

*Colossians &
Philemon*

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS



P U B L I S H I N G

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CONTENTS

Series Introduction ix

Preface to Colossians and Philemon xiii

COLOSSIANS: THE ALL-SUFFICIENT CHRIST

1. In Colossae, in Christ: Colossians 1:1–2 3
2. Bearing Fruit and Growing: Colossians 1:3–8 13
3. Strengthened with Power: Colossians 1:9–11 23
4. Qualified as Heirs: Colossians 1:12 33
5. The Great Transfer: Colossians 1:13–14 43
6. The Image of the Invisible: Colossians 1:15 53
7. The Eternal Christ: Colossians 1:16–17 64
8. Head of the Church: Colossians 1:18 74
9. Peace by His Blood: Colossians 1:19–20 84
10. The Gospel “If”: Colossians 1:21–23 94
11. God’s Word Made Known: Colossians 1:24–25 104
12. Christ in You: Colossians 1:26–27 114
13. Him We Proclaim: Colossians 1:28–29 124
14. With You in Spirit: Colossians 2:1–5 134
15. Walk in Him: Colossians 2:6–7 144
16. Tradition versus Christ: Colossians 2:8–10 154

Contents

- 17. The Circumcision of Christ: Colossians 2:11–12 164
- 18. Alive with Christ: Colossians 2:13 174
- 19. Nailed to the Cross: Colossians 2:14–15 184
- 20. A Shadow of Things to Come: Colossians 2:16–17 194
- 21. Self-Made Religion: Colossians 2:18–23 204
- 22. Hidden with Christ: Colossians 3:1–4 214
- 23. The Mortification of Sin: Colossians 3:5–8 224
- 24. The New Self: Colossians 3:9–11 234
- 25. The Garments of Grace: Colossians 3:12–14 244
- 26. The Peace of Christ: Colossians 3:15–17 254
- 27. Grace in the Home: Colossians 3:18–21 265
- 28. Grace in the Workplace: Colossians 3:22–4:1 276
- 29. Watch and Pray: Colossians 4:2–4 286
- 30. Grace Seasoned with Salt: Colossians 4:5–6 296
- 31. Band of Brothers: Colossians 4:7–18 306

PHILEMON: ON ACCOUNT OF GRACE

- 32. Grace Made Effective: Philemon 1–7 319
- 33. For the Sake of Love: Philemon 8–16 330
- 34. To My Account: Philemon 17–25 340

- Bibliography of Commentaries Cited 351
- Index of Scripture 355
- Index of Subjects and Names 363

SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

Series Introduction

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE TO COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

When the apostle Paul urged that “in everything” Christ “might be pre-eminent” (Col. 1:18), his aim was not primarily directed at the public worship of God’s people. Rather, Paul was noting the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ for salvation, so that any other saving hope would be set aside. Identifying the “Colossian heresy” against which this letter was written has kept academic scholars busy for generations. But the particular elements of the false teaching plaguing the churches of the Lycus Valley are clear and present dangers for Christians today. The perils of legalism, mysticism, and asceticism continue to lurk, each spuriously offering a higher path to spiritual attainment than is found in Christ alone. Therefore, Colossians is not only a fascinating look into the proto-Gnostic spirituality threatening the early churches in Asia, but an urgently relevant critique of challenges that threaten believers today with distractions from Christ. “Let no one disqualify you,” Paul warned concerning the “higher life” false teaching in Colossae, “not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body . . . grows with a growth that is from God” (2:18–19).

Not only is Colossians an extraordinarily relevant book for Christians today, but this New Testament epistle also provides a singularly potent Christology that is drawn from the language of the false categories of the Colossian heretics. In other words, Paul shows how all that they sought through “the elemental spirits of the world” (Col. 2:20) comes to its true and full expression in the person and work of Christ. In this way, Colossians provides a compelling view of apostolic apologetics, taking “every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Since the false teaching afflicting this church—an alloyed mixture of Jewish legalism and Greco-Roman mystery

Preface to Colossians and Philemon

religions—purported to offer mystic power, Colossians provides a penetrating discussion of the power that Christ gives for the mortification of sin. Not merely outward conformity but an inward renewal as “the new self” (Col. 3:10) is generated by the power of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ sends from heaven. The template for Christian sanctification set forth in Colossians 3 is vitally needed in our time, both to outline biblical expectations for God’s people and to encourage believers in the mighty renewal that Christ is able and willing to achieve in our lives, working from the inside and bearing outward fruit.

Colossians has similarities with Paul’s other “prison letters”—Ephesians and Philippians—but provides a unique benefit by casting Paul’s characteristic doctrines in pointed language suited to the challenges of this particular church—challenges that are distinctively felt by Christians in the post-Christian world today. Colossians is therefore highly relevant for the influence it should exert on the ministry approaches of churches in our time: the same churches that should hold Christ as preeminent should also identify their primary mission in the apostle’s soaring charge: “Him we proclaim” (Col. 1:28).

The adjoining letter to Philemon provides an application of the doctrine in Colossians to a member of this church who needed to learn that right doctrine must produce right relationships. Paul urges Philemon to rethink his relationship to a returned slave for the sake of the love and grace shown to Philemon in Christ. Here the sufficiency of Christ for exhortation and transformed living is put on eloquent display.

The material found in these chapters was first preached to the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina, to whom I express my deepest thanks for their love of God’s Word and generous support of my ministry. I also thank my wife, Sharon, for her tireless ministry and loving support. I am further grateful to Philip Ryken, Dan Doriani, Karen Magnuson, and John Hughes for their extensive editorial contributions. This volume is dedicated to Alonzo and Esther Ramirez, whose heroic labors for the gospel in northern Peru are an inspiration to many. I contribute these chapters with prayers that Christ may be exalted and his people strengthened in faith. To him be all glory.

Richard D. Phillips
Greenville, South Carolina



Colossians

THE ALL-SUFFICIENT CHRIST

1

IN COLOSSAE, IN CHRIST

Colossians 1:1–2

*To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace
to you and peace from God our Father. (Col. 1:2)*



Acts 19 records the apostle Paul’s ministry in the city of Ephesus, in western Asia Minor. For two years, Paul taught the Bible daily in the hall of Tyrannus, with the result that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). Asia was the Roman province in which Ephesus was located, so it is clear that Paul’s message was spreading outward from that city. One direction in which the gospel traveled was eastward up the Meander River, and then along a tributary into the Lycus Valley. There lay three cities where significant churches would grow: Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae.

Those who believe in Jesus always have a desire to share the gospel with others. In this case, a disciple named Epaphras had listened to Paul’s teaching, believed in Christ, and then returned home to his native Colossae to tell the good news of salvation to his people. Jesus had taught that the kingdom of God is like a farmer spreading seed—the seed being the Word of God (Luke 8:11)—and Paul’s two years of teaching in Ephesus had spread seed among the Colossians.

If we date Paul's Ephesian ministry from A.D. 53 to 55, the book of Colossians takes us to the years 60–62, when after many travels Paul was enduring his first imprisonment in Rome. There, he was found by the same Epaphras who had sat under his teaching in Ephesus, bringing news from Colossae. What encouragement it must have brought to Paul to learn how through his ministry these distant people had embraced the faith! Yet a challenge had arisen there that probably brought the younger minister to visit Paul. False teaching and worldly pressure had beset this church, threatening its spiritual life. Paul therefore sent Epaphras back home with a letter, the purpose of which was to assure the young believers of the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

John Calvin described Paul's letter to the Colossians as "an inestimable treasure,"¹ providing "some of the richest, highest, most exalted and worshipful words about Jesus found anywhere in the New Testament."² Colossians is also immensely practical, modeling for Christians in the world an approach to both faithfulness and cultural engagement that finds fullness in all things through Christ. Paul bears an expansive message about the glory of Christ, saying that "he is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . , that in everything he might be preeminent" (Col. 1:17–18). In Colossians, the apostle also bears a message to us, that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3), so that we might "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (3:1).

PAUL, AN APOSTLE

Following the custom of his day, Paul began the letter with his name and office: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:1). Paul wrote thirteen biblical books, making up just under one-quarter of the New Testament. Apart from Jesus, it is hard to think of anyone who has left so indelible a mark on the history of the Christian church.

"Apostle" means "one who is sent." In the New Testament era, apostles were missionaries who traveled about, preaching the gospel and forming churches. Most importantly—and Paul surely intends to emphasize this—apostles bore the authority of Christ in their teaching and rule, an authority

1. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 21:134.

2. Brian G. Hedges, *Christ All Sufficient: An Exposition of Colossians* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2016), 15.

granted them by the risen and exalted Lord Jesus himself. Martyn Lloyd-Jones defines an apostle as “one chosen and sent with a special mission as the fully authorized representative of the sender.”³ Concerning Paul, Peter O’Brien writes, “As an apostle he has the authority to proclaim the gospel in both oral and written form, as well as to establish and build up churches.”⁴

Acts 1:22 establishes the qualifications that an apostle must have been personally disciplined by Jesus and have witnessed the resurrection. Paul fulfilled these criteria by means of his conversion experience on the Damascus road, when he was converted and commissioned by the risen Lord. So what Jesus said to the apostles just before his ascension into heaven applies equally to Paul: “You will receive power . . . , and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Paul’s writing, like that of the other apostles, is the exalted Christ’s own Word as the Holy Spirit inspired these official messengers and delegates.

Paul adds that he is an apostle of Christ “by the will of God” (Col. 1:1). This was not a job that Paul had sought and worked toward on his own. He was called and equipped by God’s grace. It is on this basis that his teaching is to be received, not because of his own native genius and persuasive power, but in submission to God who appointed him and Christ who commissioned him. This contrast between divine and human authority is important to Paul; the opening words of Galatians work this out even more clearly: “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). This apostolicity means that whatever we find taught in Colossians comes from God himself and that we must therefore receive it in obedience to him.

Paul was not alone in sending this letter, but was joined by “Timothy our brother” (Col. 1:1). Timothy was one of Paul’s longest tenured and most loyal associates, having been converted under Paul’s ministry years before. He is named not as an apostle but as “our brother,” signifying both their shared Christian faith and their ministry partnership. Timothy was in Rome at Paul’s side and may have served as the secretary who wrote down this letter. It is suggestive, however, that within a few years Timothy would be leading the church in and around Ephesus. Paul may therefore have wanted to introduce the younger leader as a competent teacher and spiritual authority

3. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 1: The Gospel of God* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 38.

4. Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 84.

in his own right. It is clear from the letter itself, however, especially the concluding remarks, that Paul was the primary author of Colossians.

THE CHURCH IN COLOSSAE

The city of Colossae was located about eighty miles inland from Ephesus in what is today western Turkey, settled on the main road to the cities of the east. It seems that Paul had never visited this place, though the gospel spread there from his ministry. He writes to a new but thriving gathering of believers, closely knitted to those in nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis.

The city had been settled by Greeks and was described by Xenophon in the fifth century B.C. as “a great city.”⁵ By Roman times, the city had declined, although its population had been fortified by the relocation of a large community of Jews from Babylon. The people of Colossae, including the church, would soon be forced to abandon their city because of the recurrence of destructive earthquakes. It is likely for this reason that Colossae does not appear among the churches listed by the apostle John in the seven letters of Revelation, so that the most enduring legacy of the Colossian church was this letter from Paul.

The church at Colossae was facing struggles that came from the surrounding communities, so that, like so many other New Testament epistles, Colossians was written to combat heresy. The contents of this letter indicate that the church members had been converted out of both the Greek and the Jewish communities, and it seems that the trouble came from both directions. Despite this trial, Colossians is a positive letter, far more cheerful and affirming than, for instance, Galatians or 1 Corinthians. O’Brien writes: “Paul believed God had effected a mighty change in their lives: he had reconciled them to himself in an earthshattering event, namely, Christ’s physical death on the cross (1:22); God had delivered them from a tyranny of darkness and transferred them into a kingdom in which his beloved Son held sway (1:13). They now possessed redemption and the forgiveness of their sins (1:14).”⁶ The letter was written, then, not to rebuke believers who were falling away, but to exhort them to continue in faith in Christ against threats to their spiritual well-being.

5. Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 1.2.6.

6. Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary 44 (Dallas: Word, 1982), xxix.

Exactly what heresy was facing the Colossians is difficult to nail down. Greek converts may have incorporated beliefs from their former mystery religions, which highlighted a ritual initiation into mystic insights. For this reason, some commentators define the Colossian heresy as Gnosticism, involving denials of the deity of Jesus, which we know did infect the region in later years (as seen in 1-3 John). But Gnosticism was at this stage more of a mood than a full-fledged religion, and the general idea of spiritual ascent through mystic knowledge and experiences seems to have infiltrated the Colossian church. The Colossians needed more than introductory teaching from Paul and his friends, the false teachers taught; they needed to advance beyond mere faith in Jesus. Moreover, through the Jewish community a rigid asceticism cried, “Do not taste, Do not touch” (Col. 2:21), to create a toxic mixture of mysticism and legalism, not unlike certain forms of Pentecostalism today.

The special relevance of Colossians today is seen in Paul’s advice on how to respond to the spiritual and intellectual pressures of a corrupted world. The first and key step is always to see Christ in his truth and glory. F. F. Bruce writes, “A firm grounding in Christology, then, in its practical implications for the daily life of believers was the best defense against the illusory attractiveness of the Colossian heresy.”⁷ Today, Christians are similarly beset by false ideologies involving both relativism and moralism. In Colossians, Paul teaches us to evaluate every worldview through the truth of Christ as Son of God and sin-bearing Savior. It is fascinating to watch Paul pick up the terminology of the pagan culture and show how the truth that it expressed in vanity is actually embodied in Christ, in whom we gain the knowledge of God and the true “hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). The vain ideas of the non-Christian culture were mere shadows, while “the substance belongs to Christ” (2:17). Distinctively in Colossians, Paul employs an apologetic that takes “every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Bruce writes:

As apologist to the Gentiles, [Paul] may have been the first to meet his pagan opponents on their own ground and use their language in a Christian sense, in order to show that the problems to which they unsuccessfully sought an answer elsewhere found their solution in the gospel.⁸

7. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 28.

8. Bruce, 29.

If we compare Colossians to Paul's other famous epistles, we can glean insight into how the Holy Spirit provided an array of settings in which the richness of New Testament theology was revealed. In Romans, Paul detailed the righteousness of God that is in Christ through faith. Ephesians centers on the blessings of God through union with Christ. Philippians highlights the believer's joy in Christ. Colossians adds to this tapestry a stunning portrait of the ultimate supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ. R. Kent Hughes celebrates the letter's unique contribution to Christ-centered worship: "There is no book in the New Testament . . . that presents such a comprehensive picture of the fullness of Christ. Accordingly, there is no writing better equipped to draw us upward than the book of Colossians."⁹

WHAT BELIEVERS HAVE BECOME IN CHRIST

As we advance in Paul's greeting, the opening verses unfold what the Colossians have become in Christ. Paul addresses his readers: "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae" (Col. 1:2).

Few Bible words have a more misleading history than the designation "saints." Most people think of saints as super-spiritual achievers who are far removed from the mundane affairs of normal life. How common it is to hear Christians exclaim, "I'm not a saint, after all!" But as Paul and the Bible use the word, you cannot be a Christian *without* being a saint. Being a Christian makes you a saint by definition.

We need to consider the Roman Catholic teaching here because it exerts such an influence on most people's use of this word. Saints, Rome says, are those few believers whose great spiritual attainments and alleged post-mortem miracles elevate them above lesser Christians so as to become intermediaries with heaven.¹⁰ Because saints supposedly "proffer the merits which they acquired on earth"¹¹ in intercession for us, they are adored, venerated, and trusted for salvation. The idolatry of this practice lies on the very surface. Moreover, the idea that anyone may come to God on his own merits—much less with excess merits, as Rome teaches—is offensive to the

9. R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 211.

10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 828.

11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 956.

biblical teaching of sin and justification through faith in Christ alone, and denies the sufficiency of Christ as our Savior and intercessor. Refuting the Roman teaching, 1 Timothy 2:5 states that “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

In the Bible’s usage, *all* Christians are saints. Paul uses this expression many times in his letters, and a glance through them will show that he means ordinary, regular, sinful, struggling Christians like you and me. The word *saint* comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, meaning “holy one.” *Holiness* is a condition characterized by being set apart by and for God. In this sense we must realize that sainthood is a fact concerning every Christian, something that pertains to all who are in Christ. Leon Morris elaborates:

A holy place, such as a temple, is a building not to be used for secular purposes; it is set apart for the worship of God. Holy vessels are withdrawn from all other use and are used only in the service of God. Similarly, “saints” are people who belong to God.¹²

“Saints” therefore describes something that has happened to Christians. We have been set apart by God, for God, becoming his property and his holy people. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:10, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” Having been made saints, believers have holiness as their calling and obligation. Christians are separated not from people but from sin, not from the world but from worldliness. Lloyd-Jones writes that for the saint, “there is a separation which has taken place in your mind, in your outlook, in your heart, in your conversation, in your behaviour.”¹³ Paul therefore writes to the Colossians with a reminder of their high calling as saints.

Paul adds that his readers have become “faithful brothers in Christ” (Col. 1:2). We may take “faithful” to mean that they had come to faith in Jesus as God’s Son and their Savior. The New Testament constantly stresses the need to believe the gospel message and trust in God in order to be saved. You are not a Christian if you simply are a charitable person, lead a certain lifestyle, or possess morality and idealism. You are a Christian if

12. Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 11.

13. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 27.

you believe certain specific and essential truths that center on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Faith begins receptively, openhandedly grasping what is promised and offered by God in Jesus Christ. But once we receive Jesus, we are to be faithful in an active sense. Believing these truths, we practice them; committing ourselves to Christ, we manifest that commitment in our choices and actions. It is likely that Paul writes of the Colossians as faithful in this sense. They are surrounded by spiritual and intellectual threats, but they have held firm to Christ and his gospel.

Paul calls the Colossians “faithful brothers,” noting their family relationship with God, his Son, and all fellow believers. It is said that “birds of a feather flock together,” and the Colossians had turned from the world to Christ and one another in a new and holy society. Various shortcomings of these believers will come out in this letter. Yet because they are “saints and faithful” (Col. 1:2), Paul embraces them as brothers and sisters from the outset.

All that had happened to the Colossians could be summed up as “in Christ” (Col. 1:2). This expression occurs over eighty times in Paul’s letters and means far more than “believing in” Christ. Paul’s basic idea is union with Christ through faith. We become one with Christ, so that in terms of his privileges and blessings, “all that Christ has done, all that he was (and is), and all that he ever would be” is now ours.¹⁴ Since Jesus enjoys the fatherhood of God, in him we likewise become children in God’s family. James Dunn writes, “Their brotherhood was not one of blood relationship, but rather the spiritual bond of the shared experience of believing in Christ.”¹⁵ Just as the believers were located in Colossae physically, they also were in Christ spiritually and redemptively.

Perhaps the key to understanding the challenge addressed in this letter is seen as Paul describes his readers as “in Christ at Colossae” (Col. 1:2). The Greek original seems to imply a deliberate parallel: “in Colossae . . . in Christ.” Though their earthly citizenship was in Colossae, their heavenly citizenship was in Christ. Though they were surrounded by unbelief and a melding of pagan mysticism and Jewish legalism, they found their

14. Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, 213.

15. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 49.

sufficiency in Christ. While observers might identify them as Colossians, they identified themselves in Christ, as believers and fellow children of God. And while the aims and concerns of their native city were still relevant, their true calling and passion were connected to the gospel-spreading mission of Christ. What these ancient believers had become is also true of all believers today. Yes, we are in the world. But wherever we find ourselves, we are “in Christ”—trusting in God through him and seeking to glorify God in the missionary calling of our lives.

WHAT BELIEVERS HAVE RECEIVED IN CHRIST

Paul concludes his greeting in his characteristic language: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father” (Col. 1:2). If “saints and faithful brothers” defines what the believers had become, “grace” and “peace” specify what they have received through Jesus Christ.

“Grace” is often defined as “God’s unmerited favor.” This is true, but it does not go far enough. Grace is God’s favor to us when we have merited his condemnation. We have earned God’s hatred and wrath, yet he causes us to be forgiven and makes us his precious children. The measure of God’s grace is the costliness of his gift in sending his Son to remove our guilt on the cross, reconciling us by his love.

God’s grace finds expression in the unstoppable plan of grace for our salvation. Paul will show in Colossians that while every secular scheme of salvation undercuts God’s grace, a sufficiency of grace is found in his Son. All that God has done, including our election in eternity past (Col. 3:12), the sending of his Son to be the head of the church, his body (1:18), the forgiveness of our sins on the cross (2:13), and even his commissioning of Paul to be the teacher of the gospel, is conceived as the work of God’s grace. How encouraging it is to the beleaguered Christian today, like the Colossians of old, to know that our salvation is the free gift of God, according to his sovereign and eternal plan of grace. We may therefore rely utterly on God’s grace, giving God all the glory for our blessings in Christ.

“Grace” describes God’s unmerited favor and his way of saving sinners. Finally, grace is God’s power working in us for newness of life. It is by grace that the Colossians will escape captivity from “philosophy and empty deceit,

according to human tradition” (Col. 2:8), and be enabled to “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (3:10).

By grace and in Christ, believers like the Colossians further receive the blessing of “peace from God our Father” (Col. 1:2). The world’s idea of peace includes only the absence of strife and conflict. We may sign peace treaties, but the hatred is still there and war soon resumes. The deeper biblical idea of peace is expressed by the Hebrew word *shalom*. To unpack *shalom*, Morris writes, “[Paul] is speaking about the deep and abiding peace that comes when people are right with God.”¹⁶ Jesus offers us his own enduring peace, promising: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27).

God’s peace is conveyed through Jesus specifically by his death and resurrection; Paul says in Ephesians 2:14, “He himself is our peace.” Do you know peace with God? Are you able to say that you have his favor and love? Do you love him in return, longing to do his will and know him better? The only way that you can know true peace is by coming to God through faith in Christ, confessing your sins, and trusting Christ’s death and resurrection, all of which were given for you to have peace with God. Notice carefully Paul’s order: first grace and then peace. By God’s grace we have *peace with God*, and Christians receive the *peace of God* in order to live harmoniously with one another. Paul therefore later exhorts the Colossians to “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body” (Col. 3:15).

If you do not know the peace that God gives, you need only ask him for it, for a sufficiency of every blessing is found in Jesus Christ. Since true peace comes from “God our Father” (Col. 1:2), you will find it only in his Son. The Colossians, immature and vulnerable as they were, had become saints and faithful brothers, and had received grace and peace from God our Father because, Paul explains, they had “received Christ Jesus the Lord” in faith (2:6). The false teachers of Colossae offered a higher experience than the gospel of Jesus could provide. Paul answers that, blessed with grace and peace, we have no need for mystic ecstasies and no cause for legalistic chains, but that in Christ we possess even now, in the words of Mark Johnston, “nothing less than a tantalizing foretaste of the wholeness of the world to come in this present age of imperfection.”¹⁷

16. Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians*, 13.

17. Mark G. Johnston, *Let’s Study Colossians and Philemon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2013), 12.