13. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 3
- Question 4
- Question 5
- *Optional: questions 6 and 7*
- Question 9
- Question 11
- Question 12

Expressive individualism is the notion that a person forms her own identity and must express that identity (or “true self”) in the manner she chooses in order to lead a happy and fulfilled life. The emphases fall on *expression* (and, conversely, repression/oppression), *the freedom of the individual* (as opposed to assimilation or submission to external/“objective” norms), and embracing one’s root *desires* and *inclinations* without judgment.

Some of the mantras and buzzwords of expressive individualism:

- “You do you.”
- “Be true to yourself.”
- “Your truth” vs. “my truth” vs. “their truth”
- “Authenticity”
- “Self-actualization” and “self-fulfillment”
- “Finding yourself” and “becoming your true self”

Thanks and Petitions for You

Colossians 1:3–14

After Paul’s salutation (Col 1:1–2), he begins describing his prayers concerning these Colossian believers (1:3–14). He describes his prayers of thanksgiving as well as his prayers of petition on the Colossians’ behalf. In so doing, Paul models several vital elements of faithful Word ministry.

Pray. More than we talk to people about God, we must talk to God about people. When we retell the gospel in our discipling or evangelistic relationships, our words ought to flow from the wellspring of our prayers for them. And our speaking the gospel’s truths to someone ought to lead us right back where we started: praying for them.

Share your prayers. When we pray regularly and fervently for people, it can be profoundly encouraging to them when we share our prayers with them—not only *that* we have prayed for them, but also *what* we have prayed for them.

Let the gospel shape your prayers. The gospel’s grip on us ought to extend to our prayer life. Paul allows the gospel so utterly to control his priorities that the gospel’s transformative power is even disclosed in the way he prays. How beautiful that Paul retells the gospel to the Colossians even as he describes how he prays for them!

As we study Col 1:3–14, may we learn even more how to pray, by sitting in the school of prayer under Paul’s tutelage.

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 1:3–14 and respond to questions 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 14, 18.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 1:3–14; Questions 1–4
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 1:3–14; Questions 5–10
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 1:3–14; Questions 11–13
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 1:3–14; Questions 14–16
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 1:3–14; Questions 17–19

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. Think of a **specific instance** in your life when someone whom you knew loved you told you that they had been praying for you. What was that experience like for you? Why?

What person in your life prays most regularly for you? How do you know?

2. What **might it have been like for the Colossians** to read for the first time (or hear read aloud) Paul's description of his prayers for them in Col 1:3–14?

Imagine you are a Colossian believer, who is smack-dab in the middle of a painful controversy in your local-church family about what is needed for spiritual development. What **portion of Paul's prayers** might have most encouraged or struck you, in that context? Why? *Note the specific phrase or verse.*

3. Paul often describes the essence of Christian character with "faith," "hope," and "love." For example, take a look at 1 Corinthians 13:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8. In one sentence each, define each of these virtues. *Make sure to pay attention to how Paul describes each in vv. 4–5.*

Faith:

Love:

Hope:

4. Paul reminds the Colossians that they have heard "the word of truth, the gospel" (1:5). In one sentence, **what is "the gospel"**?

What stands out to you in Col 1:3–8 about **the way** the gospel "bears fruit and grows"?

5. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

Pick one of those themes. How is this theme relevant to your current circumstances?

6. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

TOOLBOX | Structure

See the appendix on "Structure" for help in to approaching this question.

7. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*
8. What does this passage mainly reveal about the **Christian life**?

9. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

TOOLBOX | Author's Aim

To help clarify an author's peculiar purpose in one passage within its whole-book context, ask:

If this passage were to drop out of the book, what would be missing?

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*
12. If you are a believer in Christ, in what concrete ways are you **participating in the gospel's advance**—that is, the gospel's “bearing fruit and growing” throughout the world? *Note at least several ways, and be specific.*

What is one of the **greatest joys** you're currently experiencing in seeking to advance the gospel in this way? *Be specific.*

What is one of the **greatest challenges** you're currently experiencing in seeking to advance the gospel in this way? *Be specific.*

13. Consider the way in which Paul's description of his prayers of thanksgiving and petition in Col 1:3–14 serves implicitly as a model for how we ought to pray for our siblings in Christ, including those whom we have never even met. What is **one aspect of praying for specific believers** in which you want to make progress this week? *Be specific.*

How do you **plan** to make that progress? *Be specific.*

14. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

Our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Scripture. [We] speak only to the degree we are spoken to. . . . The wedding of the Bible and prayer anchors your life down in the real God.

Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*

15. What is **most difficult** for you about trusting this main truth about God?

16. What **specific resource(s) is God currently providing you** to trust this truth about him?
Be specific. Consider how this passage indicates certain divine provision for believers' ongoing and ever-deepening trust.

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.

Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.

Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

17. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

18. More than we talk to people about God, we must talk to God about people. When appropriate, it can be powerful to share with people not only *that* we have prayed for them, but *what* we have prayed for them. To what extent is your retelling of the gospel to others **flowing from your regular habits of praying** for them—either specifically by name if you know them, or else more generally if you do not?

What might it look like for you to make progress in this foundational aspect of Word ministry—that is, in praying for the gospel's advance, for others whom you are discipling or evangelizing, and for God to grant you opportunities to share the gospel with them?

Perhaps consider asking some wise believers in your life what sorts of practices and habits they have developed in this regard, and seek to emulate them.

19. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

No learning can make up for the failure to pray. No earnestness, no diligence, no study, no gifts will supply its lack.

E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 2
- Question 4
- Question 7
- Question 10
- Question 11
- Question 14
- Question 18

Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work.

Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

Your Reconciler: Jesus Christ, the Lord

Colossians 1:15–23

Imprisoned Paul receives word from his close associate, Epaphras, that some false teachers are leading astray the local church at Colossae. These false teachers are advocating a “Jesus plus” sort of religion. They are saying that for a Christian to become a mature disciple and secure God’s full approval, she—in addition to receiving Christ—must strive for some impressive super-spiritual knowledge and embrace a series of rigorous religious practices.

Many of these practices advocated by the false teachers are spiritual and religious practices that the Colossian believers had previously held before their conversion to Christ. And, tragically, these Colossian believers embraced this false teaching after their conversion. They are combining their new religious experience through believing the gospel with the old religious ideas and habits they had learned in their culture. It is a classic case of syncretism.

Here is the real crisis confronting this local church: in assimilating Jesus into their previous worldview, they are claiming that Jesus is not enough for a believer’s complete salvation. They have come to believe that a person cannot put her full confidence in Jesus’s redemptive achievements; believers need something else, something more than “just” Jesus.

How in the world can a group of believers who have experienced God’s true grace abandon it like that? How could that ever happen?

Well, how does it happen among us? How do you come to embrace the lie of “Jesus plus”?

Often, we begin losing our confidence in Christ in subtle ways at first. Rather than completely abandoning the notion of Christ all together, we start believing that we also need some other things to complete us and give us purpose: a happy marriage and family, a good therapist, a lively social life, a meaningful job, financial success, a good reputation in our profession, a successful ministry.

Oh, we verbally credit Jesus for those good things. But down deep inside, we sometimes imagine that Jesus needs a little help to satisfy us and make us whole. So we start putting some of our ultimate confidence in other things and other people—including in ourselves and in our own spiritual and moral and ministry performance.

Sometimes these other things begin to thrill us more than Christ. They seem fill us up and make us feel like they give our life meaning and significance. Or else, sometimes the lack of them leaves us feeling empty and insignificant.

Paul shows that there is only one explanation for our buying into the lie of “Jesus plus” religion: we have lost sight of who Jesus really is. Whenever we doubt Jesus’s sufficiency, it is a sure sign that we do not understand his supremacy.

That is why, rather than jumping into all the practical outworkings of the false teaching at Colossae, Paul sets his readers’/hearers’ gaze on Christ.

Paul knows that we must see Jesus’s supremacy to trust Jesus’s sufficiency.

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 1:15–23 and respond to questions 1, 2, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 1:15–23; Questions 1–5
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 1:15–23; Questions 6–9
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 1:15–23; Questions 10–11
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 1:15–23; Questions 12–14
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 1:15–23; Questions 15–17

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. List the repeated words, phrases, and concepts that you notice in Col 1:15–23.

2. In what ways are the specific truths about Jesus that Paul declares in Col 1:15–17 **controversial in our day? How so?** *Name at least three controversial truths and describe in what sense (and to whom) they are controversial in our culture.*

In Col 1:15, Paul describes Jesus's authority as *"the firstborn of all creation."* By applying the language of "firstborn" to Jesus, Paul is not suggesting that Jesus is a created being—that there was a point in time when Jesus did not exist. No! Jesus is God's Son, and lives in eternal union with God the Father and God the Spirit. The language of "firstborn" here pertains to Jesus's position as the rightful heir of his Father's kingdom, which is *"all creation."* The "firstborn" language is the language of kingship and illustrates Jesus's status; it is not about birth order, but order of importance. (Compare with Hebrews 1:1–4.)

3. Put into your own words what Paul means by writing that **in Christ "all things hold together"** (Col 1:17).

4. According to Paul in Col 1:20, what is **God's purposes in Christ?** By **what means** does God accomplish this purpose in Christ?

5. How do you make sense of the **“if” clause** in Col 1:23? What is Paul saying here?

6. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage’s shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

8. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

9. Based on the passage’s various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage’s main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author’s main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author’s aim in one sentence.*

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

12. What most often tempts you to lose your spiritual footing, so to speak, along the lines of what Paul is warning against in Col 1:23? In other words, **in what contexts are you most tempted to "shift from the hope of the gospel that you heard"**? *Be specific.*

What are the **main obstacles in your heart** that distort your clear sight of the Lord Jesus's supremacy over all things, including over you? What often keeps you from seeing him for who he is? *Be specific.*

13. What are the **main provisions of God's grace** in your life that help you see more clearly who Jesus really is and the fullness of what he has accomplished, is accomplishing, and promises to accomplish? *Be specific.*

14. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.
Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.
Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

15. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

16. Paul not only sets the Colossian believers' eyes on Christ, but he also applies truths about Jesus *directly* to them in Col 1:21–23.

Think of a time when someone who loves you **applied God's truth about Jesus *directly* to *you*** and your heart? What was that like for you? Describe the situation and its impact on you.

To what extent do you find it difficult in your discipling and evangelistic relationships to **apply God's truth about Jesus *directly*** to your hearers? Why?

17. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 2
- Question 8
- Question 10
- Question 11
- Question 14
- Question 16

Toil for You
Colossians 1:24–2:5

In light of the cosmic supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul counts it a privilege to suffer for Christ’s sake. Paul wants the Colossians to understand that all of Paul’s hardships—not least his current imprisonment—are unquestionably worth it to him. Why? Because of Christ, in all the riches of his fullness.

It is because of who Christ is that Paul rejoices in his suffering-on-behalf-of-the-church to proclaim Christ and encourage believers’ assurance in Christ. Paul’s suffering is no minor deal. The word “struggle” in Col 1:29 and 2:1 in the original language conveys the idea of contending in a fight, of combating. It is the same word from which we get the English word “agony.” Later, Paul says that Epaphras *struggles* on the Colossians’ behalf in his prayers for them (4:12).

At its heart, all our Word-ministry bears fruit on account of Jesus Christ’s uniquely redemptive struggle.

And yet as those who teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16), we too partake in this struggle in a variety of ways. Paul shares with the Colossians about the afflictions and struggles he endures for their sake.

One clear illustration of someone in my life who embodies this truth is a friend of mine who has two young children, both under the age of six.

These two little ones are wonderful as well as quite a handful. My friend has basically been exhausted for six years and nine months. She does not have much help from extended family or friends, and her husband often travels for work. She has an enormous load on her, day after day. Some of you are in this very season right now.

One of the things I really admire about this friend of mine is her commitment to train her children in the Scriptures, even amid her exhaustion and ... their frequent misbehavior! My friend does not have an elaborate, fancy scheme to do this. (I am not disparaging elaborate, fancy schemes; I am simply saying that she does not have one.) She tells me that often it is a real struggle to evangelize/disciple her kids. She reads them the Scriptures each day (even in small portions), sings songs with them about Jesus, and prays with them at various points throughout the day. When they ask her questions about God or life—which the precocious older one is starting to do quite a bit—she tries to convey what difference the gospel makes in her life. Her older one is asking her spiritual questions to which she does not know the answer, and so she is investing more time in reading the Scriptures and theological essays so that she can share the gospel faithfully with him. Despite her fatigue, she is making sacrifices each day in order to share God’s Word with her children.

She has admitted to me that sometimes when she hears others share about how they are discipling their children, she is tempted to feel inadequate, as if she is not doing enough. She tells me that she regularly needs to remind herself: (1) of God’s faithfulness to use weak, exhausted, inadequate vessels to communicate his truth; (2) of his pleasure in her that does not depend upon her performance as a mom; (3) of the privilege it is to minister Christ in her home.

Paul’s example and my friend’s example lead me to examine my own life and ask to what extent I am counting the cost for the sake of proclaiming Christ to people whom he loves and I love.

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 1:24–2:5 and respond to questions 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 12, 15, 17.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 1:24–2:5; Questions 1–4
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 1:24–2:5; Questions 5–10
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 1:24–2:5; Questions 11–13
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 1:24–2:5; Questions 14–15
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 1:24–2:5; Questions 16–18

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. Take a moment to reflect on what many in our culture consider to be the source(s) of wisdom and knowledge (i.e., the means of a person's becoming wise). What are some of these **sources for wisdom**, according to people in our generation? *Give at least four examples.*

2. What **causes** Paul to "rejoice" in this passage? *List the various reasons for rejoicing that Paul notes in Col 1:24–2:5.*

To what extent are Paul's reasons for rejoicing **counter-intuitive** to you and to your neighbors? *Explain your response.*

Paul explains his suffering for the sake of the church as his "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24). Is Paul suggesting that Christ's atoning sacrifice is somehow incomplete or deficient? By no means! Paul is not claiming that his ministry contributes to Christ's uniquely redemptive work. The Lord Jesus cried out from the cross, "It is finished!"

Jesus plainly told his disciples that they would endure severe persecution on account of their identification with him. Paul certainly identifies with the Lord Jesus—and he suffers for Christ's sake, as one whose life is hidden with Christ in God. But there is a time limit on the suffering that Christ followers must endure. There is coming a day when all the afflictions of Christ's body (i.e., the church, the saints) will be complete. Paul endures great affliction for the sake of Christ's church, to advance the gospel until that day when the Lord Jesus will return and thereby put an end to every affliction of those who are united to him by faith.

3. Using only the context of Col 1:24–2:5, **what does Paul mean by "mystery"**? That is, how does he seem to be using this language of "mystery"?

And what **is** the "mystery," in this passage?

4. In this passage, Paul describes his Word ministry in general and on behalf of the Colossians and Laodiceans in particular. What are the **main features of Paul's Word ministry**, according to this passage? *Name at least four characteristics of Paul's Word ministry, as he describes it in Col 1:24–2:5.*

Paul uses the same language to describe his Word ministry (Col 1:28) as he does to describe the whole congregation's Word ministry (Col 3:16). The word for "warning" in 1:28 is the same as "admonishing" in 3:16. There is, then, a clear parallel between Paul's Word ministry and every believer's Word ministry. Why does this **parallel matter**, in terms of our understanding what ought to characterize our discipleship and evangelism?

5. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

Pick one of those themes. How is this theme relevant to your current circumstances?

6. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

7. How does this passage **relate to the words surrounding it**: to those passages immediately preceding it and following it (immediate literary context), to the whole letter (whole-book literary context), and to the whole Bible (whole-Bible literary context)? And so what?

Immediate Literary Context

TOOLBOX | Context

A hallmark of expositional teaching is its aim to deal wisely with biblical texts in their context.

To determine what portion of text constitutes your passage’s “immediate literary context,” identify the immediately preceding and following **thought unit**.

Whole-Book Literary Context

TOOLBOX | Context

Key questions to ask to discern which other passages in the book you ought to highlight for “whole-book literary context” include: *Does the specific passage under analysis initiate, develop, or bring to a conclusion one of the book’s key themes? If so, how does the whole-book development of this theme affect your interpretation of this specific passage and what the author intends to accomplish in this passage?*

Look for words/phrases/images/ideas that recur throughout the book, which also directly or indirectly appear in your passage.

Whole-Bible Literary Context

What themes or terminology appear in this passage that also appear elsewhere in the Scriptures? How do these other occurrences of these themes and this terminology shed light on Paul’s meaning in this passage?

If the whole Bible is about God’s redeeming a people for himself through his Son, for his glory, then how does this passage in Colossians fit into the Bible’s redemptive storyline and ethic?

TOOLBOX | Context

Helpful tools for whole-Bible context include Study-Bible cross-references (often located in the central margin), online concordances (such as biblegateway.com, in which you can search a word or phrase in a particular English version), and commentaries.

For example:

Examine some select occurrences of “mystery” in the Pauline corpus: Romans 16:25; 1 Corinthians 15:51; Ephesians 1:9; 3:1–13; 5:32.

How does the way Paul uses “mystery” *elsewhere* help shed light on what he means by this language *here*, in Col 1:26, 27; 2:3?

8. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

9. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

12. Paul declares that in Christ “*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (Col 2:3). What are some **places or things other than Christ** in which you strive to find ultimate wisdom? *Give at least three examples.*

Why is it particularly tempting for you to seek wisdom in this place or thing? *Be specific.*

13. Paul desires that all those believers whom he has never met in person would “*reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of ... Christ*” (Col 2:2). What a beautiful desire! Paul wants believers to embrace the enormous privileges that are theirs in Christ, including assurance of salvation in Christ—salvation from a believer's conversion, through her progressive sanctification, all the way to her glorification in the new heavens and new earth.

To what extent do you find it difficult to experience “**full assurance**” in terms of your **knowledge of Christ**? *Explain.*

What strengthens the experience of assurance for a Christian? That is, how can you **make progress** in reaching all the riches of full assurance in knowing Christ?

14. What aspect of Paul's description of his Word ministry (in Col 1:24–2:5) **most challenges you**, in terms of your attitude/approach to your own Word ministry? **Why?** *Refer to the previous question regarding features of Paul's Word ministry.*
15. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.
Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.
Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God’s grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God’s Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

16. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

17. There is no doubt that the apostle Paul labors in Word ministry. He repeatedly refers to his “toil” and “struggle” in this passage. And yet, he openly acknowledges the source of his strength to work hard in Word ministry: “*For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me*” (Col 1:29).

Paul, then, illustrates a profound paradox: in our Word ministry, we believers must all at once toil/struggle *and* rest.

- a. What makes it **difficult for you to work hard** in Word ministry, as you retell the mystery of Christ in your discipling and evangelistic friendships?

- b. What makes it difficult for you to **rest in Lord Jesus Christ’s mighty power** in Word ministry, as you retell the mystery of Christ in your discipling and evangelistic friendships?

- c. In your Word ministry, when might it be **helpful to share** with those to whom you proclaim Christ about your struggle on their behalf (as does Paul), and when might it **not be helpful**? *Explain.*

18. The apostle Paul makes plain that his Word ministry is all about Jesus, the Word-made-flesh. *“Him we proclaim,”* Paul writes (Col 1:28). How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God’s Word by writing out a prayer for this person/ group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God’s Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 2
- Question 4
- Question 7
- Question 8
- Question 12
- Question 15
- Question 17

Walk in the One You Received, Not in Empty Religion

Colossians 2:6–23

Not too long ago, one of my good friends gave birth to her second child. He was a beautiful, healthy baby. But after a few weeks, my friend grew concerned because her infant's growth began to stagnate. He was not gaining weight. This situation obviously alarmed my friend and her doctor because gaining weight is a vital sign of health for a newborn. It is a key indication that an infant is receiving the necessary nutrients and developing properly.

What are the vital signs of spiritual life for a Christian? What are the key indications that a believer in Jesus Christ is receiving the necessary nutrients for proper spiritual development? And what primary processes ought Christians embrace in order to mature spiritually?

Were you to poll professing Christians in Memphis (or on social media) regarding these questions about spiritual life, you would get a broad spectrum of responses.

Just scan the book titles on a mainstream Christian publishing website that they have put under the topic of “spiritual growth” or “Christian living.” You will notice the wide array of opinions about the essential means of spiritual growth and marks of spiritual health.

Or explore a few websites of different local churches in your area to get a sense for their programming priorities. A local church's programming priorities reflect what they suppose makes for the spiritual health of their congregation.

Or ... evaluate your own life as objectively as possible, from the perspective of someone else who is observing you to get a sense for what *you* suppose makes for spiritual health. (Prepare to be convicted.) What do your habits and routines suggest about what *you* deem most important for your spiritual health?

The apostle Paul faces head on the issue of spiritual maturation (i.e., what makes for spiritual vitality and growth). He aims to persuade this local church to trust Jesus Christ's sufficiency for their full salvation, from new birth all the way to glory. To that end, Paul unmasks the emptiness of a “Jesus plus” approach to spiritual growth. He wants the Colossians (and all other readers) to take hold of Christ's full sufficiency and stake our life on it.

As we examine Col 2:6–23, we would be wise to ask God to search and know our hearts, that he might show us any ways in which we are dabbling in “Jesus plus” religion. And we would be wise to ask him to lead us in repentance, **so that we too would take hold of Christ's full sufficiency and stake our life on it.**

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 2:6–23 and respond to questions 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 17.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 2:6–23; Questions 1–4
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 2:6–23; Questions 5–9
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 2:6–23; Questions 10–15
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 2:6–23; Questions 16–17
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 2:6–23; Questions 18–19

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. For believers in Christ: in what season of your life did you grow in your faith most dramatically? Why?

For those who do not yet trust Christ for salvation: in what season of your life did you most desire to grow spiritually? Why?

2. In Col 2:6–7, Paul summarizes the message and logical sequence of the whole letter's argument. "*As you received Christ Jesus the Lord*" corresponds to Col 1:3–2:5, and "*so walk in him*" corresponds to Col 2:6–4:6. In this way, Col 2:6 seems to function as the letter's structural hinge.

In the argument's first part (Col 1:3–2:5), Paul calls the Colossian believers to remember Christ Jesus the Lord, his gospel, and the apostle's stewardship on their behalf. Paul then pivots to focus on applying the gospel to the way believers must respond to what God has done for them in Christ, in the argument's second part (Col 2:6–4:6).²

In Col 2:7, Paul clarifies his charge that believers "walk in [Christ Jesus the Lord]." **Put in your own words** what Paul means by the following expressions:

"rooted and built up in [Christ]"

"established in the faith, just as you were taught"

"abounding in thanksgiving"

3. How does Paul characterize the false teaching that is plaguing the Colossian congregation? *List the words and phrases he uses to describe this heresy, with the specific biblical reference for each item on your list.*

²Even the letter's grammar supports a basic two-part structure to the letter's main body. The original language includes no formal imperative verbs (i.e., commands) in Col 1:1–2:5, but, beginning in Col 2:6, there are twenty-nine formal imperative verbs; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 175–76.

TOOLBOX: Genre

Discerning a Letter's "Occasion" (see the Appendix)

Interpreting New Testament epistles involves discerning the letter's occasion, that is, the particular circumstances that lead the author(s) to write the letter. The trouble is that a letter represents only **"one side of the conversation."**

Reconstructing the particulars of the situation in Colossae, for example, is a bit like listening in on only one side of a two-way conversation. We only hear Paul's side; we do not have access to Epaphras's report, nor to the Colossians' response to Paul. So, we must speculate regarding the heresy's precise nature.

That means we can't ascertain *thorough* knowledge of the letter's occasion. We can't fill in all the gaps and see the full picture. Our conclusions on matters of background must remain somewhat tentative. But thorough knowledge of a letter's background is NOT essential to understanding its main message.

Remember that, though Paul has never met these believers face to face, he is well informed about the particular temptations and struggles they are experiencing. He has received a report, most likely from Epaphras, about false teachers within this local church and their particular heresy. As Paul addresses the Colossian congregation, he does not need to explain the details of this heresy; they know exactly to what he is referring!

The picture that we get from listening in on Paul's side of the conversation to the Colossians is that the false teachers are taking a little of this pagan spirituality and a little of that Jewish spirituality and mixing it all together to make one new "gospel." Notice that they have not denied Christ *any* room in their philosophy. Rather, they have relegated him to a corner. That is, they are presenting Christ as one among several vital elements of a believer's maturation and wisdom.

So, we aim to listen carefully to the letter's "one side of the conversation" to evaluate what the letter indicates about the specific circumstances that prompted the authors to write the letter. Such an evaluation helps bring into focus the authors' main aim/purpose in composing the letter.

4. As Paul aims to expose the emptiness of the false teaching threatening the Colossian church, what in particular does he **emphasize about Jesus Christ**? *Note the biblical reference for each observation you make.*

Why do you think Paul emphasizes these things about Jesus?

5. How does this passage **relate to the words surrounding it**: to those passages immediately preceding it and following it (immediate literary context), to the whole letter (whole-book literary context), and to the whole Bible (whole-Bible literary context)? And so what?

Immediate Literary Context

Whole-Book Literary Context

Whole-Bible Literary Context

What themes or terminology appear in this passage that also appear elsewhere in the Scriptures? How do these other occurrences of these themes and this terminology shed light on Paul's meaning in this passage?

If the whole Bible is about God's redeeming a people for himself through his Son, for his glory, then how does this passage in Colossians fit into the Bible's redemptive storyline and ethic?

Examples: the threat false teaching (or prophesy) poses to God's people

circumcision/uncircumcision [see Genesis 17:1-14]

religious practices: "food and drink," "festival," "new moon," "Sabbath"

6. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?

Note specific verses in your answer.

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?

To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

8. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

9. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

Consider how regularly Paul uses the language of “in Christ” and “in him” (in reference to Christ) throughout this letter. **Union with Christ** is one of the major themes in the entire Pauline corpus. Paul is aiming to convey the reality—the marvelous reality—of the relational connectedness, and the spiritual privileges therein, that God grants believers *in* Christ through union with Christ.

For example, by receiving Christ, believers are *incorporated* ... into Christ. They utterly belong to Christ and cannot be separated from him. Moreover, believers *participate* in Christ—they share in his sufferings, his death, his life, his resurrection. They are all at once living here on the earth and also seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. (!) Believers also *identify* with Christ, through faith. What profound privileges are ours in him!

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

12. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

13. The false teachers at Colossae are presenting Christ as one among several vital elements of a believer's maturation and wisdom. This sort of "Jesus plus" heresy is a persistent temptation for believers of every generation—including ours.

We too sometimes relegate Jesus to a corner in our hearts or in our churches by mixing the gospel of Jesus Christ we received at our conversion with whatever the dominant cultural philosophies surround us. Perhaps we supplement Jesus's gospel with:

- a touch of Oprah self-improvement philosophy;
- or a touch of health-and-wealth prosperity gospel;
- or a touch of therapeutic "it's mostly about me and the emotions of my heart" gospel—which contends that spiritual development mainly involves getting in touch with oneself and understanding oneself;
- or a touch of "what's really important is whether or not you embrace my particular view of social justice";
- or a touch of "God and country" nativist gospel in which appropriate patriotism is distorted into the sort of notion that God cares more about America than Somalia and that the U.S. has a unique place in God's heart.

With what are you most often tempted to supplement the gospel of Jesus Christ the Lord, in terms of your progressive sanctification? That is, what are you most often tempted to believe you *must have* for your spiritual development besides Christ and the things of Christ? **Why?** *Be specific and honest.*

14. What do you imagine a **godly response to Paul’s letter** would have looked like for the Colossian believers—personally and corporately? *Be very specific. Think in terms of the original audience.*

Personally:

Corporately:

What will it look like **for you to repent** of your particular “Jesus plus” proclivities?
Be specific.

15. Practically, how will you rely this week on the **resources God provides you** to trust the main truth about him that this passage reveals? *Consider how this passage indicates certain divine provision for believers’ ongoing and ever-deepening trust.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God’s Word by writing out a prayer to him.

Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart’s meditation.

Let the passage’s revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

16. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

17. One of the tell-tale signs that Paul truly loves this congregation is that he tells them the truth, even when it might put the relationship at risk. He cares more about the Colossians themselves than he does his relationship with them. Yes, the truths he shares may not be popular; they might even cost him some of his friendships. But Paul counts the cost because he loves these people and is willing even to lose their friendships in order that God might save their soul.

- a. In what situations and/or specific relationships do you find it most difficult to **risk a relationship** to share the truth? **Why?** *Be specific, and reflect honestly about what situations of this nature you find most awkward or painful or discouraging.*
- b. We can tell when a person shares truth with us wisely, graciously, in love. What is the difference between **wisely sharing** hard truths and **unwisely sharing** hard truths? *Be specific, perhaps by providing an example of the same truth being shared unwisely and then wisely.*
- c. **What does God provide believers** in Christ for such challenging situations of needing to risk a relationship with someone for the sake of sharing the truth in love with that person? *Be specific.*

Our neighbors today probably are not tempted by Greek mysticism or Jewish legalism, as the Colossians were. So, what *are* our listeners tempted by in this regard? To what specific false belief or practice that *they* encounter about spiritual growth could we apply these warnings?

Among my hearers, is there a similarly threatening false teaching that puts demands on Christians beyond what Scripture commands, claiming these religious practices are necessary to achieve Christian maturity?

Relatedly, is there any way my hearers are tempted to engage in spiritual elitism—passing judgment on one another about their spiritual and moral performance?

Are there any so-called “Christian” mindsets or practices that may be popular among them that actually lead to a loss of focus on the person and work of Christ—and, instead, an emphasis upon these peculiar beliefs and experiences?

18. What are **some examples of “Jesus plus” religion** that you discern in some of your family and friends, with whom God might lead you to share the truth wisely, in love?

19. What aspects of the gospel and of Jesus might you emphasize as you tell the truth about the emptiness of “Jesus plus” religion? That is, how will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God’s Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God’s Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 2
- Question 3
- Question 4
- Question 8
- Question 10
- Question 11
- Question 12
- Question 17

Warnings for You: On Being Taken Captive, Judged, and Disqualified
Colossians 2:8–23

It is a chronic temptation of the church in every generation to distort the gospel by espousing some iteration of “Jesus plus” religion. A simple perusal of hot-topic debates on social media among professing Christians illustrates these tendencies. We emphasize a choice issue in a manner that sets it up as a litmus test for “authentic” or “mature” Christianity, and then we cancel anyone who fails our test.

Even if we articulate orthodox doctrine, we sometimes imply in word and/or deed that Christianity is *really* about following a set of moral rules, belonging to a particular ecclesial tribe, advocating for the right social cause or else avoiding any apparent advocacy of social causes (the “just preach the gospel” clique), endorsing a certain emotional-psychological framework, or achieving certain life goals. With this sort of attitude, we inevitably create a “caste” system whereby we pass judgment on other believers who do not adhere to our chosen priorities in the precise way we prefer.

The Bible warns us about the dangers of counterfeit spiritual maturity and its deleterious effects in a local-church fellowship. It is quite possible for a person to undergo extensive training in evangelism, steward her wealth for the good of the poor, curate an impressive theological library, teach gripping Bible studies, and even meaningfully contribute to others’ spiritual development—but all the while languish in her soul (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 13:1–3). How so? Because we can perform any of these religious activities in a spirit that marginalizes Jesus Christ in our heart.

When we as believers prioritize something *else* for our sanctification—whether explicitly or implicitly, publicly or privately—we distort the gospel and thereby stagnate our maturation. **The danger of being deceived about the source and evidence of genuine Christian maturity is one with which we each must reckon.** None of us is immune.

Paul writes a letter to the local church at Colossae to declare again the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ the Lord, so that they will walk in Christ and not in any empty philosophy. Colossians 2:8–23 is the letter’s most explicit passage regarding the particulars of the false teaching at Colossae.

Paul uses strong language to describe this heresy’s destructive nature. It is enslaving, empty (i.e., it may look attractive on the outside, but it lacks true substance), deceptive, and compelling. Paul exposes a stark contrast between the effects of the true gospel and the effects of the false teacher’s “gospel.” The true gospel of Jesus Christ the Lord leads to life. The heresy of “Jesus plus” leads to death. There is no middle ground.

But Paul does not merely warn believers of heresy. He takes another opportunity to declare truths about Jesus. That is, he exposes the false teaching’s emptiness *in light of Christ’s fullness*. He thereby demonstrates for his readers/hearers how **the core truths about Jesus’s supremacy and sufficiency determine the value of any doctrinal or ethical teaching.**

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 2:8–23 and respond to questions 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 2:8–23; Questions 1–4
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 2:8–23; Questions 5–8
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 2:8–23; Questions 9–10
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 2:8–23; Questions 11–12
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 2:8–23; Questions 13–14

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. What **most stood out to you** from our previous study of Col 2:6–23? **Why?**
2. Colossians 2:6–23 calls Christians to walk in Christ and embrace his complete sufficiency for salvation, from new birth to glory. The obvious corollary is that we must reject all empty religious beliefs and practices that somehow minimize Christ's sufficiency for our spiritual growth.

What are some specific ways that you have seen certain religious beliefs and practices **minimize Christ's sufficiency** for believers' spiritual development? *Be specific; feel free to draw on the previous lesson's discussion.*

3. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer. Naturally, your response here will resemble your response in the previous lesson regarding Col 2:6–23.
4. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer. The structure of Col 2:8–23 is not simply a repeat of Col 2:6–23; the first two verses of the latter (i.e., Col 2:6–7) strongly affect how one would articulate the structure of that whole textual unit.

5. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

6. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

7. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

8. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

9. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

10. Read the “Extended Example” on the next page. Observe the general method of:
(1) selecting a particular audience (in this case, millennials) to whom you will apply the unifying theme of the passage; (2) after identifying a specific audience *and* a specific area of life to apply the passage for that audience, answering the main questions listed regarding that audience, in light of the passage.

Now **choose a different example of your own**—with a specific audience and a specific false teaching about spiritual growth/health to which this audience might be prone. Follow the method used in the example of millennial moralism.

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.

Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.

Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

Extended Example: “Millennial Moralism”

**See Appendix under “Application” for the key questions used below.*

1

What does God require from millennials in response to the truths revealed in Col 2:8–23? And in what specific area of my life does he require this of me? We millennials must reject all forms of moralism and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Moralism” is the idea that to be a Christian is to be a good, moral person. Some of us millennials so emphasize certain ethical practices and social activism that we end up defining Christianity according to what *we do* rather than what *God has done* for us. Our ethical practices are vastly important, of course, including our action on behalf of our most vulnerable neighbors. But God’s performance in Christ is the sole grounds of our acceptance before him.

When we embrace “millennial moralism,” we begin to imagine that our performance is more important than God’s. In fact, sometimes we ruthlessly pass judgment on one another in this regard—buying into the lie that those of us who promote certain social causes are spiritually superior to those who do not. So, we feel like an elite class of Christians, and it damages our fellowship with other believers and our witness to the world.

2

Why must millennial moralists do what God requires of us in this passage? We millennials must refuse to believe that our ethical performance and social activism on social media is what matters most because, at its heart, Christianity is not about what we do for God, but about what God has done for us. If, out of insecurity, I am striving to earn God’s love through my religious performance or my acts of social justice—or if, out of self-righteousness, I am judging other people as less or more worthy of God’s love on account of their religious performance or acts of social justice—then I am claiming that Christ and his achievements are somehow insufficient apart from what we add to them.

But Jesus Christ the Lord, in whom the fullness of God dwells, has fulfilled the righteous requirements of God’s law in our place, has decisively defeated our enemies, and grants full life on the basis of his achievements. Those who have received Christ Jesus the Lord lack for nothing! Christ’s fullness and his complete redemption are the reasons why I must walk in Christ and not in empty teaching.

3

Why is it difficult for millennial moralists to do what God requires in this passage? Practices that promote millennial moralism may have the appearance of wisdom—that is, they can look really righteous on the outside, and sometimes Christians even use the Bible to support a moralistic mindset. We are easily deceived. Also, we are tempted to feel ashamed when we compare ourselves to others, perhaps especially to those who pass judgment on us if we do not adopt their viewpoints. Like all sinful, broken human beings, we millennials want to boast in our own strength and our own performance. Our impulse to achieve, perform, and earn is deep-seated. In our flesh, we want to be congratulated as a self-sufficient, morally superior activist, rather than known as a sinner redeemed by grace, whose godly activism results from God’s sheer mercy.

4

How (i.e., by what means and strategies) can I do what God requires of me? We will grow and mature in our faith as we hold fast to the Head, and he will equip us to walk in him. As our roots go deep into Christ, we will be nourished and knit together as a church. That is, reminding ourselves of the sufficiency of Christ as seen in his life, death, and exaltation exposes the emptiness of millennial moralism.

There are a few practical steps we millennials could take to trust Christ’s sufficiency. (1) We could post Scripture verses somewhere we look regularly that address our specific moralistic temptations and call us to remember Christ’s decisive accomplishments. (2) We could discipline our social media intake/outtake, if that particular space is feeding these lies. (3) We could recruit someone to pray regularly with us, encourage us, and hold us accountable—ideally an older sister in Christ who may not be tempted in precisely the same ways. She could encourage us to engage passionately in issues of social justice from the position of already being fully accepted in Christ Jesus the Lord, and not to indulge in spiritual pride.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

11. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

12. Prior to dealing in depth with the heresy infiltrating the Colossian church, Paul reminds these new converts of the gospel's truths and of his deep, abiding pastoral love for them. Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 6:11, Paul shares with the Corinthians that he not only has opened his mouth to them (i.e., to proclaim the gospel), but he also has opened his heart to them.

Paul's love for the people inspires him to *teach* them—even *warn* them. Conversely, Paul's teaching came from a deep-seated *love for people*. People are the goal of his teaching. And people must be the goal of all our teaching and truth-telling. (As opposed to, for example, our goal merely being "to speak the truth" or "not to hold back.")

As you prepare to share God's Word with someone, what is **something practical** that helps you keep in mind that **people are the goal** of your teaching? What helps you be sure that as you are opening your mouth to share God's Word, you are also opening your heart to those with whom you're sharing God's Word? *Be specific about what you have found helpful in this regard.*

13. What **sort of analysis and reflection** helps us apply the gospel to specific false teachings infiltrating our generation? *Give specific examples of the sorts of practices and tools that help equip us for engaging others in discussions about the true gospel, amid the many distortions plaguing local churches today.*

14. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 2
- Question 4
- Question 5
- Question 7
- Question 8
- Question 9
- Question 12
- Question 13

Just as there were false teachers among the church at Colossae, so there are false teachers in our generation. They will try to convince you to combine your confidence in Christ with other sources of confidence.

They will advocate self-made solutions for spiritual growth, solutions that appear wise but are devoid of real spiritual power.

They will try to persuade you to supplement a “Christ alone” spiritual foundation with your own moral performance, religious regimens, super-spiritual systems, adoption of the self-help dogma du jour, civic activism, or ministry effectiveness.

Have nothing to do with them. Yours is a mighty Christ. He is seated at the Father’s right hand. What must you add to *him*?

First Principle of Your Sanctification: Heavenly Mindedness

Colossians 3:1–4

It seems odd to suggest that in order for a person to live a meaningful life on earth that she must be focused on other-worldly things. But that is precisely what the Bible teaches. There are many places where Scripture stresses the necessity of heavenly mindedness, but one of the more famous and explicit passages is found in Col 3:1–4. There is no spiritual growth without heavenly mindedness, Paul argues.

As a reminder, in Col 2:6 Paul pivots to a new stage in his letter. He directly exhorts this local church to grow up in Christ, by Christ. Paul then immediately takes up the problem of the Colossians' crumbling ethical foundation (Col 2:8–23). He issues a series of negative commands: “*see to it that no one takes you captive*”; “*let no one judge you*”; “*let no one disqualify you.*”

These young believers are being tempted to shift from the gospel's hope by basing their Christian ethic partly on mysticism and ritual legalism. Paul exposes the enslaving emptiness of their “Jesus plus” religion by describing the fullness that believers receive in Christ, with whom they are united by faith. Believers must not submit to religious regulations and spiritual systems that minimize the all-embracing implications of their union with Christ. Such religious syncretism undermines the gospel.

In all this, Paul presupposes that believers must *choose* what to seek and what to contemplate. The situation at Colossae illustrates that a worldly mindset can get a foothold in an entire congregation. Charles Spurgeon's assessment of the church in his day remains apropos: “One reason why the church of God at this present moment has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church.”³

Paul shifts in Col 3:1–4 from a more negative focus (i.e., what to avoid) to a more positive focus (i.e., what to embrace). Colossian 3:1–4 comprises the simple core of Paul's exhortation to Christ-centered living. In these four verses, he conveys the first principle of Christian sanctification: heavenly mindedness.

Paul urges the Colossians to pursue spiritual growth entirely grounded in the person and work of Christ. He calls believers beyond mere Christ-centered verbal affirmation all the way to thoroughgoing Christ-centered living.

That is because Paul is convinced that **Christ is the sum of the Christian life.** Christ is the starting point, the ending point, and every point in between. It is all about Jesus. Growing as a Christian means becoming more like Jesus Christ, from one degree of glory to another.

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 3:1–4 and respond to questions 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 12, 13, 16, 18.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 3:1–4; Questions 1–4
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 3:1–4; Questions 5–10
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 3:1–4; Questions 11–14
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 3:1–4; Questions 15–16
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 3:1–4; Questions 17–19

³Charles Spurgeon, “The Soul Winner,” (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1989), 278.

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. Paul mentions “heaven” five times in Colossians. “Heaven” is the secure place where believers’ hope lies (1:5), the realm over which Christ exercises dominion through creation and redemption (1:16, 20), the realm under which the gospel has been proclaimed (1:23), and the place where Christ is, the ultimate “Master” (4:1). Although Paul does not use the word “heaven” in Col 3:1–4, he clearly signifies the heavenly realm in his repeated reference to “*things that are above*” (3:1, 2), which he contrasts with “*things that are on earth*” (3:2).

Bearing in mind the way Paul refers to “heaven” throughout Colossians, **what does Paul mean** by calling believers to “seek the things that are above” and “set your minds on things that are above”? *Put these commands into your own words.*

“seek the things that are above”

“set your minds on things that are above”

2. There is an old saying that “so-and-so is so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good.” The fact of the matter is that you will never meet a person like that. Actually, the opposite is the case. The Lord Jesus Christ is the person who most demonstrably confirms the value of heavenly mindedness.

In what ways do you see the virtues of heavenly mindedness **modeled in Jesus’s life and ministry**, as recorded in the Gospels? *Be specific by giving several examples.*

3. Notice in Col 3:1–2 that heavenly mindedness has both a positive and negative dimension. It involves embracing something and rejecting something. Paul says, positively, “*Seek the things that are above*” and “*Set your minds on things that are above.*” Then, negatively, he clarifies, “*not on things that are on earth.*”

What would it look like for someone to **seek** what is on earth **and set their mind on what is on earth**?

To what extent is this a **problem** for believers in our generation? For you? How so?

4. Paul not only instructs believers *what* to do (i.e., cultivate heavenly mindedness), but also *why* they should do it. In Col 3:1–4, Paul gives a series of incentives for cultivating heavenly mindedness. What are these **incentives** that Paul gives?

Paul's language for "hidden" in Col 3:3 is the same word from which we get "cryptic." Paul is saying that believers are now cryptically in Christ. To the world, we are incognito; our true identity is concealed from them. The world thinks we are just ordinary human beings. They have no idea that we believers are actually sons and daughters of the Most High God. But, one day, are they going to find out! When Christ returns, not only will *his* identity be made fully known, so will *ours* (Col 3:4). On that great day, all flesh will see that Jesus is Messiah and we are his siblings. What a day that will be!

5. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?

Note specific verses in your answer.

6. How does this passage **relate to the words surrounding it**: to those passages immediately preceding it and following it (immediate literary context), to the whole Gospel (whole-book literary context), and to the whole Bible (whole-Bible literary context)? And so what?

Immediate Literary Context

Whole-Book Literary Context

Whole-Bible Literary Context

What themes or terminology appear in this passage that also appear elsewhere in the Scriptures? How do these other occurrences of these themes and this terminology shed light on Paul's meaning in this passage?

If the whole Bible is about God's redeeming a people for himself through his Son, for his glory, then how does this passage in Colossians fit into the Bible's redemptive storyline and ethic?

Example: Revelation 21–22 | What strikes you as different about what Rev 21–22 emphasizes about heaven and what the world often emphasizes about "the afterlife"? How does this biblical vision of the new heaven and new earth shed light on Paul's instruction here in Col 3:1–4?

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

8. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

9. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have on his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

New Identity in Christ: Foundational for Progressive Sanctification

We live in a world that obsesses over all things identity but can offer no real solutions. But it is folly to look anywhere else besides Christ to discover our fundamental identity. Contrary to the world's clamoring voices, human beings do not have to "find themselves" or manufacture their own significance. We are not the sum total of our self-expression or of our experiences, be they positive or negative. We find our life's purpose and highest privilege in knowing and treasuring the eternal Christ. Each human being is the personal handiwork of the Lord Jesus Christ, created for him, for his glory (Col 1:15–17). Our ordinary lives are infused with extraordinary significance. The one who made us is the only one who can make us whole. He alone possesses the authority to define us and the power to unite us, in him.

A common reason we Christians do not mature in our spiritual lives is that we do not embrace our new identity, personally or corporately. We may affirm with our lips that we have been made co-heirs with Christ to a colossal inheritance, but we choose to live in the streets as if we had no home. We revert to our old, pre-Christ identity and do not take advantage of the privileges he has afforded us. Whether out of fear, shame, or anger, we fail to believe the truth about who God has made us in Christ.

Paul's opening "if" (3:1) draws on what he has already established regarding believers' new identity. Who are we? Believers in Jesus Christ are "saints" (holy ones) who have been incorporated "in Christ" into the family of the Triune God, as the Father's adopted children (Col 1:2–3). When we first believed the gospel, God the Father "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13–14). God has transformed our very nature as "saints," "siblings" in Christ, and citizens of his kingdom—*on what basis?*—through the Lord Jesus's blood he shed on Calvary's cross (Col 1:20, 21). The reigning Lord's reconciling work on our behalf enables believers to experience intimate, direct fellowship with him: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27).

These interrelated aspects of Christian salvation coalesce in the concept of *union with Christ*. Believers have been filled in Christ, in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col 2:9–10; see 1:19–20). Through faith, we participate together in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Col 2:12, 20; 3:1, 3, 4; see Rom 6:2–11). Well then, Paul argues, if we truly are united to Christ, we ought to live like it. It is only natural that believers should set our minds on things above, because we have been fit for there. It is who we truly are, as a body of believers.

To grow up in Christ, we must embrace our new identity. Everything else in this passage and in the Christian life logically flows from Paul's starting point in Col 3:1a about our new identity in Christ. The character of our Christian life, including our heavenly mindedness, derives its fundamental rationale from our being united with Christ, personally and corporately. That means that the wellspring of sanctification is a growing, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. Everything in our life must flow from the fountain of Christ and our incorporation in him. Because we wholly belong to him as our Creator and Redeemer, he alone can satisfy our deepest desires for security and significance.

Due to our age's penchant for identity politics, we twenty-first-century believers have a peculiar opportunity to demonstrate the gospel's transformative power in this very area of identity.

Believer, how will you display Christ's sufficiency through your enjoyment of the new identity he has given you? Moreover, who in your life is particularly experiencing pain and confusion regarding their identity, and what deliberate efforts might you take to comfort and encourage them in this area, pointing them to their Maker, the Lord Jesus Christ? Part of walking in wisdom among non-Christians (see Col 4:5) is transparently heeding God's Word about who he has made us in Christ, rather than letting our self-understanding be dictated by other voices, including the voice of our own inner critic.

Few things in life are more practical than setting our mind on heaven, in confidence that God has fit us for there.

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

12. How confident are you that you have been "raised with Christ" (Col 3:1)? *Explain.*

13. Paul urges the Colossians to cultivate heavenly mindedness because of their new identity in Christ: they are now fit for heaven. When is it most difficult for you to **operate out of your new identity in Christ**, rather than out of your old identity before trusting in Christ?

Practically speaking, what have you found **helpful to resist the temptation** to operate out of your old identity?

14. Paul also urges the Colossians to cultivate heavenly mindedness because their Savior is there. Paul is calling us to orient our passions, our will, our aspirations, our dreams according to the priorities of heaven where our ascended Savior, with whom we are united, reigns in exalted glory.

Paul is getting at something more fundamental than our behavior. He is after our heart. He is talking about our deepest motivations and loyalties. He is saying that every person who is raised with Christ must focus the desires of her heart on heavenly realities. As John Wesley wrote, "Whosoever will reign with Christ in heaven, must have Christ reigning in him on earth."

- a. How does a person know **what she is truly seeking**, not simply what she *says* she is truly seeking? That is, what are the tell-tale signs of one's fundamental ambitions?
Be specific.

- b. In what area of life are you most tempted to **seek something other than Christ for your ultimate satisfaction**?

- c. How does Paul's emphasis on the ascended Christ's identity **encourage you** to seek him alone in this specific area of your life? *Be specific.*

Ignatius of Antioch quipped, "Do not have Jesus Christ on your lips and the world in your heart."

15. Paul also urges the Colossians to cultivate heavenly mindedness because they are going there: Jesus is returning to them in glory, and they are returning to Jesus in glory.

Paul defines believers' past, present, and future all according to our union with Christ. Paul's final note focuses on our future, when we will receive our reward. The very Christ we proclaim today is the Christ we soon shall see face to face at his coming.

- a. Describe a season in your life when God particularly strengthened your confidence regarding the security of your heavenly future with him. What did **God particularly use** to assure you of where you are going?
- b. To what extent do you live with **the eager expectation that Christ will return and readiness for his return**? *Explain.*
16. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.

Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.

Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

17. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

18. A believer's genuine, whole-hearted eagerness to see Christ face to face at his return is one of her most powerful evangelistic tools.

a. Which believer in Christ whom you know **most eagerly awaits** Christ's second coming? **How do you know this about him or her** (i.e., what is the evidence of this person's glad anticipation)?

b. What **practical difference** does this person's readiness for Christ's return make in his or her life? *Be specific and concrete.*

19. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

For Further Reflection

In your relationships with believers in Christ, what are some concrete, specific ways in which you might encourage them to cultivate heavenly mindedness, for Christ's glory and their good?

In your relationships with non-Christians, what are some concrete, specific ways in which you might communicate truths about heaven such that, should God choose to open the eyes of their heart, they might see more clearly heaven's goodness and worth?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 12
- Question 2
- Question 4
- Question 6
- Question 8
- Question 13
- Question 16
- Question 18

Sometimes when we believers speak of heaven, we mostly emphasize heaven's **secondary benefits**, such as freedom from pain. Tragically, our longing for heaven can become more about what heaven lacks (i.e., suffering) than who it has (i.e., God)—more about the sorrow that is absent than the Savior who is present. We can inadvertently distort “heavenly mindedness” into mere escapism. But a Christ-less heaven is no heaven at all. Heaven’s central feature is God himself. Scripture calls us to anticipate fellowship with our beloved Savior as the all-surpassing joy, far surpassing the joy of renewed fellowship with beloved saints who have preceded us in death. (Though joyful that will be!)

If Christ is not the center of your ambitions for your heavenly future, he will not be the center of your ambitions for your earthly future. Contemplating the reality of our King’s return empowers us to resist the temptation to seek our satisfaction from the things below, including from our spiritual and ministry endeavors. But if we are not contemplating his return, we will be enticed by the world’s alluring promise of instant gratification.

If Christ is all-sufficient for your earthly and heavenly future, then his return satisfies your heart and energizes you to “make the best use of the time” (Co. 4:5) in the here and now.

The Stuff of Your Maturation: Putting to Death

Colossians 3:5–11

Having instructed the Colossians to reject a “Jesus plus” approach to progressive sanctification (2:8–23), Paul transitions to focus on what they must embrace: Christ-centered sanctification (3:1–4:6).

Colossian 3:1–4 comprises the simple core of Paul’s exhortation to Christ-centered living. In these four verses, he conveys the first principle of Christian sanctification: heavenly mindedness. In the verses that follow (Col 3:5–4:6), Paul then applies and illustrates this first principle to show how heavenly mindedness works out in real life, amid lingering sin and brokenness.

More specifically, Col 3:5–4:6 contains three major units that each apply the principle summarized in Col 3:1–4.

First, Paul identifies “earthly” practices that believers must “put to death” on account of their new identity in Christ (Col 3:5) and, conversely, those qualities and practices that believers must “put on” (Col 3:12).

Second, Paul then illustrates Christ-centered living with respect to certain basic relational structures: wives and husbands, children and parents, fathers and children, bondservants and masters (Col 3:18–4:1).

Third, Paul continues instructing the Colossians about Christ-centered living, especially addressing how to relate with “outsiders” (i.e., non-Christians; Col 4:2–6).

On the whole, Paul’s instructions in Col 2:6–4:6 underscore **the all-encompassing ethical relevance of believers’ union with Christ**. Believers ought to approach every relationship, every encounter, and every endeavor in a Christ-centered manner, as those who possess a new identity in Christ and participate with him in his death and life.

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 3:5–11 and respond to questions 1, 3, 4, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 3:5–11; Questions 1–4
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 3:5–11; Questions 5–10
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 3:5–11; Questions 11–13
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 3:5–11; Questions 14, 16
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 3:5–11; Questions 15

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. The “therefore” in Col 3:5 explicitly links this passage to what immediately precedes it. Paul also continues developing the duality of what is heavenly (above) and what is earthly (below). What does Paul mean by commanding believers to “**put to death**” those earthly things he lists in v. 5? Were the Colossians to obey this command, what would that look like? *Be specific.*
2. In what sense can Paul **call covetousness “idolatry”** (Col 3:5)? How does he come to that conclusion?
3. On what basis does Paul exhort the Colossians to “put to death” and “put off” earthly practices? What is the reason he gives for why they must do this?
4. **Put in your own words** Paul’s statement: “*Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all*” (Col 3:11).

In what way might Paul’s statement be **misinterpreted**? *Give an example of a misunderstanding of Paul’s meaning in this verse.*

5. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

6. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

7. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

8. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

9. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

Christian growth demands moral decision-making and discernment between good and evil. We must learn to say “no,” and we must learn to say “yes.” Systematic theologians sometimes speak of the “no” aspect of Christian progressive sanctification as **mortification** and the “yes” aspect as **vivification**. In mortification we put to death, and in vivification we bring to life.

Christians must actively reject sin. We crucify the desires of our flesh and hate the sin that so easily entangles. We resist malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. (By the way, Scripture never pretends that this dimension of our sanctification will be easy for us redeemed sinners-- just read Romans 7!).

But Christians are not just “no” people. We actively embrace godliness, as those beloved by and united to Jesus.

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

10. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*
11. Against what sin pattern are you presently struggling? How long have you been struggling against this temptation and sin?

To what extent are you discouraged or encouraged in your struggle against this sin?
Explain.

What gifts of grace are you relying on to put to death this sin? *Be specific.*

12. Favoritism and classism are some of the greatest threats to a local church's unity in the gospel. We sinners like to create and/or endorse certain social categories that establish a pecking order. Even if we are not at the top in that system, we sometimes find comfort in social divisions. Oftentimes, these divisions pertain to one or more of the following: culture and ethnicity, preferred religious/cultural practices, class, socio-economic status, or gender.

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ levels the playing field, so to speak. Every believer in Christ—regardless of these various categories that we sometimes use to divide—has equal access to God in Christ. Every believer is a new creation in Christ. Every believer receives the astounding privilege of being renewed in knowledge after the image of the Lord Jesus. The implications of believers' corporate solidarity in Christ for how we are to relate to one another cannot be overstated.

- a. In your local church, **what sorts of earthly divisions** tend to thwart the full expression of the glories of Col 3:11? *Be specific, and explain.*

- b. What is **one practical way** this week that you, by refusing to regard people according to earthly divisions, can help your local church make progress in expressing Col 3:11?
13. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.

Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.

Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

14. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

15. Christians are not morally superior people in and of themselves. We have not received Christ because we earned him, or because he looked down the corridors of time and saw that our spiritual performance would be impressive. No, it is only the grace of God—expressed in the will of God (1:1)—that we are who we are.

Paul's words in Col 3:7 ought to humble each of us. Every one of us, prior to our receiving Christ, "once walked" and "were living" in the very vile, dishonorable passions and practices on account of which "the wrath of God is coming"! Apart from Christ, we have no leg to stand on.

- a. In what ways might **your grasping this reality more deeply** strengthen your Word ministry in your discipling and evangelistic relationships? In other words, what difference does it make when the gospel-reteller manifestly demonstrates humility?

- b. In a relationship in which a discipler is helping someone younger in the faith make progress in putting to death sin, what sorts of **unhealth could develop** if the discipler lacks the sort of grateful humility that Col 3:7 ought to engender? *Be specific.*

- c. Practically speaking, **how does a believer make progress in humility?**

16. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 3
- Question 4
- Question 7
- Question 11
- Question 12
- Question 13
- Question 15

Jesus himself supremely exemplifies the sort of heavenly mindedness that equips human beings for maximum usefulness in this world. He humbly receives his heavenly Father's loving pleasure in him (e.g., Matt 3:17). He consistently relies on his heavenly Father's blessing throughout his ministry (e.g., Matt 14:19). The nearness of the kingdom of heaven shapes his preaching (e.g., Matt 4:17), and the superiority of heaven's treasures relative to earth's suffuses his teaching (e.g., Matt 6:20). Jesus even endures the injustice of Calvary by actively entrusting himself to his heavenly Judge (1 Pet. 2:23). The sort of heavenly mindedness Jesus embodies also equips us to persevere amid life's excruciating hardships and, after the pattern our Savior set, even to bless the very ones who curse us (1 Pet. 3:9; compare Acts 7:59–60).

The Stuff of Your Maturation: Putting On

Colossians 3:12–17

Believers in Christ must not only say “no” to passions and practices of the old self; we must say “yes” to passions and practices of the new self. In Col 3:12–17, Paul continues to unpack the first principle of progressive sanctification, which is heavenly mindedness. (Notice Paul writes “*then*” in 3:12.) Heavenly mindedness involves renouncing what is earthly (Col 3:5–11) and embracing what is heavenly (Col 3:12–17).

Paul calls believers to “put on” the virtues of godliness. These virtues are quite a contrast from “what is earthly” in the preceding passage! Here again, Paul grounds his ethical instruction in believers’ new identity in Christ—personally and corporately. They must put on these virtues “*as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved*” (Col 3:12).

Holiness is not merely a personal project, but also a corporate one. And holiness therefore not only has personal implications, but corporate ones. Earthly passions and practices in accordance with the old self **divide and splinter** local churches. On the other hand, passions and practices in accordance with the new self **promote peace, love, and thankfulness.**

As Paul describes holy living among God’s people, he emphasizes the beauty and importance of thankfulness. Significantly, we cannot be thankful for something we do not have.

Of course, we are not always grateful for what we receive. But when we *are* grateful, it is evidence that we *have* received something. We can only be thankful for what we are confident we possess.

How does this theme of thankfulness relate to the controversy at Colossae? Remember that Paul is trying to persuade these believers to trust Jesus Christ’s complete sufficiency. The Colossian believers have fallen prey to the false teaching because they think Christ is lacking in some regard. Paul is urging them to see, instead, that they have *everything* they need in Christ, and thus they must abound in thanksgiving to God. Paul knows that if the Colossians truly reclaim Christ’s sufficiency in their hearts and their doctrine, the clear evidence of that will be robust gratitude.

A satisfied church is always a thankful church.

Moreover, *thankful satisfaction in Christ* curbs any craving to seek fulfillment elsewhere. Thankfulness in Christ is the antidote to legalism, to moralism, to idolatry, to despair—including despair over the state of the church around the world.

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 3:12–17 and respond to questions 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, 16.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 3:12–17; Questions 1–3
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 3:12–17; Questions 4–7
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 3:12–17; Questions 8–11
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 3:12–17; Questions 12–14
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 3:12–17; Questions 15–17

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. What difference does it make for interpretation that Paul's charge here focuses on cultivating **corporate holiness**, in the life of the local church, rather than simply holiness cultivated by individual persons? *Explain.*
2. As you read Col 3:12–17, imagine that you are one of the original recipients of Paul's letter, a member of the church at Colossae. Based on what you know about the letter's occasion, what aspect of this passage might **particularly strike you**? Why?
3. What does Paul mean in Col 3:13 by "**bearing with one another**"? *Explain Paul's meaning by using context.*

What might that **look like practically** in the life of the Colossian local church at this time?

4. In **what sense** does love "bind everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:14)?
5. What is "**the word of Christ**" to which Paul refers in Col 3:16?

What stands out to you about **how** the word of Christ is to take up residence among believers?

6. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

Pick one of those themes. How is this theme relevant to your current circumstances?

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

8. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

9. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

12. What **makes forgiveness so very difficult**, including forgiveness among believers in the same local church?

What **makes forgiveness so very important**, not least forgiveness among believers in the same local church? *Read and reflect on Jesus's instruction and parable regarding forgiveness in Matthew 18:15–35.*

Who **in your local church** might you need to forgive, as a response to this passage?

13. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

14. Practically, how will you rely this week on the **resources God provides you** to trust this truth about him? *Consider how this passage indicates certain divine provision for believers' ongoing and ever-deepening trust.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.
Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.
Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

15. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

16. Paul explicitly grounds his instructions in the reality of believers' new identity "*as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.*"

a. As you communicate God's commandments with others (including those you disciple and your children), **to what extent** do you emphasize **the grounds** for their obedience? *Explain.*

b. More broadly, what else have you noticed in Colossians about **Paul's strategies for motivating believers to obey God?**

c. What is one way Paul motivates believers **in which you want to make progress** as you pass on the Scriptures?

17. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 2
- Question 5
- Question 8
- Question 10
- Question 11
- Question 13
- Question 16

Serving the Lord in Your Life's Station(s)

Colossians 3:18–4:1

Following Paul's description of a heart overflowing with thanks to God the Father, **he applies his exhortations about Christ-centered living to the Colossians' specific life situations and contexts (Col 3:18–4:6).**

The thematic link between Col 3:17 and, in particular, 3:18–4:1 is important for us to notice: honoring the Lord in our various callings ought to be anything but legalism or drudgery. Rather, it ought to flow from and be characterized by joyful gratitude.

In the letter's opening, Paul describes the good fruit that the gospel is bearing all around the world. **Well, *in what context* does the gospel bear that fruit?**

The gospel bears fruit in the context of our ordinary lives and our everyday relationships. And it bears fruit among us, as a family.

All the theology Paul puts forward in the main body of his letter lands in the context of our regular relationships and our various roles and responsibilities in this life.

Along these lines, Col 3:18–4:1 illustrates that there ought to be no area of our lives untouched by the supreme authority of Jesus Christ.

That is because Jesus Christ truly is Lord over every area of life.

In Col 3:18–4:1, the word “Lord” in Greek appears six times, referring to Jesus. In Col 4:1, our ESV translates the word “Master,” but a more wooden reading that brings out Paul's wordplay is: “lords, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Lord in heaven.”

No matter our life station, each one of us believers has the same central mission: to serve the Lord Christ in every context. What a privilege!

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 3:18–4:1 and respond to questions 1, 3, 4, 8, 12, 13, 14, 17.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 3:18–4:1; Questions 1–3
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 3:18–4:1; Questions 4–7
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 3:18–4:1; Questions 8–11
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 3:18–4:1; Questions 12–15
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 3:18–4:1; Questions 16–18

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. Take a moment to reflect on the various core relationships and roles that currently shape your days. What are these **main contexts in which your ordinary life unfolds**? *List them.*
2. Paul aims to show how believers in Christ ought to conduct themselves in three relationships: wife and husband, child and father, bondservant and master. In each relationship, Paul first addresses the socially weaker party.

What most strikes you about Paul's instructions **to the socially weaker party**?

What most strikes you about Paul's instructions **to the socially empowered party**?

3. List each instance in which **Paul grounds his imperatives** (i.e., commands) **in the indicatives of God's grace** (i.e., statements of fact). *For each item listed, include the biblical reference (i.e., chapter and verse). For help in imperatives and indicatives, see the Appendix under "Structure" and the discussion of verbs' moods.*

Household bondservants were slaves, and although first-century slavery was radically different from the race-based, kidnap-rooted slavery practiced in the United States and elsewhere, it was still slavery. These men and women were subject to the whims of their master. Inevitably some masters would have been hostile to the Christian faith and may have resented their slaves' newfound religious convictions.

Notice what Paul says as he exhorts household bondservants to submit to their earthly masters: *"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ"* (Col 3:23–24). Imagine how radical this would have been for a man or woman in that situation to hear. The Lord *sees* them; he *knows* their labor; he *receives* their effort as unto him; he promises to *reward* them for their humble Christ-following, which is the overflow of their grateful hearts. There is no partiality.

4. What aspects of Paul's instructions in Col 3:18–4:1 might have been **most shocking or controversial to the letter's *original* recipients?** *Be specific.*

What aspects of Paul's instructions in Col 3:18–4:1 might be **most shocking or controversial to the letter's *current* readers** in your cultural context? *Be specific.*

5. Examine two similar passages in the New Testament epistles: Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and 1 Peter 2:13–3:7. How would you **compare Paul's instructions to the Colossians** to these other two passages? Is there anything **distinct** in the Colossians household code, relative to these other two?
6. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

Pick one of those themes. How is this theme relevant to your current circumstances?

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

8. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

9. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

12. For those of you who are married, what is one area in which you **would like to make progress** regarding Paul's instructions to wives? *Be specific.*

13. First-century slavery should not be equated with twenty-first-century Western workplaces. But we can glean some general principles from this passage about submission to authorities in the workplace.

Whether we are accountants or social workers, most of us work under authority. We have supervisors. And sometimes they create a lot of problems for us: they might mismanage us, undercut us, even openly mock us on account of our faith. When this sort of mistreatment happens, we usually feel powerless. When we feel degraded in our workplace, we are tempted to retaliate. Maybe we try to get even with our boss by gossiping about her with our colleagues. Or maybe we do not do our best work for that assignment we deem to be unreasonable. Or maybe we do everything we are supposed to do, but begrudgingly.

But when we are setting our minds on things that are above, where Christ is, we refuse to retaliate. No, we entrust our case to the Lord Jesus, in confidence that "*the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done*" (3:25) and that "*from the Lord [we] will receive the inheritance as your reward*" (3:24).

Why is it particularly tempting in the workplace to **conduct one's work "by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers"** (3:22)? *Explain.*

What is one **concrete, practical application of Col 3:22–25** for the work you do in your life, including for those of you who work inside the home or are in retirement? *Be specific.*

14. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*
15. Practically, how will you rely this week on the **resources God provides you** to trust this truth about him? *Consider how this passage indicates certain divine provision for believers' ongoing and ever-deepening trust.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.
Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.
Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

16. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

17. Ethical passages like Col 3:18–4:1 that commend servant-hearted submission to Christ and one another are some of the most controversial passages in our cultural context.

In general, what are some **wise practices for sharing biblical truths** with someone whom you suspect will be offended by the Scriptures on the matter. What does it look like to do that well? *Feel free to refer to a time when you observed someone communicate controversial biblical truth clearly, boldly, and wisely to someone who disapproved of that biblical truth.*

18. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 3
- Question 4
- Question 8
- Question 12
- Question 13
- Question 14
- Question 17

Walking Wisely Toward Outsiders in the Faith

Colossians 4:2–6

Whereas Paul opens his letter’s main body by reporting his prayers for the Colossians, Paul concludes his letter’s main body by asking the Colossians to pray for him.

Before we dive into Col 4:2–6, let’s take a moment to remember where we are in the letter.

Paul opens his letter’s main body by describing his prayers that God would fill the Colossians with knowledge about God and his purposes, so that they would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Col 1:3–14). They need to reclaim in their hearts the conviction of Christ’s full sufficiency. That is why, after Paul’s prayer report, he sets before them a stunning vision of the supremacy of Jesus Christ (Col 1:15–23). Seeing Christ’s supremacy is necessary for trusting his sufficiency.

After reiterating his love and toil for the Colossians, Paul articulates the heart of his pastoral burden for them: “as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Col 2:6). Paul exposes the destructiveness of “Jesus plus” religion and then comes to focus on the sorts of priorities and virtues that believers ought to nurture in themselves and in one another. Fundamentally, believers must demonstrate their trust in Christ’s sufficiency by cultivating heavenly mindedness. Because we have been raised with Christ—who is our life—we set our minds on him and on heaven, which is where he is, at the right hand of God. This heavenly mindedness is so practical that it suffuses and transforms even the nitty-gritty of believers’ everyday life.

As Paul concludes the main body of his letter in Col 4:2–6, he shows that believers’ Christ-centered heavenly mindedness must express itself in our participation in Christ’s mission. Significantly, in light of the letter’s unifying theme, **the extent to which a believer is genuinely engaged in Christ’s mission will reveal the extent to which she genuinely trusts Christ’s full sufficiency.**

In Col 4:2–6, Paul focuses on the mission that the Lord Jesus has granted to his church, to every believer in Christ: the mission to advance the gospel of Christ.

Paul’s instructions here presuppose several gifts of grace that God gives to every member of the church in equal measure, so that we *can* participate in the mission of advancing Christ’s kingdom—gifts such as prayer, the gospel message, and wisdom. Exercising these gifts calls for humility, patience, and radical dependence on God. These special gifts equip the church to rely on the Lord Jesus to do what only he can do. And he will do it!

Since God has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, his agenda becomes our agenda. The kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ endures forever, and so it is *this* kingdom that demands our allegiance and our deepest investment. As missionary C. T. Studd once wrote, **“Only one life, ’twill soon be past; Only what’s done for Christ will last.”**

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 4:2–6 and respond to questions 1, 4, 5, 9, 14, 15, 17.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 4:2–6; Questions 1–5
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 4:2–6; Questions 6–11
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 4:2–6; Questions 12–13
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 4:2–6; Questions 14–15
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 4:2–6; Questions 16–18

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. In Col 4:2–4, Paul commands those who have been raised in Christ (i.e., believers) to pray. He also requests specific prayers from the Colossians on his and his team's behalf. What **characterizes** the sort of prayer Paul commands? That is, how does he describe it?
Be specific.

2. What **does Paul mean** by calling believers to be “*watchful in [prayer]*”? *Put the expression in your own words.*

*Three other occurrences in the Pauline corpus of the same Greek root translated here as “watchful” are:
1 Corinthians 16:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:6, 10.*

Why should believers be “watchful” in prayer? What's the reason?

3. Yet again Paul enjoins the Colossians to thankfulness (Col 4:2). In general, what makes thankfulness difficult for **believers in Christ**?

What about for **you**, in particular?

4. Put **in your own words** Paul's prayer request in Col 4:3–4.

5. The starting point for a believer’s participation in Christ’s mission is that she “*continue steadfastly in prayer.*” On that foundation of radical God-reliance, Paul also instructs believers to participate in Christ’s mission of advancing the gospel through their everyday interactions with “*outsiders*” (i.e., non-Christians). Believers ought to seek opportunities to share the gospel message with their neighbors.
 - a. What do you suppose Paul means by “*making the best use of the time*”? To what “time” is Paul referring?

 - b. As Paul describes what walking wisely entails, he focuses on believers’ speech. He instructs the Colossians to use speech that is “gracious, seasoned with salt”? Put Paul’s metaphor of “seasoned with salt” **in your own words**. What is he saying here?

6. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage’s shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

8. How does this passage **relate to the words surrounding it**: to those passages immediately preceding it and following it (immediate literary context), to the whole letter (whole-book literary context), and to the whole Bible (whole-Bible literary context)? And so what?

Immediate Literary Context

Whole-Book Literary Context

Whole-Bible Literary Context

What themes or terminology appear in this passage that also appear elsewhere in the Scriptures? How do these other occurrences of these themes and this terminology shed light on Paul's meaning in this passage?

If the whole Bible is about God's redeeming a people for himself through his Son, for his glory, then how does this passage in Colossians fit into the Bible's redemptive storyline and ethic?

For example: Deuteronomy 4:5–8

1 Peter 2:9–12

9. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

10. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

11. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

12. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*
13. In this passage, Paul emphasizes two fundamental ways every Christian is to advance Christ's kingdom: (1) we are to persevere in prayer; (2) we are to relate wisely with non-Christians. What do you find **particularly difficult** about putting these instructions into practice in your life? **Why** do you find this especially difficult?

Are you making the best use of the time?

When our overseas missionaries come back and give us a report of their ministry in their country of residence, we expect certain things from them. We expect them to lead a missional lifestyle; we expect that their calendar will reflect strategic thinking about how to steward their time and resources for the advancement of the gospel in their neighborhood and city; we expect that they will think creatively about engaging their non-Christian neighbors and seeking opportunities to testify to Christ. Those are just basic expectations we have of overseas missionaries.

And when they come to visit us, they ought to expect the same things from us. We are the gospel workers here, in our city. Every member of Second Presbyterian Church ought to be as fully "on mission" right here in Memphis as our missionary partners are in their country.

May God help us make progress in relating to non-Christians in a way that leads to opportunities to share the gospel message with them. May we seek occasions to do good and treat people around us with respect, so that our conduct tills the soil of our neighbors' hearts and prepares it for any seeds of the gospel we are able to sow, should God open the door for the word. May God make us wise!

14. First and foremost, Christ's kingdom comes because God opens a door for the word. The advance of Christ's kingdom utterly depends on the sovereign mercy of God Almighty. That is why our engagement in his mission begins in petitioning God to do what only he can do. As one theologian once put it, "Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons—but they are helpless against our prayers."

What is **one practical way** you will aim to make progress this week in praying for the gospel's advance around the world, including in your own neighborhood, through your "salty speech"? And **with whom** will you share your plan for prayer, so that he or she may hold you accountable? *Be specific.*

15. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.

Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.

Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

The rest of the world seeks power to become independent, self-reliant, and impermeable to this world's strife and pain. But Christ raised us alive together with him so that we can live a different way.

If we trust that Jesus is enough for us, we do not seek to become independent and self-reliant. We are set free to live in ongoing, active dependence on God. We aim to rely humbly on his sovereign grace. It is in our active dependence on God amid our weakness that we find his grace to be sufficient (2 Corinthians 12). His power is made perfect in weakness. The logical implication of Christ's full sufficiency is our glad dependence on him. Reliance on Christ is the inevitable fruit of confidence in Christ.

And rather than striving to become impermeable to this world's pain, we embrace it and bring it before the throne of the living God. This is *key* to our purpose here. We petition our Father and ask that his will would be done here on earth as it is in heaven. We intercede for the hurting, the abused, the marginalized, the lost. We serve the world as God's royal priesthood, bringing people's burdens to our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The ministry of prayer is all about God—it exalts his power, his competence, his sufficiency, his gifts.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

16. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

17. Paul anticipates that a believer's wise conduct will elicit questions from non-Christians. Look at the final clause in Col 2:6, which states the purpose of our wise conduct: "*so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*"

Our attractive way of life and our speech should cause people around us to ask questions. And so we must ask ourselves, "*To what extent does my conduct elicit questions? To what extent am I living differently enough that it's clear I have a supernatural source of wisdom: Christ himself?*"

Certainly one implication of Paul's logic in Col 4:5–6 is that walking in wisdom among non-Christians involves knowing the sorts of questions our friends and neighbors are pondering, so that we can be ready to respond to their questions when they ask them.

That means we will listen humbly and carefully to non-Christians around us. We will seek to understand their concerns. We will invest time and energy into reading about the topics that most interest them so that we can point them to Christ in our conversations with them.

In this way, we get our syllabus (so to speak) from the needs of the people around us. Their questions and concerns ought to influence what we read and how we develop our mind. If we are going to be a wise messenger, we will contemplate what specific message our non-Christian friends and colleagues need to hear, and we will learn how to say it graciously.

- a. Reflect on a few of your recent conversations with non-Christians. What are the **major issues** they are grappling with, even if they have not yet asked you a direct question about these issues?

- b. What are some **resources** you can use/consult to prepare a wise and gracious response to their questions about these specific issues, should they ask you? *Perhaps you will need to ask others about good resources for these issues.*

18. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Paul's prayer request that he speak "the mystery of Christ" clearly shows **Paul's confidence in the gospel's power**—and not in his rhetorical sophistication.

Some of us are sitting on the sidelines when it comes to sharing the gospel because we feel inadequate. We worry that we do not have the right education or training, or that our personalities are not dynamic or bold enough to make our message seem compelling. We worry that our sin, suffering, or imperfections disqualify us from speaking the word of truth.

But when we share the gospel message, we do not need to make it glamorous (according to our culture's standards). We do not need to dress it up and make it seem more palatable to our hearers. The gospel's power does not rest in our dynamic communication skills or even in our moral record/performance. You do not need a seminary degree to share the word of Christ, nor do your closets need to be skeleton-free.

You need only be a servant of the word, and not its master. You need only share the truth of Jesus simply and clearly. God is the ultimate Evangelist. That is what Paul shows us in Col 4:2–6.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 4
- Question 5
- Question 9
- *Optional: questions 11, 12*
- Question 14
- Question 15
- Question 17

E.M. Bounds: “What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men [and women] whom the Holy Ghost can use—men [and women] of prayer.”

D. L. Moody: “He who kneels the most, stands the best.”

Grace Be With You

Colossians 4:7–18

Our experiences throughout the pandemic have convinced us more than ever how much we need gospel-centered community to thrive.

Paul’s concluding greeting gives us a glimpse of how the gospel ought to work out in the concrete realities of believers’ life together in the church—both in the local church and the global church.

In customary Greco-Roman style, Paul wraps up his letter by greeting specific people and giving instructions regarding/for specific people. And by doing so, Paul implicitly illustrates the importance and beauty of gospel partnership among believers.

Paul’s concluding greeting thereby yields several important principles of gospel-centered community. And we must embrace every one of them. (Full disclosure: a sermon that my father preached has heavily influenced the way I think and talk about Paul’s final greeting.)

Here is an example of a fundamental principle for gospel-centered community in this passage: **we believers are all fellow servants of the Christ Jesus the Lord.**

Without question, Paul views himself and his partners in the gospel as servants of the Lord. (The word translated “minister” in the ESV throughout Colossians can also be translated “servant.”) For example, Paul refers to Tychicus as “*a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord*” (Col 4:7) and to Epaphras as “*a servant of Christ Jesus*” (Col 4:12).

Like Paul and his partners-in-the-gospel, we too are servants of the Lord. And because we are servants of the Lord, we are servants of his gospel and of one another.

Paul finally signs off with those beautiful words: “*Grace be with you*” (4:18). Remember that his opening salutation concludes with, “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father*” (1:2). Fitting bookends.

Believer, as one who must rely on the grace of God every day for your personal and our corporate flourishing, take great comfort in this: **because you are *in Christ Jesus the Lord*, you are enveloped in the grace of God.**

What better security exists than *that*?

Basic Preparation: Read Colossians 4:7–18 and respond to questions 1, 3, 5, 9, 13, 15, 19.

Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Colossians 4:7–18; Questions 1–4
- **Day 2:** Read Colossians 4:7–18; Questions 5–8
- **Day 3:** Read Colossians 4:7–18; Questions 9–12
- **Day 4:** Read Colossians 4:7–18; Questions 13–16
- **Day 5:** Read Colossians 4:7–18; Questions 17–20

HEAR THE WORD

Pray that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. In our study of Colossians, what **truth has most struck you**—either as a challenge, a comfort, or something else? *Explain why this truth has struck you the way it has.*

2. **List** all the people whom Paul mentions by name and how Paul describes them.

Which person that Paul names and describes **most stands out to you**? **What is it** about their description that gets your attention?

3. As you look over the list you made of the named persons in Paul's final greeting, **what sorts of diversities** do you notice among them? And why do these diversities **matter**, in terms of this whole letter's unifying theme?

4. Why do you suppose Paul includes a **specific charge to Archippus**? *Remember that this letter would be read aloud to the whole local church at Colossae, and then circulated to local churches in surrounding areas ... and eventually included in the Christian canon!*

5. In his sign-off, Paul instructs the whole church (and all those churches to whom this letter would be read publicly), “*Remember my chains*” (Col 4:18). He is requesting prayer here, yes. But primarily, he is confirming his identity as the Lord Jesus’s servant. Paul is willing to lay down his life gladly for the sake of the gospel, and the recipients of his letter know that.

Remember what prayer from the Colossians Paul does *not* request in Col 4:2–4: release from prison. Rather, Paul requests prayer that God would open a door for the word, giving Paul *even more* opportunities to declare the gospel clearly—which is why he is in prison in the first place! Paul is a glad servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

How do you suppose the original recipients of Paul’s letter **might have responded** to Paul’s final verse? What might his signature and “sign-off” have evoked among them?

Imagine yourself as a member of the Colossian church, who has been experiencing the trauma of division in the church and doctrinal confusion. Upon first hearing Paul’s letter read aloud, what sorts of internal responses might the letter have created in you? What about external responses in the congregation as a whole?

6. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?
Note specific verses in your answer.

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?
To show the passage’s shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.

8. How does this passage **relate to the words surrounding it**: to those passages immediately preceding it and following it (immediate literary context), to the whole letter (whole-book literary context), and to the whole Bible (whole-Bible literary context)? And so what?

Immediate Literary Context

Consider the thematic relationship of Col 4:7–18 to what immediately precedes it.

Whole-Book Literary Context

For example: track the language of “servant”/“minister” through the letter

Whole-Bible Literary Context

What themes or terminology appear in this passage that also appear elsewhere in the Scriptures? How do these other occurrences of these themes and this terminology shed light on Paul’s meaning in this passage?

If the whole Bible is about God’s redeeming a people for himself through his Son, for his glory, then how does this passage in Colossians fit into the Bible’s redemptive storyline and ethic?

For example: Which of these named persons in Paul’s final greeting are mentioned Elsewhere in Scripture? And how does the information about them from other Scriptures help us understand more about their relationship with Paul and the church?

Jesus’s servanthood: John 13:1–20; Philippians 2:3–11

9. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*
10. Based on the passage’s various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage’s main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

11. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Paul intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

12. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*

13. Like Paul and his partners-in-the-gospel, we too are servants of the Lord. And because we are servants of the Lord, we believers are servants of his gospel and of one another.

It is one thing for us to affirm with our lips our identity as Christ's servants. It is another thing for us to embrace that identity and live it out in our daily experience—including in the context of our local-church relationships.

How many of our troubles in local churches would be resolved if we understood this principle: that we are all servants of the Lord Jesus? I have heard my father say, "How do you know if you have grasped your identity as a servant? Well, how do you respond when you're treated like one?"

In what **context or relationship** in your life right now are you finding it **most difficult** to embrace your identity as a servant—of Christ and of others? *Explain.*

14. One of the clearest manifestations of the Spirit's work in a local church occurs when believers from all kinds of backgrounds—culturally, religiously, educationally, regionally, and so on—choose to relate to one another in humility and love, as family. When believers truly defer to one another's preferences and needs (rather than assert their own), when they truly serve one another (rather than demanding to be served), when they honor one another (rather than looking down on others), when they do not regard themselves more highly than they ought ... *that* is when our neighbors pay attention.

a. What are the **main challenges your local church is presently facing** in terms of its unity in Christ? *Be specific, and explain.*

**Take time now to pray for your local church and her unity in the gospel.*

- b. In your own heart, what are the **main challenges you are facing** in terms of viewing various members of your local church as *true family in Christ*, and thus loving them in ways displayed in Paul's final greeting? *Be specific, and explain.*
15. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*
16. Practically, how will you rely this week on the **resources God provides you** to trust this truth about him? *Consider how this passage indicates certain divine provision for believers' ongoing and ever-deepening trust.*

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.
Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.
Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.

RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

17. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

Specific person/group: _____

Specific truth to share: _____

Possible occasion for sharing this truth: _____

18. Sometimes we assume that people who are quite different from us in obvious ways would be especially unwilling to hear the gospel from us. We can easily become intimidated by others' differences from us—whether that be relating to gender, culture, ethnicity, class, educational/professional status, socio-economic situation, personality, or neighborhood. "Surely," we reason, "God isn't calling me to talk to *that* person! God will send someone else—someone more like them—to disciple/evangelize them."

But the truth is that God delights in unity-in-Christ-amid-diversity. We have seen this ever since God created Adam and Eve as male and female, two complementary and inter-dependent beings, who become one flesh through marriage. God delights in the unity-in-Christ displayed in Col 4:7–18 amid various diversities—of gender, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic situation, ministry focus, profession, and so on. "*Christ is all, and in all.*"

Since God has designed his church to experience and cultivate such unity-in-Christ-amid-diversity, we ought to be fearless in reaching out to people across all kinds of social and cultural dividing lines with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Who is **someone very different from you** whom you are burdened to see receive Christ as Savior? How will you aim to **reach out to him or her** in some clear way this week, with the hope that God might open a door for the word? *Share with someone about your plans, so that this person can pray with and for you.*

19. Paul is not trying to "go it alone." Just look at all his partners in the gospel ministry! Those partnerships did not happen overnight. Paul and the others would have needed to cultivate those partnerships—sometimes painfully so (for example, with Mark).

a. To what extent are you actively cultivating partners in Word ministry? *Explain.*

b. What are you finding challenging about cultivating these partnerships, and what are you finding encouraging?

20. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

Word-Filled Prayer | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/group.

You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.

Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.

Notes from Teaching

Small-Group Questions

- Question 1
- Question 3
- Question 5
- Question 9
- Question 13
- Question 15
- Question 19
- Share with one another your plans for ongoing study of Scripture over the course of these next few weeks and months.

APPENDIX | Five Expositional Tools

For Hearing, Doing, and Retelling God's Word

DEFINING THE FIVE EXPOSITIONAL TOOLS

For Hearing, Doing, and Retelling God’s Word

How do we dig into a biblical text to understand, apply, and communicate it faithfully?

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Genre | In terms of <u>literary form</u> , how does the author say what he is saying? |
| Structure | In terms of <u>literary shape</u> , how does the author say what he is saying? |
| Context | In what <u>context</u> does the author say what he is saying? |
| Unifying Theme | <u>What</u> is the author saying? (That is, what’s the <i>main thing</i> he is saying?) |
| Aim | For what <u>purpose</u> is the author saying what he is saying? |
| Application | What <u>difference</u> does what the author is saying make in my/your life? |

Genre | A book’s genre is simply the **kind** of literature it is. It is important to notice the specific genre we are reading, because each genre requires that we ask distinct questions. Many Old Testament books are historical narrative. The Psalms are poetry. There are many genres and even combinations of genres within books. With **Colossians**, we are studying an **epistle** (i.e., a letter). God chose to speak in the Bible’s final books through personal and inspired letters to the early church, penned by apostles and witnesses of Jesus’s resurrection.

Structure | The structure of a book or passage is its **shape** from beginning to end. When we look for structure, we look to find the distinct parts of a text and how these parts hold together. An **outline** shows structure in a clear, logical form. Discovering structure lets us begin to grasp the whole, unified meaning of a text.

Context | The context of a book or passage is the **world** and **words** that surround it. Most of us are aware of the danger of taking words “out of context.” It is crucial to understand an author’s words in **historical, literary, and theological** context—from the words and worlds immediately surrounding a passage, all the way to those of the whole Bible.

Unifying Theme | The unifying theme is the big idea of a book or a passage—what some call the “**main idea**” or “**central thrust**.” Every book or passage has themes (that is, recurring ideas) at work in it. The unifying theme is the main message communicated as the text’s multiple themes combine, develop, and pierce our hearts. We will try to articulate the unifying theme of a book or passage in one concise sentence.

Aim and Application | An author’s aim is that author’s **purpose for writing**—what that author **intends to accomplish** through his or her words. Authors of a New Testament epistle wrote for a reason. What did they want their audience to understand, and **how did they want them to respond**? Once we begin to grasp the author’s aim for his original audience, then we can resonate with that same aim in our own lives and in the lives of those to whom we minister. Application, then, is the process of bringing that aim to bear on the specifics of our lives today: How will this passage **make a difference** in our hearts and actions? Most fundamentally, how will this passage **point us toward** the Lord Jesus Christ?

These five tools help shape our study of Colossians. If we had included *six*, the additional principle would be **prayer**, and it would come first. But prayer doesn’t seem to work as a separate principle. **Prayer is more like the blanket that covers the whole expositional process from beginning to end.**

WIELDING THE FIVE EXPOSITIONAL TOOLS

A Toolbox for Interpreting New Testament Epistles

TOOLBOX | Genre (New Testament Epistles)

The Bible incorporates a panoply of literary genres, which together display the depth, beauty, creativity, and clarity of God's enduring speech. The unity of the Bible's message amid such literary diversity highlights the manifold wisdom of God. There are psalms, and historical narratives, and law codes, and proverbs, and apocalyptic visions, and so on. Each of them reveals God's character and ways so that together they manifest Christ in "Technicolor."

Twenty-one of twenty-seven New Testament books are epistles, which comprises thirty-five percent of the testament. Paul wrote thirteen of these letters.

On the whole, New Testament epistles are personal, occasional, public, and formal.

Personal: Letters establish personal connections. Colossians is not only personal because it comes from one group of people to another. It is personal because Paul divulges his very heart throughout it. In fact, the personal nature of its content is part of why Paul chooses to communicate this way, since a letter enables him to shepherd this local church from a distance.

Occasional: The author of the letter writes on account of a specific occasion or circumstance. The author indicates in the letter, either explicitly or implicitly, the occasion prompting him to write.

Sometimes the author explicitly refers to the letter's occasion. For example, Paul writes to the local church in Galatia in response to a crisis: a group of false teachers has infiltrated the local church and is leading the church to abandon the gospel (see, for example, Galatians 1:7–8). Paul writes to Philemon in light of Onesimus's return to Ephesus (see, for example, Philemon 12).

Sometimes the occasion inspiring the author to write the letter is more implicit. For example, the author of Hebrews undertakes to show Jesus's superiority to old-covenant persons and institutions that point to him (such as Moses and the priests), and the author repeatedly warns his readers/hearers of the perils of abandoning the gospel and its new covenant. By implication, then, the author of Hebrews writes to a local church that is facing the temptation to return to old-covenant symbols and institutions and thereby desert the gospel of the Lord Jesus, and so the author exhorts his readers/hearers to persevere in the gospel in part by reminding them of the superiority of Jesus Christ relative to those leaders and institutions preceding him.

Public: Most New Testament letters are intended to be read aloud to one local-church assembly and then circulated to others. Even if a letter is written to one person, that letter ultimately gets circulated. (This is the case, for example, in Paul's letter to Timothy.)

Formal: New Testament letters usually adopt a particular form: a salutation, main body, and farewell/greeting. This form resembles the typical Greco-Roman epistolary form at the time. See discussion below on the letter's "structure."

TOOLBOX | Structure

Paul shapes his letters in a manner reflective of the customs of his day. In the broadest sense of structure, his letters involve an opening **salutation**, a **main body**, and a final **greeting**.

Authors of New Testament epistles make **theological arguments** in the main body of their letters. Discerning the structure of the letter's main body, then, requires identifying the components and logical flow of that main argument.

Here are a few pointers to help identify and follow the logical flow of a letter's argument:

- **Pay attention to shifts in topic, issue, or theme.**
- **Pay attention to verbs.** Verbs often “do the work” in an argument. Tracking the verbal sequence will help show how the author develops the argument.
- **Likewise, pay attention to the “mood” of the verbs.**

In grammatical terms, the “indicative mood” of a verb is used to state a fact, while the “imperative mood” is used to express a command.

Paul commonly shapes his overarching argument with a broad “**indicative therefore imperative**” structure. That is, Paul often focuses the first part of his main argument to highlight God's accomplishments for believers through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. On that foundation, Paul then focuses the second part to show how believers in Christ must respond to God's accomplishments on their behalf. The fundamental **gospel sequence** is either “*indicative therefore imperative*” or “*imperative because of indicative*.”

In Col 2:6–7, for example, Paul writes, “*Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*” These two verses function as the letter's “structural hinge” and establish a smooth transition from the letter's first half to its second half.

Of course, Paul also often includes exhortations in the first part of his argument as well as the facts of the gospel in the second.

A letter's main argument is comprised of various supporting arguments. Paul often shapes his supporting arguments *also* with this gospel sequence/structure of “*indicative therefore imperative*” or “*imperative because of indicative*.” Paul always motivates believers to respond to God's grace by repeatedly reminding them of the fullness of that grace.

TOOLBOX | Structure (*continued*)

- **Pay attention to linking words that establish a *logical relationship* between two clauses and/or thought units.** (See discussion of “Immediate Literary Context” for explanation of “thought unit.”)

There are many sorts of possible logical relationships between two clauses, including:

- **Purpose** or **Cause/Reason**: often signaled with *therefore/for/then/so that/that*
1 Thess 2:9 | ... that we might not be a burden to any of you ...
- **Result**: often signaled with *so that/that*
2 Thess 1:12 | ... so that the name of our Lord Jesus ...
- **Further Explanation**: often signaled with *for*
1 Thess 1:9 | For they themselves report concerning us ...
- **Grounds/Reason** or **Motivation**: often signaled with *since/because/for*
1 Thess 4:7 | For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.
- **Transition, Specification** (general-to-specific), or **Focusing**: often signaled with *now/then/so then/finally*
1 Thess 4:1 | Finally, then, brothers and sisters ...
2 Thess 2:1 | Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ...
- **Summarizing** or **Concluding**: often signaled with *so/therefore*
1 Thess 4:17 | ... and so we will always be with the Lord.
- **Contrast**: often signaled with *but/rather/however*
2 Thess 2:13 | But we ought always to give thanks to God for you ...
- **Concession**: often signaled with *although/though/even*
1 Thess 2:6 | ... though we could have made demands ...
- **Amplification** (development) or **Sequence**: often signaled with *and/but*
1 Thess 2:13 | And we also thank God constantly for this ...
- **Comparison**: often signaled with *just as/so also*
1 Thess 5:11 | ... just as you are doing ...
- **Temporal Sequence**: often signaled with *when/before/now*
1 Thess 2:6 | But now that Timothy has come to us from you ...
- **Condition**: often signaled with *if... then*
 - 2 Thess 3:10 | If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat ...

TOOLBOX | Literary Context

For help in dealing with a passage's literary context, consult your Study Bible's *cross-references*. Cross-references are often located in the margin of your Bible (in the center). These references list passages that, according to the Study-Bible editor, are highly relevant to a particular theme, sentence, phrase, or word.

Immediate Literary Context | To determine what portion of text constitutes your passage's "immediate literary context," identify the immediately preceding and following **thought unit**. (If your passage opens or concludes the book, then merely refer either to the following or preceding passage, respectively.) Thought units can vary in length, sometimes consisting of multiple paragraphs and/or sentences, and sometimes consisting of just one sentence.

After identifying which passages to examine as the main passage's "immediate literary context," consider: *How does the passage's immediate literary context help establish the passage's meaning and significance? What specific role does the main passage play in its immediate literary context?*

Whole-Book Literary Context | Every passage in a letter contributes somehow to the author's main argument. Conversely, how we interpret a passage is controlled to a certain degree by the letter's main argument. So we must ask: *What role does this specific passage play in the whole book? And, conversely, what role does the whole book play in how we interpret and apply this specific passage?*

- Does the specific passage under analysis initiate, develop, or bring to a conclusion one of the book's key themes? (Look for a word/phrase/image/idea that recurs throughout the book that also directly or indirectly appears in your passage.) If so, how does the whole-book development of this theme affect your interpretation of this specific passage and what the author intends to accomplish in this passage?
- In its context, does your passage represent a transition to a different aspect of the author's main argument? If so, how does the main argument illuminate this particular aspect of it?

Whole-Bible Literary Context | Helpful tools for whole-Bible context include Study-Bible cross-references, online concordances (such as biblegateway.com, in which you can search a word or phrase in a particular English version), and commentaries.

- Ask, "*At what point in God's big story of redemption does the author write this book?*" This question helps determine the "redemptive-historical" context of the passage. For example, Paul writes to the Colossians "between the comings": after the first coming of Christ and before the second coming of Christ.
- Consider other Scripture passages by the same author that address aspects of this passage's main themes.
- Consider a few other passages in the Bible that also deal with this passage's main themes.
- Consider whether Jesus ever taught on the topics that the author addresses in this passage.
- Perhaps consider one or two major passages in the opposite testament (Old or New) relative to this passage that deal with one of this passage's major themes.

After identifying and examining these additional passages for context: *How do these additional passages help you interpret and apply the specific passage you're analyzing?*

TOOLBOX | Unifying Theme

The unifying theme is the result of several key themes in a book or passage integrating and coming together to a point. It's important to be able to articulate the central message of a passage in a succinct, clear statement, which is why we aim to develop a "unifying-theme statement" (just one sentence!). In order to understand, explain, and apply a passage, we are greatly helped by working hard to distill a passage's many rich truths into one succinct, simple statement.

Of course, no single sentence can exhaust a passage's meaning. The goal of writing a unifying-theme statement isn't to be thorough and capture all the rich details. Rather, we aim to capture the main idea in a simple statement that helps us "cut open" a text and see how the various details of the passage express a principal message.

What's the process of developing a unifying-theme statement of any given passage?

1. Read! (and re-read!)

Ideally, read through the whole book in one sitting. Perhaps mix up how you "hear" the whole book, for example, by marking it up as you read it, reading it aloud, and/or listening to a recording of it.

2. Notice repeated words, phrases, and ideas.

Authors of Scripture didn't have highlighters. So how did they establish emphasis in their passage? Repetition! When an author repeats a word, phrase, or idea, he is emphasizing it. Another way to describe an author's "unifying theme" in a passage is "main emphasis."

3. Work out the passage's structure.

Structure is another mechanism of the author's for establishing emphasis. For example, in New Testament epistles, the authors often refer to the book's key themes in the book's introduction and conclusion.

Understanding a book's/passage's structure is hard work! Usually, our initial thoughts about a passage's structure change as we spend more time in the passage. After reading through the book or passage in full, take a stab at an initial, simple outline. But you'll probably want to tweak that outline a few more times in the process.

4. List key themes and their relationship to one another.

After reading the passage thoroughly, attending to repetitions, and making an initial outline ... make a list of what seem to be the key themes. Once you have listed all the book's key themes, consider how these themes *relate to one another* and *integrate into one main idea*, or "unifying theme." For a book's unifying-theme statement, it's helpful to review again and again those passages that seemingly play a dominant role in clarifying the book's main idea.

5. Identify author's aim/purpose in composing this passage. (See the next "tool"!)

6. Articulate the passage's unifying theme in a resonant (with the text and the audience), simple, and clear sentence that has explanatory power for the whole text.

- To strengthen your statement's resonance with the text, use actual words from the passage. Some make a "non-negotiable lists" in which they identify the two or three key words or themes that they think are vital to have in their unifying-theme statement.
- In articulating the passage's unifying theme, be simple but not simplistic.
- Regarding a unifying-theme statement's explanatory power for the whole passage: if there is an element of the passage that your statement doesn't help explain (in terms of why the author included that element in the passage), then your unifying-theme sentence might not be sufficiently *unifying*. That is, you might have articulated a key theme of the passage, but not its main theme.

TOOLBOX | Author's Aim

Here are a few tips for discerning an author's aim/purpose in composing a particular passage:

1. **Start with the whole book.** What is the author's purpose in writing the whole book?
2. **Examine the specific passage.** What evidence is there of the author's particular aim/purpose in this specific passage? To help clarify an author's peculiar purpose in one passage within its whole-book context, ask: *If this passage were to drop out of the book, what would be missing from the book as a whole?*
3. **Relate the aim of the passage with the aim of the book.** *How does the author's purpose in this specific passage contribute to his overarching purpose?* This question helps interpreters discern the logical relationship between the specific passage and the book as a whole.

TOOLBOX | Application

Putting God's Word into practice (including by sharing that Word to others) requires careful listening. Faithfully "doing" and "retelling" the Word depends on humbly "hearing" that Word.

God's Spirit is the chief Teacher and Applier of God's Word. He is the *only* One who can change hearts by his Word. We servants of the Word don't "make the Bible relevant"—we simply aim to make God's Word plain in order to show its intrinsic relevance. We must ask the Chief Author of these inspired words to pierce our hearts with them.

Preparing to retell a passage of Scripture in this manner requires that we first **yield our own heart** to let God's Word do its work in us. Only then ought we consider how that Word applies to others and seek opportunities to speak that Word to others' hearts.

Here are a few tips for discerning the main application of a passage of Scripture:

1. **Prioritize the author's main/unifying theme in this passage.**

Usually one passage can legitimately inspire a number of helpful application points. But rather than noting all the many ways these ancient words apply to a contemporary audience, it's best to focus on the author's principal idea, so that the passage's thematic emphasis gives rise to and aligns with your applicational emphasis.

2. **Adopt the author's original aim in writing the passage as your aim in applying it.**

For example, in 2 Thess 2:1–12, Paul admonishes this congregation, some of whom had embraced a false claim that the day of the Lord has already happened. So Paul **refutes** the false claim and **instructs** these young believers in the truth, in preparation for (2:13–15) exhorting them to "stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us."

Pointed application of this passage, then, will involve considering:

*Among my hearers, are there similarly deceptive claims relating to Jesus's second coming that **threaten** to shake us/them (2:1–3a)? What sorts of false teaching in this regard are we facing in our context? And how does believers' embracing this false teaching result in being shaken and losing confidence in God's salvation of them?*

Having identified contemporary threats to believers' right understanding of Jesus's second coming and assurance of salvation, pointed application will involve exposing these threats, refuting their claims, and instructing in the truth (the apostolic tradition).

3. **Call for a specific response.** Ask: *What does God require from me in response to the truths revealed in this passage? And in what specific area of my life does he require this of me?*

Let the passage's unifying theme guide you and focus your application. Getting *specific* and *concrete* in applying a passage helps us put that Word into practice.

All of Scripture calls us to respond to God in faith and obedience. We discern the particulars of a passage's call by closely examining it. Sometimes the main thing God requires from us in a passage is that we *believe* a particular truth. Sometimes it's that we *change our attitude* about something. Sometimes it's that we *say "no"* to something—or *repent* of a sin pattern. Sometimes it's that we *open our heart and humble ourselves* to experience the beauty and power of God's love. Sometimes it's that we *more actively trust Jesus Christ* and the promise of his return. Usually, it's a combination of several of these!

4. **Avoid moralism.** Ask: *Why must I do what God requires of me in this passage?*

"Moralism" falsely teaches that Christianity is mainly about being a good, moral person. Moralism emphasizes human performance rather than God's performance.

But we must never apply a passage in a manner that unhinges it from its gospel context. We must explicitly root a passage's "call to action" in *God's prior action on our behalf*. (See discussion under "Structure" for the distinction between a passage's "indicatives" and "imperatives" and the gospel sequence of the two.) God's performance is primary. Scripture application that matures people in the long run is application rooted in the gospel and empowered by the Spirit. It doesn't merely aim for behavior modification.

5. **Don't be superficial or naïve.** Ask: *Why is it difficult for me to do what God requires?*

This question helps us apply the Word to broken, fallen sinners with sober-mindedness, compassion, and urgency. It helps us attend to the tension we sinner-saints experience in our daily struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Yes, Christ has decisively defeated our enemy on the cross. But the battle rages on until that day when the Lord Jesus returns and consummately exercises his victory.

6. **Don't leave listeners hanging.** Ask: *How can I do what God requires of me?*

The message of Christianity is decidedly NOT "God helps those who help themselves." It is NOT "God does the first part, now you do the rest." No, the Christian life is grace upon grace—including with respect to God's enabling of us to follow Jesus day by day. God equips those he calls. He supplies sinner-saints the grace to "do the Word."

Here again, we must closely examine the passage and its unifying theme. The passage itself usually indicates, whether explicitly or implicitly, how God empowers obedience.

Just as God motivates his people to obey him by his grace, he also empowers them to obey him by his grace. So, in giving the passage's call to action, highlight God's provisions of grace to enable sinners to respond to his Word in faith and repentance.

In sum, faithful application of God's Word to others involves **asking** God for wisdom and humility, **submitting your own heart** to God's word, **prioritizing** the author's unifying theme and his aim/purpose, and **developing** a specific call to action which is **rooted in the gospel** and is therefore a response *to* God's grace that is undertaken *by* God's gracious empowerment.

Four of these questions come from Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 214–22.

