

Paul's Letter to the Colossians Study  
Bible Study Session 19  
09.1 Colossians  
"A Summary Overview"

Study By  
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The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>

Any serious study of a scripture text must give consideration to two basic questions: *What was the most likely original meaning of the text to those who first read, or heard read, this letter?* And then, *What is the relevant application of this original meaning to our day?* This is the several centuries old lesson that historical exegesis of ancient texts has taught us. Skip over either of these questions, and your interpretation of scripture will be seriously flawed. You face the inevitable disaster of false understanding of God's Word!

Additionally, when we seek to understand an ancient text we are standing on the shoulders of countless numbers of individuals over the centuries of interpretative history who have also tried to make sense out of this ancient text. To ignore, or to be ignorant of, their efforts will leave our ability to correctly understand the scripture text severely deficient of potentially profitable insights. But to only look to the interpretive history without seriously examining the text itself is equally wrong. It's a lazy way to do scripture study, and will short circuit the speaking of the Holy Spirit to us through the sacred text itself.

In all of the eighteen detailed studies of the text of Colossians we have made serious efforts to follow the best procedures of historical exegesis of scripture that give appropriate attention to the interpretive history of each passage. The two text meanings, the 'then' and the 'now' meanings, have been explored at great length. The intent has been to build a proper bridge between these two 'horizons' of the text so that we can penetrate

<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

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back in time to the composition of the letter and then understand how it should apply to us today.

In this study, we reflect back over what has been learned over the weeks of intensive study of the text of Colossians. Hopefully this will enable us to carry away from the study a clearer understanding of the message of Colossians both to the Lycus Valley of the mid-first century world and also to us in the modern world.

## 1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

In raising this question several others are implied. Answers to each of these subsidiary questions will form the best answer to this more basic one. In our reflection only two implicit questions will be explored in order to keep the reflections from ballooning out into too long a discussion. These grow out of the historical situation both for Paul and for the churches in the Lycus Valley that prompted the writing of the letter in the first place. And, secondly, what did Paul say in the letter that addressed the needs of the believing community in that part of the Roman province of ancient Asia?

### a) What was the circumstance when the letter was composed?

The writing of a formal letter in the ancient world always presupposed needs on the part of those addressed by the letter recipients. And also that the sender of the letter possessed relevant and worthwhile insights that could help solve problems being experienced among the targeted readers. Clearly this was the case in regard to Colossians. The idea of 'circumstance' in this case assumes two aspects: that of the letter sender and that of the first letter readers. Both are important because the ancient letter served as a 'substitute presence' of the sender, who due to his personal situation was unable to make a trip to where the readers lived where solutions could be found in a face to face exchange of ideas.

**Paul's circumstance at the writing of the letter.** Where was the apostle at the time of the writing of this letter? Why couldn't he just have traveled to Colossae to address the problems personally? Nowhere inside the letter does Paul indicate his location geographically.

In order to determine the details we need to look inside the letter at several references: 1) his references to being in chains, 2) his mentioning of suffering in behalf of the Colossians, 3) his reference to two associates coming to Colossae to explain his situation, 4) his reference to eight different associates present with him at the writing of the letter, and 5) later efforts to identify a geographical location.

1) Toward the end of the letter, Paul makes reference to his situation twice, three times if 4:10 is included:<sup>2</sup>

**4:2-4. 2 Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, 4 so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.**

2 Τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτερεῖτε, γρηγοροῦντες ἐν αὐτῇ ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ, 3 προσευχόμενοι ἅμα καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν, ἵνα ὁ θεὸς ἀνοίξῃ ἡμῖν θύραν τοῦ λόγου, λαλήσῃαι τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ, δι' ὃ **καὶ δέδεμαι**, 4 ἵνα φανερώσω αὐτὸ ὡς δεῖ με λαλήσῃαι.

**4:18b. Remember my chains.**

μνημονεύετέ **μου τῶν δεσμῶν**.

The point of emphasis in both these statements concerns his reference to being "in chains": καὶ δέδεμαι and μου τῶν δεσμῶν. In the parallel letter that went to Colossae also, Paul mentions his chains twice in the short letter to Philemon:

**Verse 10. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.**

παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς **δεσμοῖς**, Ὀνήσιμον,

**Verse 13. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of**

<sup>2</sup>Col. 4:10 NRSV, 10 Aristarchus **my fellow prisoner** greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him.

10 Ἀσπάζεται ὑμᾶς Ἀρίσταρχος ὁ **συναιχμάλωτός μου**, καὶ Μάρκος ὁ ἀνεψιὸς Βαρναβᾶ (περὶ οὗ ἐλάβετε ἐντολὰς, ἐὰν ἔλθῃ πρὸς ὑμᾶς δέξασθε αὐτόν),



**service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel;**

ὄν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῆ **ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,**

Additionally, in the cover letter of Ephesians, which was written at the same time and also read to the churches in the Lycus Valley as well, Paul mentions his chains:

**Eph. 6:19-20. 19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.**

19 καὶ ὑπὲρ ἑμοῦ, ἵνα μοι δοθῆ λόγος ἐν ἀνοίξει τοῦ στόματός μου, ἐν παρρησίᾳ γνωρίσαι τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ εὐαγγελίου 20 ὑπὲρ οὗ **πρεσβεύω ἐν ἀλύσει,** ἵνα ἐν αὐτῷ παρρησιάσωμαι ὡς δεῖ με λαλῆσαι.

The different word used for ‘chains’ in Ephesians, ἄλυσις, is also a figurative expression for imprisonment, just as δεσμός is. Beyond this, Paul uses the personal noun δέσμιος meaning ‘prisoner’ in Eph. 3:1 and 4:1, along with Philm. 1. Additionally is ὁ συναιχμάλωτός, ‘fellow prisoner,’ in Col. 4:10. The verb δέω that Paul uses in Col. 4:3 in the perfect tense passive voice form defines imprisonment as well.<sup>3</sup> Even though both δεσμός and ἄλυσις could literally specify chains that could be used to bind a person, the figurative use of both terms for imprisonment does not necessarily imply that prisoners would be continuously bound with chains. The figurative meaning simply specified imprisonment or confinement by governmental authorities.<sup>4</sup>

2) Additional indirect insight on Paul’s circumstance can be gleaned from another set of references in Colossians. In 1:24 Paul said Νῦν χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, **I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake.** This seems to be a reference to the ‘chains’ he mentions in chapter four. In 2:1, he further mentions, Θέλω γὰρ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ἠλίκον ἀγῶνα ἔχω ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ καὶ ὅσοι οὐχ ἑώρακαν τὸ πρόσωπόν μου ἐν σαρκί, **For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face.** Again at least some of Paul’s struggle, ἀγῶνα, being experienced at the time of the writing of the letter is connected to his chains. What his ἀγῶνα, struggles, were specifically are not defined. Most likely they centered on the legal issues of charges being brought against

<sup>3</sup>Pass. (Biogr. p. 238) **δέδεμαι be bound**, i.e., a prisoner **Mk 15:7.** κατέλιπε δεδεμένον leave behind as a prisoner **Ac 24:27** (δεδεμένος=in prison, as Diog. L. 2, 24 of Socrates); ἀπέστειλεν δ. **J 18:24.** Cp. **Col 4:3;** IEph 1:2 al. in Ignatius. Παύλου δεδεμένου AcPI Ha 2, 1. δέδεμαι ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι be a prisoner because of the name (=being a Christian) IEph 3:1.” [William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 221.]

<sup>4</sup>The reference to chains is important as it speaks to the nature of Paul’s confinement. One must assume, since Paul in both Philemon and Colossians refers to a variety of associates and friends with whom he is able to have regular conversation and dealings, that his confinement cannot have been too severe. Indeed, that Onesimus somehow came across Paul speaks to this reality as well. As B.Rapske points out, there is always difficulty deciding the exact nature of confinement. A ‘prisoner’ was not necessarily in a prison cell, the terms ‘chains’ and ‘prison’ could be virtually interchangeable, and one could be in chains and not in prison (Digest 50.16.216).<sup>11</sup> Roman imprisonment without chains was a concession given sometimes to a high status prisoner and one could be chained without imprisonment while awaiting trial.

“During the imperial period, when the Roman armies extended the scope of the empire, it was not uncommon for persons to be taken prisoner by the military rather than by a governing official. Military custody in fact became increasingly common during the first century A.D., and sometimes a governing official would simply turn over a prisoner to the military. Military custody is indeed what is depicted in Acts from 21:22 through Paul’s time in Rome: from the outset Paul is chained, and he is escorted to Rome by a soldier or group of soldiers. One could be in military custody in a barracks or a military camp, such as on the Campus Martius in Rome, in the camp of the Praetorian Guard in Rome (see Phil. 1:13),<sup>12</sup> or in one’s own apartment, which presumably would need to be near the military camp. ‘Military custody in a private house was much less severe than in the military camp.... The level of creature comfort was apparently limited only by the prisoner’s own resources and the constraints of security.’<sup>13</sup> Paul was in military custody to assure his appearance at trial. Under house arrest a prisoner would normally have his right hand chained to the left hand of his guard, which gave the advantage to the right-handed guard if there were a struggle or an attempt at escape (see Seneca, Epistle 5.7).

“Since a prisoner had to have permission to approach or be approached by others, we must conclude that Paul’s confinement was one of the lightest possible, for he seems to continue to have ongoing dealings with a variety of people, even non-high status people like Onesimus, and of course Paul suggests in Philm. 22 that he expects to be released. It was regular practice to allow Roman citizens to be placed in the custody of their families or in their own chosen apartment, which is likely to have been Paul’s situation when he wrote these documents.<sup>14</sup> Winter is however right to point out that it is unlikely that a runaway slave would be able to seek asylum in a place of Roman incarceration! By this I mean the theory that Onesimus is not really a runaway but is simply a wanderer seeking intervention for some sort of minor squabble or concern, really does not work.<sup>15</sup> But what of Onesimus, the man who was still a slave? Was he actually in a more perilous situation than Paul? I think the answer to this is yes, not least because he was a slave.”

[Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians : A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 68-69.]

him by Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that could easily bring about his execution. Very likely some hassling of him by the Roman soldiers guarding him took place, although his Roman citizenship would have prevented severe abuse of him while under arrest.

3) Very interestingly, Paul mentions the sending of Tychicus and Onesimus to Colossae in order to explain Paul's situation to the church there (4:7-9):

7 Τὰ κατ' ἐμὲ πάντα γνωρίσει ὑμῖν Τυχικός ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφὸς καὶ πιστὸς διάκονος καὶ σύνδουλος ἐν κυρίῳ, ὃν ἐπέμψα πρὸς ὑμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἵνα γνῶτε τὰ περὶ ἡμῶν καὶ παρακαλέση τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν, 9 σὺν Ὀνησίμῳ τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀγαπητῷ ἀδελφῷ, ὃς ἐστὶν ἐξ ὑμῶν· πάντα ὑμῖν γνωρίσουσιν τὰ ὧδε.

7 Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; 9 he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

Implicit here is awareness of heightened concern for Paul's safety by those believers in the Lycus Valley. Paul desired to alleviate their apprehension about him through the personal explanations of these two beloved Christian brothers.

4) Some additional limited insight comes from examining those individuals around Paul at the time of the writing of this letter.

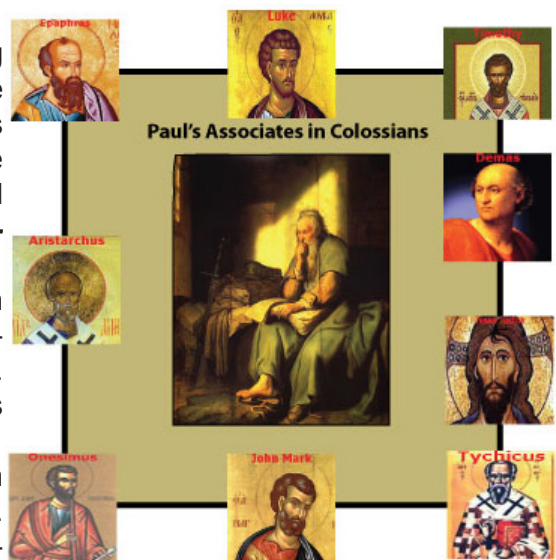
**Epaphras** is mentioned in 1:7-8 and 4:12-13 as having come from Colossae to Paul with news about the situation in the churches of the Lycus Valley.<sup>5</sup> From all indication Colossae was his home, but he traveled between the Lycus Valley and where Paul was imprisoned. At the writing of the letter, also with Paul was **Tychius** (4:7-8), **Onesimus** (4:9), **Aristarchus**, **Mark**, **Jesus Justus** (4:10-11), **Luke** and **Demas** (4:14).

Also mentioned as being with Paul at the writing of Philemon are **Epaphras**, **Mark**, **Aristarchus**, **Demas**, and **Luke** (Philm. 23-23). And **Onesimus** as well (Philm. 10-16), plus Timothy (Philm. 1). Of the nine individuals mentioned in Colossians only Tychicus and Jesus Justus are not mentioned in Philemon.

In Eph. 6:21-22, Paul indicates that **Tychius** will explain Paul's situation to the Ephesians when he arrives with the letter. This letter does not contain a section of greetings as does Colossians and Philemon.

One individual clearly with Paul at the writing of this letter and of Philemon was **Timothy** (Col. 1:1; Philm. 1), who is included as a second sender of both letters to the Colossians. This most likely signals that Timothy was heavily involved in the composing of the letters. Whether or not he accompanied Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9) who carried the letters to the Lycus Valley is not stated directly. Timothy's home was Lystra in the province of Galatia (Acts 16:1), where he joined Paul in ministry during the second missionary journey in the early 50s.

*The clear implication* of the mentioning of the names of these individuals suggests that in some undefined way all of them had some acquaintance with the Christian communities in the Lycus Valley. This is based on the established ancient tradition of sending formal greetings to people whom you have acquaintance with in the greetings sections of ancient letters. Whether or not they had all traveled there is unclear, although Epaphras and Onesimus lived there. Some of these men came from other places as Luke indicates in Acts 20:4.<sup>6</sup> Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and Tychicus was from an unnamed city in the province of Asia, which did include both Ephesus and the cities of the Lycus Valley. And from 2 Tim. 4:10, Demas came from Thessalonica as well as Aristarchus. Although never stated directly it seems that Luke came from one of the cities in Macedonia, whether Philippi or another one is not certain. Whether or not those beyond Epaphras



<sup>5</sup>One caution here about names. The Epaphras (Ἐπαφράς) of Colossians and Philemon is easy to confuse with Epaphroditus (Ἐπαφρόδιτος) whose home was Philippi and is closely linked to the composition and delivery of that letter to Philippi (Phil. 2:25-30).

<sup>6</sup>Acts 20:4 NRSV. He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Beroea, by **Aristarchus** and Secundus from **Thessalonica**, by Gaius from Derbe, and by **Timothy**, as well as by **Tychicus** and Trophimus from **Asia**.

and Onesimus had traveled to the Lycus Valley in ministry or not is unclear. Perhaps they had met various church members from there when these members traveled to Ephesus and other places on business trips.

*The other implication* is that Paul during his imprisonment had a circle of strong Christian friends around him giving assistance in any way he needed. On the assumption that Paul was in Caesarea at this time, the instruction of the Roman governor Felix to the centurion in Acts 24:23 becomes clearer: “Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody, but to let him have some liberty and **not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs.**” διαταξάμενος τῷ ἑκατοντάρχη τηρεῖσθαι αὐτὸν ἔχειν τε ἄνεσιν καὶ **μηδένα κωλύειν τῶν ἰδίων αὐτοῦ ὑπηρετεῖν αὐτῷ.** These men, and very likely others, had freedom to assist Paul and through them Paul could extend his ministry to touch the lives of others far beyond his imprisonment.<sup>7</sup>

The picture emerges from this data inside the letter and the parallel letters of Philemon and Ephesians that the apostle was under arrest by the Roman government. But his confinement did not terminate ministry opportunities, just limited them logistically. He still had opportunity to share Christ with others. He had a circle of competent and highly dedicated Christian brothers around him taking care of his needs and helping extend his ministry to other places.

5) Although we could wish Paul had explained more, from the contents of the letter the picture does emerge that Paul at the writing of the letter was in custody, and most likely this was by the Roman governmental authorities. From references to being under arrest both in Acts and in the letters of Paul, three geographical locations arise as possible locations: Rome, Caesarea, and Ephesus.<sup>8</sup>

Of the three hypothetical possibilities only Rome and Caesarea are realistic possibilities. Drawing firm conclusions on the location is not possible, given the very limited amount of data provided.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were written at the same time, with Ephesians as the cover letter for the other two. This means that the three letters were not only composed at the same time but also were carried to Ephesus and to the Lycus Valley where they were read to the various house church groups both in Ephesus and to the house churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis across the Lycus Valley.



Ephesus 52-57 AD      Caesarea 57-60 AD      Rome 61-62 AD

The imprisonment of Paul in **Ephesus** is known by a brief reference in 1 Cor. 15:32: “Do you think I was

<sup>7</sup>Of course a similar argument can be made for Paul’s imprisonment in Rome as described by Luke in Acts 28:23-31.  
<sup>8</sup>“As a servant of God, Paul endured, among other things, numerous imprisonments (2 Cor. 6:4f; 11:23, 28). The book of Acts records at least three, while early tradition attests to as many as seven confinements (1 Clem. 5:6). In Philippi both Paul and Silas were imprisoned under the care of a jailer (Gk *desmophylax* Acts 16:23, 27, 36; cf. LXX Gen. 39:21; T. Jos. 2:3; Ant. ii.5.1 [61]) who subsequently converted to the faith (Acts 16:30–34). To avoid a Jewish ambush, Paul was escorted by a Roman tribune to Caesarea, where he was confined while awaiting his appearance before Felix the procurator of Judea (23:12–35). But in order to win favor with the Jews, Felix left Paul in prison (24:27). Later Paul’s appeal to Caesar before Festus destined him for Rome (25:12). After arriving at Rome Paul was guarded by a soldier (28:16) and was bound by a light chain (v 20; cf. SPT, p. 349). He remained in this condition for two years, but enjoyed relative freedom (v 30). Paul’s own prison experiences are ironic in view of his former activities as Saul, ‘persecutor of the church’ (Phil. 3:6; cf. Acts 8:3; 21:1–21).” [Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002), 975.]  
<sup>9</sup>“Of the introductory questions, this is the one I found most difficult to draw out to a clear and final answer. The one thing that is clear is that the letter was written from prison (4:3, 10, 18). If we can now sideline the hypothesis of a post-Pauline authorship written years after Paul’s death (see above), these references must refer to a period of imprisonment of Paul during which the letter was written.” [James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 39.]

just trying to act heroic when I fought the wild beasts at Ephesus, hoping it wouldn't be the end of me?" If taken literally, the reference to 'wild beasts' implies being pitted against them in the arena as a prisoner of Rome. This would have happened in the early stages of the third missionary journey during Paul's lengthy two plus year stay at Ephesus, sometime in the mid 50s.<sup>10</sup> But Luke's description of this ministry in Acts nineteen makes no allusion to such an event. Although at the end of this period a riot did occur in the city (19:21-41), Luke's depiction of Paul's departure from the city in 20:1 leaves no room for any imprisonment: "After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples; and after encouraging them and saying farewell, he left for Macedonia." Very likely Paul's reference to 'fighting the wild beasts in Ephesus' (ἐθηριομάχησα ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) was meant figuratively to allude to having to cope with Demetrius and his fellow silversmiths who instigated the riot over the healing of the young slave girl they were using for money making purposes (Acts 19:23:-27). The only point in favor of an Ephesian setting for the writing of the letter is the close geographical closeness of Ephesus and Colossae.

Clearly Paul spent some two plus years under Roman arrest at **Caesarea** on the eastern Mediterranean coast after being taken into custody in Jerusalem (Acts 24:27).<sup>11</sup> Paul did have considerable freedom during this period as Acts 24:23 indicates: "Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs." Certainly both time and circumstance would have afforded Paul opportunity to dictate these letters for these congregations in the province of Asia. Geography poses the major barrier to this view, since Caesarea and Ephesus / the Lycus Valley are quite a distance from one another. Why the run away slave Onesimus would have showed up in Caesarea where he and Paul could have met one another is a difficult question to answer. It is feasible, given the more favorable status of slaves among the Jews. And if Philemon, his master, were Jewish one can see a tendency to flee to an area where he knew that he would likely receive better treatment. But again, this is indirect probability, not stated fact.

The traditional location for Paul's imprisonment at the writing of these letters is understood as **Rome**, which would place the time of composition at the latest of the three possibilities. This view reflects an early church tradition that shows up in a few of the postscripts added by manuscript copyists.<sup>12</sup> Acts 28:23-31 describes at least the early years of Paul's confinement at Rome, and in fairly generous terms where he was permitted to stay in private lodging with a Roman soldier guarding him. Luke suggests this lasted at least two years (28:30), probably the years 61-62 AD. How much longer this lasted beyond these two years is unclear, since Luke's narrative evidently caught up in time at least with the note taking phase of composing Acts. If these three letters of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were composed during this period, very likely they came toward the beginning since Philippians distances itself from them and signals more directly that it came from Rome toward the end of Paul's imprisonment in the city (cf. Phil. 2:19-30; 1:18b-26).

One cannot claim dogmatically that these letters were written either from Caesarea or Rome, since the available evidence is extremely limited and no direct geographical location for the composition of any of these letters is given inside the documents themselves. The Roman view is exclusively based on later church tradition. But the high probability is that one of these settings is the correct one, since the existing data identifies both as places where Paul spent lengthy periods of time under Roman confinement.

One implication from the non-geographical identification of location is that the specific location was not nearly as important as what Paul was experiencing during his confinement. And this aspect is described with considerable detail as the above summary establishes. Limited ministry opportunity was Paul's lot. Suffering was a part of his experience. Facing the possibility of execution loomed large in his mind. But he was circled

<sup>10</sup>There are various indications in the Corinthian Epistles that Paul's life was in peculiar danger at times during his residence in Ephesus (cf. 1 Cor. 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 1:8ff). The only hint of danger given by Luke is the story of the riot in the theater (Acts 19:23ff), but Paul's words seem to imply greater peril than was apparently involved in the riot. Some scholars (notably A. Deissmann, W. Michaelis, and G. S. Duncan) have argued for an Ephesian imprisonment (or more than one), during which the 'Captivity Epistles' may have been written." [Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002), 42.]

<sup>11</sup>Acts 24:27 NRSV. **After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.**

Διετίας δὲ πληρωθείσης ἔλαβεν διάδοχον ὁ Φῆλιξ Πόρκιον Φῆστον· θέλων τε χάριτα καταθέσθαι τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὁ Φῆλιξ κατέλιπε τὸν Παῦλον δεδεμένον.

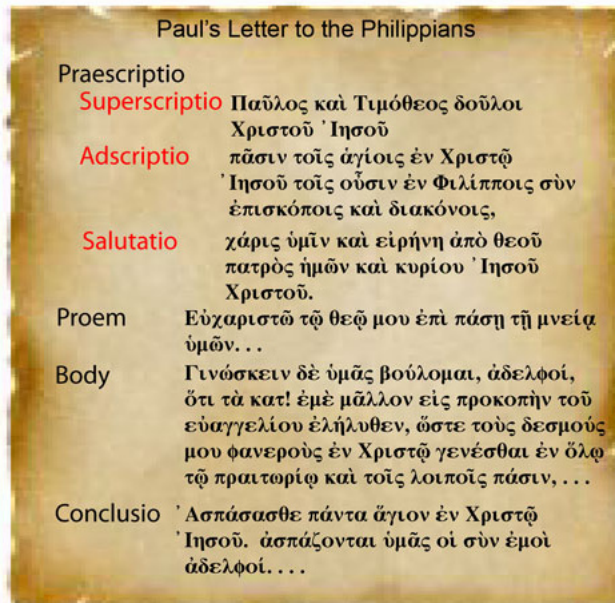
<sup>12</sup>These include the following manuscripts A, B, P, 075, 0278, 1739, 1881. Codex Alexandrinus (A) and Vaticanus (B) are the earliest mss and are dated third to fourth century AD.

with a group of dedicated fellow Christians helping to take care of him and to extend his ministry. Several churches all the way from the Lycus Valley to Macedonia were constantly praying for him and in the case of the church at Philippi (Phil. 4:10-20) a very generous love offering was sent to underwrite the expenses he incurred while in prison. Thus Paul's ministry during imprisonment took the new direction of writing and ministry through trusted co-laborers in his behalf. In many ways his ministry expanded significantly during his imprisonment, as he himself acknowledges in Phil. 1:12, "I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel," Γινώσκεις δὲ ὑμᾶς βούλομαι, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι τὰ κατ' ἐμὲ μᾶλλον εἰς προκοπὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἐλήλυθεν.

The lesson we can learn from this centers on being flexible in ministry. When taken into custody the contours of ministry shifted dramatically for Paul. But he learned to adjust and to take advantage of every opportunity for witness and ministry that opened up to him. He repeatedly sought prayer support from the congregations (Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:3-4, 18; Phil. 2:18, 4:10) that God would open up new avenues of ministry while in imprisonment. Foundational to this flexibility in ministry is complete trust and surrender to God's leadership in ministry. Paul did not see a fixed picture of ministry that he possessed himself. Rather, he saw ministry as fluid and as completely coming from God, with the Lord shaping the contours of that ministry, and frequently re-shaping them as He saw fit. Thus what Paul experienced in imprisonment he could affirm positively in words like Romans 8:28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose," Οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι τοῖς ἀγαπῶσι τὸν θεὸν πάντα συνεργεῖ εἰς ἀγαθόν, τοῖς κατὰ πρόθεσιν κλητοῖς οὖσιν.

Another important aspect of Paul's circumstance at the time of the writing of the letter is how this letter was composed. Colossians was written essentially in the same manner as Paul's other letters. Paul's statement in 4:18a, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand," Ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῆ ἐμῆ χειρὶ Παύλου, signals that everything in the letter up to 4:7 (the beginning of the ἀσπασμὸς) had been composed by someone else and that these final greetings were hand written by Paul as a verification of the genuineness of the entire letter. The most likely candidates for the composition of the letter are Timothy, Epaphras, and Tychius. One or all three could easily have been involved in its composition. From ancient Greek and Roman sources, we know that more formal letters written to groups of people especially were always dictated to a writing secretary who did the actual composition of the contents of the letter. The patterns of dictation ranged from very direct dictation to more often a loose pattern where the letter sender merely sketched out orally the basic ideas and left it up to the writing secretary to 'flesh out' the outline of the contents. This latter pattern seems to be the case with most of Paul's letters.

Ancient letters contained basic sections that the letters in the New Testament adhere to with but few exceptions in the general letters section. All of Paul's letters follow the ancient Greek/Roman letter format closely.<sup>13</sup> As illustrated by the chart on the right, these elements included the introduc-



Ancient Letter on papyrus

Outline of Colossians

**Praescriptio**  
Introduction: 1:1-2  
Superscriptio: 1:1  
Adscriptio: 1:2a  
Salutatio: 1:2b

**Proem**  
Thankfulness: 1:3-8

**Body**  
Intercession: 1:9-12  
Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20  
Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29  
Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15  
Christian Living 2: 2:16-19

Christian Legalism: 2:20-23  
Seeking the Heavenly Things: 3:1-4  
Christian Behavior: 3:5-11  
Getting Dressed: 3:12-17

Haustafeln: 3:18-4:1  
Husband/Wife: 3:18-19  
Father/Children: 3:20-21  
Master/Slaves: 3:22-4:1

Admonitions and Requests: 4:2-6

**Conclusio**  
Tychicus: 4:7-9  
Greetings: 4:10-17  
Closing: 4:18  
Letter Validation: 4:18a  
Prayer Request: 4:18b  
Benedictio: 4:19c

<sup>13</sup>The ancient Semitic letter format, i.e., the Aramaic / Hebrew letters, followed different patterns to those of Greeks and Romans. The letters in the NT adhere to the Greek / Roman pattern and reflect no influence from the Semitic letter form.

tory materials called the *Praescriptio*, which were usually written on the outside of the scroll of papyrus for identification purposes. This section included identification of the letter sender(s) called the *Superscriptio*, designation of the recipients of the letter called the *Adscriptio*, and the greeting called the *Salutatio*.

On the inside of the papyrus scroll would then follow the *Proem*, usually in Paul a lengthy expression of thanksgiving followed by petitions raised to God asking for His blessings on the readers.

The *body of the letter* was the next element, that typically in Paul's letters fleshed out allusions to topics contained in the expansion elements of the *Praescriptio* and the *Proem*. The length and level of detail contained in the letter body varies considerably in the letters of Paul all the way from the very lengthy letter to the Romans down to the shortest letter to Philemon at the end of the Pauline section of letters in the New Testament.

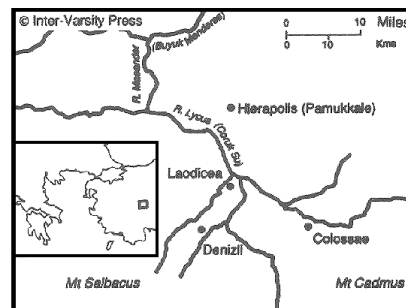
How this form was developed in the letter to the Colossians is illustrated by the outline on the right. And we will look at it more closely below.

This organization of contents is both typically Pauline, especially at the structural level, and at the same time is distinct in adapting the contents to the perceived needs of the Christian communities in the Lycus Valley. How long it took Paul and his writers to pull this letter together in finalized form is not clear. Probably over a period of several months, since at the same time they were working on letters to the Ephesians and to Philemon who lived in Colossae. This trilogy of letters with Ephesians as the cover letter for the other two would be carried together and read together both at the church in Ephesus and to those in the Lycus Valley.

Sometime during the late fifties to the early sixties Tychius and Onesimus, and perhaps others also, headed out to the Roman province of Asia with stops at Ephesus and the Lycus Valley scheduled to share these letters from the beloved apostle. If they started from Rome, it was in the early sixties with Ephesus as the first stop. If they started from Caesarea -- as I'm inclined to believe -- then the Lycus Valley was most likely their first stop and Ephesus come last with the trip coming in the late fifties.

### ***The needs of the Colossians at the time of the writing of the letter.***

Ancient letters were "occasional." That means that their composition was occasioned by some particular circumstance of needs by the targeted recipients. That circumstance could stem from a variety of needs. Sometimes questions were posed to the sender and the letter attempted to answer those questions. Sometimes information about problems was relayed to the letter sender and his sharing insights for solving these problems prompted the letter. Sometimes general awareness of weaknesses or needs in other individuals prompted the writing of a letter of advice and counsel.<sup>14</sup>



Understanding what prompted the writing of the letter is critical to proper understanding of the contents of the letter. Varying levels of understanding are possible regarding the different letters of Paul. Probably First Corinthians reflects the greatest possible understanding of the needs of a particular congregation. Ephesians, because of its cover letter function, offers the least amount of understanding simply because the topics covered are broad, generalized Christian principles.

Colossians comes closer to Ephesians than to First Corinthians at this point. The clearest issue existing at Colossae that could have given rise to the letter was the growing influence of false teachers that is directly covered in 2:8-23. But unclear is how much influence this twisting of the Gospel was having at Colossae. Clearly the influence of these false teachers was far less than at Ephesus, later on when First and Second Timothy were written to address havoc being produced in the believing community at Ephesus. And Colossians was not even like the situation at Philippi that he addresses in Phil. 3:2-6.

Paul is very affirming of the stability of the Colossian congregation both in their beliefs (cf. 2:5b; 1:4-8) and their behavior. The paraenesis scattered through the letter body, and especially in 3:1-4:6, does not seem to be addressing seriously deviate behavior such as that at Corinth, which First Corinthians addresses. Clearly Paul is not addressing people in the Colossian church who opposed him and his preaching of the Gospel, like Second Corinthians and Galatians do. No internal dissension was evident in the church at Colos-

<sup>14</sup>Often a combination of these needs prompted the writing of a letter. First Corinthians illustrates there where reports from the household of Chloe prompted the writing of 1:10-6:21, but questions posed by separate delegation from the Corinthian church to Paul in Ephesus prompted 7:1-16:12.



sae, such as that at Philippi where Phil. 4:2-3 addresses the quarrel between Syntyche and Euodia, two women leaders in the church.

The picture that emerges is of a relatively stable Christian community with some developing problems over the understanding of the Christian life. But Colossae was not a community wracked by controversy and full of issues, such as Corinth and Ephesus.

Additionally, Paul was dependent on second hand information from Epaphras for his understanding of the situation in the Lycus Valley (cf. 1:3-8; 4:12-13). From all indication, the apostle had never been to the church and the Christian community owed its beginnings to Epaphras and perhaps also to others who evangelized the region during Paul's lengthy ministry at Ephesus on the third missionary journey in the mid fifties.<sup>15</sup> Luke describes in Acts nineteen a lengthy ministry by Paul that extended beyond the city itself (19:10): "This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord." The Lycus Valley would be included in the designation of the Roman province of Asia. Thus if the Christian communities in the Lycus Valley don't emerge until around 54-56 AD, and this letter is written to them sometime soon after 58 AD (and no later than 62 AD), then not much time has passed for serious internal problems in the community to develop.

Clearly then Paul is prompted to write this letter to them mostly to encourage them to continue growing in their faith, and also to a lesser extent to warn them against the influence of these false teachers present in the valley. He does not know many of them personally, outside of Nympha and Philemon, along with a lady named Appia and Archippus, who are included as addressees in Philemon 2 with Philemon.

This makes for more pleasant reading on our part, since the apostle is not having to expose twisted thinking about the Christian faith nor bizarre ethical behavior inside the churches. He is free to paint with eloquent strokes some of the profound truths about Christianity both in what it believes and in how it is to behave itself. Consequently Colossians stands as a rich treasure of divine truth in the canon of the Bible.

## b) What did Paul emphasize in his letter to the Colossians?

Now let's take a summary look at the contents of the letter with proper consideration for each of the letter elements.

The **Praescriptio** identifies this letter as coming from both Paul and Timothy. The Adscriptio addresses the letter "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae," τοῖς ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ἀγίοις καὶ πιστοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ. The Salutatio is very typically Pauline with "Grace to you and peace from God our Father" χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν.

The development of the **Proem** section is also fairly typical in Paul's letters. The formal expression of thanksgiving in 1:3-8 is clearly the heart of this Proem. Debated among scholars is the ending point of the Proem and the beginning of the body proper of the letter. Both with the letters of Paul, and often in ancient formal letters generally the transition from the Proem to the body proper is occasionally blurred and not clearly defined as in other instances. Possibly the intercession material (1:9-12), perhaps the *Christus Hymnus* (1:13-20), and just possibly the reconciliation emphasis in 1:21-13 should be included in the Proem. Opinion varies on this, but what is clear is that this material beginning in 1:9 signals a shifting into the heart of the letter, the letter body itself. Unquestionably by 1:24, the letter body has

<sup>15</sup>The beginnings might reach back further to the second missionary journey when Paul passed through Ephesus dropping off Priscilla and Aquila at Ephesus. See Acts 18:18-21. A Christian community began emerging under their ministry in the early fifties around 51 AD.

## Outline of Colossians

### Praescriptio

Introduction: 1:1-2  
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Adscriptio: 1:2a  
Salutatio: 1:2b

### Proem

Thankfulness: 1:3-8

### Body

Intercession: 1:9-12  
Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20  
Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29  
Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15  
Christian Living 2: 2:16-19

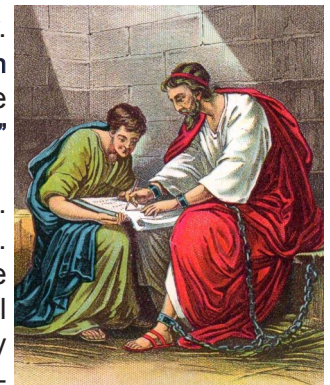
Christian Legalism: 2:20-23  
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### Conclusio

Tychicus: 4:7-9  
Greetings: 4:10-17  
Closing: 4:18  
Letter Validation: 4:18a  
Prayer Request: 4:18b  
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begun.

The heart of the letter then is contained in 1:9-4:6, **the letter body**. It attempts to address perceived spiritual needs in the lives of the targeted readers in 1:2a. Because the letter was to be read at Laodicea, and probably Hierapolis as well (cf. 4:13, 16), the spiritual needs of the Christian community throughout the entire Lycus Valley seem to be targeted, rather than just exclusively to those at Colossae.

How Paul develops the material is reflected in the above outline, and, in summary, moves along clearly definable lines. He celebrates the devotion of the Colossians to Christ and the spread of the Gospel (1:9-12). These occasions praise to God for spiritual deliverance by the superior Christ who represents the very image of God Himself (1:13-20). Out of this exalted Christ has come reconciliation of sinful humanity with the holy and blameless God (1:21-23).

Paul as a servant called to spread this good news the disclosure of a great mystery of how sinful humanity could become acceptable to a holy God. And it is this Christ that Paul proclaims (1:24-29)! The ministry that undergirds this proclamation is demanding and centers on keeping the Colossians solidly anchored in that Gospel message (2:1-5).

Out of this saving message of the Gospel then comes a life of faith commitment to Christ that needs no adaptation to foreign teachings (2:6-15), especially that depend on human effort. Some false teachers at Colossae were advocating dependency on a religious based diet and observance of a religious calendar as necessary requirements to spiritual life -- something Paul absolutely rejects as having any validity (2:16-19). Such man-made regulations bring nothing but spiritual destruction (2:20-23).

In 3:1-4:6, Paul turns from a mixture of biographical narrative, doctrinal affirmation, and paraenetical admonition (1:9-2:23) to straight line epistolary paraenesis in order to lay before his readers the meaning of the Christian life possible from the divine rescue established in conversion. The cornerstone principles of Christian living are put in place in 3:1-4. Essentially this foundation is the re-prioritizing of one's life to be totally centered on surrender to Christ. Off this foundation is first the responsibility of putting to death the old non-Christian lifestyle (3:5-11). In its place is the new clothing of godly qualities of living (3:12-17). These first two applications in 3:5-17 target the collective community of believers. But Christian living takes place inside the home as well, and Paul addresses this in 3:18-4:1. The three traditional relationship structures in the first century home revolved around wife/husband, child/father, and slave/master relations. Each of these receives attention with the laying down of relational guidelines that would revolutionize the first century home in radically new ways. In the last segment of moral admonition in this section found in 4:2-6, Paul turns to the traditional Jewish / Christian understanding of religion in terms of the vertical / horizontal dynamics to stress to the collective community of believers that prayer to God and proper behavior to non-Christians especially lie at the very heart of Christian living.

The letter moves toward closure in the **Conclusio** section in 4:7-18. From the variety of sub-category materials used in first century letters, Paul chooses several elements considered appropriate for the Colossians. He begins with **Travel Plans** (4:7-9) that center on Tychicus and Onesimus coming to the Lycus Valley with the letter. The **Greetings** section (4:10-15) is the longest section and contains greetings from six different associates with Paul at the time of the writing of the letter (vv. 10-14) and then Paul's greetings especially to the Laodiceans and to the lady Nympha who was the spiritual leader of one of the house churches in Colossae (v. 15). **Specific instructions** about the reading of this letter and also a reminder to Archippus come next (vv. 16-17). The **Letter Verification** stamp is placed on the letter by Paul (v. 18a), followed by a **Prayer Request** (v. 18b) and the letter ends with the standard Pauline **Benedictio** prayer (v. 18c).

This letter of Paul stands number seven in the sequence of the thirteen letters of Paul in the New Testament. Given the way of arranging the letters in our New Testament by descending length, this means that this letter is shorter than Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians. But it is longer in length than 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Thus it stands in the middle of the Pauline corpus in the New Testament. But its profoundly rich teaching about Christ especially gives it a distinctiveness that makes it stand out as one of Paul's writings. Conceptually it stands close to Ephesians in the understanding of Christian thinking about salvation and of Christian living. The arrangement of the content of the letter body distinguishes it from Romans, which more clearly than any other letter separates Christian thinking (chaps 1-11) from Christian living (chaps 12-15). The first major section of the letter body (1:9-2:23) is a mixture of Christian thinking with biographical and admonitional material, while the epistolary paraenesis

in 3:1-4:6 does bear affinity with Romans 12:1-15:33 in structural arrangement. Both contain admonitions about daily living built off a conceptual foundation provided at the outset of the paraenesis.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

Building applicational bridges from the original meaning of the text to our world is challenging at times. The ease or difficulty of doing this correctly depends in large measure on the distance of the cultural and social divide between mid-first century Colossae and the cultural, social world that you and I live in today. Conceptual thinking about Christian belief provides easier bridge building material than do the moral and behavior emphases in the letter. There the gap between 'then' and 'now' tends to be greater at times. The correct hermeneutical procedure in this situation is rather simple: the less distance this cultural gap the easier the applications, and the greater distances make for less certain applications. Dogmatic conclusions in this latter instance are woefully inappropriate.

The bridge from the 'then' to the 'now' meanings of the text should include things we can learn from the sender of the letter and his personal circumstance at the composition of the letter. And then primarily the starting edge of the bridge should be anchored thoroughly in the content of what was written.

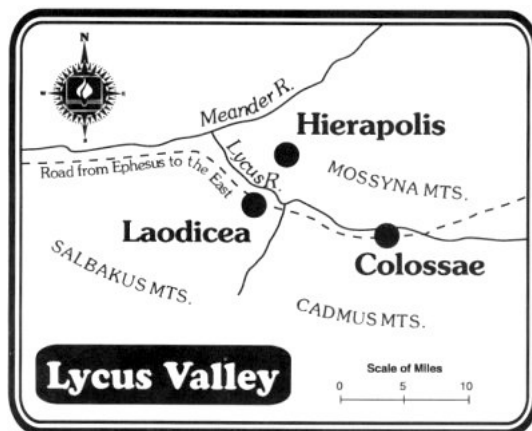
### a) What can we learn from Paul?

One of the first things that I find notable in Paul's circumstance is ***the circle of close friends and trusted associates*** who gave of themselves not only to advance the Gospel but also devoted themselves to the beloved apostle to provide assistance during his time of imprisonment. Often career Christian ministry can be one of the loneliest jobs around. This is especially true of senior pastors who are expected to serve others, but frequently have no one to turn to when they need the ministry of others. Occasionally the rather isolated ministry of Old Testament prophets like Amos are appealed to for justification of the isolation of a career servant of God. In the modern history of missions numerous stories of missionaries serving in very isolated parts of the world highlight the experience of being cut off from other servants of God on the mission field. Serving in places where one's Christian group represents only a tiny portion of the population frequently means being isolated from easy contact with others who are a part of the same denominational group.

In such places of isolated service, depression and a sense of uselessness can quickly flood into the mind and emotions of the servant of Christ. Pastor burn out always looms on the horizon as a real threat to effective ministry. A genuinely healthy spiritual life is very difficult to maintain and even more challenging to develop and expand. Christianity inherently is fundamentally a group experience that cannot survive in isolated individualism. Although being a part of a local community of believers helps the spiritual leader some, there is a critical need for fellowship and developing relationships with other career servants of Christ. When this is not possible, Christian ministry becomes enormously more difficult.

Paul's example at this point illustrates the need of working closely with others in ministry. In his imprisonment at the writing of this letter some nine separate individuals were specifically named as beloved and trusted co-laborers with the apostle. Out of their love for God and commitment to advance the Gospel came a deep concern to assist their brother Paul during a time of limited ministry opportunity. Paul acknowledges this with lavish praise of these men and of their commitment to ministry.

Another implication of this pattern in Paul's ministry is the recognition that the burden of reaching a lost world is a shared burden. Paul understood that God had not laid the responsibility for preaching the Gospel solely on his shoulders. His calling from the outset was *ἵνα εὐαγγελίζωμαι αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν*, (Gal. 1:16, **"that I might proclaim Him among the Gentiles"**). Paul wisely developed a circle of associates working with him so that this calling could be more effectively carried out. One of the great temptations to the pastor is entrapment into thinking that the success or failure of the church rests solely on his shoulders. The wise pastor will follow Paul's example and gather around him a group of skilled, committed servants of God who extend his ministry



into areas far beyond what could be done alone.

A second notable implication of Paul's circumstance at the writing of this letter is **his flexibility in ministry**. Although this has already been touched upon somewhat, I want to call attention to it here as a reminder. When God called Paul into ministry at his conversion on the Damascus road, He did not give to the apostle a clearly marked road map for ministry. The center of that ministry calling was to evangelize the Gentile world by preaching Christ. But Paul had no idea how that would unfold over his career. From his calling in about 33 AD until the beginning of the first missionary journey in 46 AD, Paul did not preach to Gentiles, instead only to Jews. Luke makes this clear in his narrative in Acts 9-12. Paul's preparatory training for his calling involved preaching Christ in Jewish synagogues in Damascus, Arabia, Jerusalem, and Tarsus. This included debating opponents who vigorously objected to the Gospel message of salvation in Christ. Paul's life was threatened; he was persecuted; his life was put in danger and so on. Ironically somewhat in a similar manner to what he had been causing Christians during his Pharisee persecuting days. But God took Paul through the twists and turns in ministry to get him ready for what lay ahead when he began preaching Christ to Gentiles. The biblical records clearly indicate that Paul adapted well to each twist and turn in ministry.

Now he found himself in prison with the serious possibility that he would be executed by Roman authorities. Did this shut down his ministry? Not at all. Instead, Paul adjusted and adapted to his changing circumstance. Out of the physical limitations on ministry imposed by his imprisonment came a writing ministry that has blessed countless millions of Christians over the centuries. Also there came about a greater dependence on his associates to carry on ministry in his behalf. In many ways God expanded Paul's ministry through imprisonment! And the apostle was sensitive enough to God's leadership to accept this and to make the best use of these new opportunities.

Central to this openness was the clear realization that the ministry given to Paul was not Paul's ministry. Instead, it was God's ministry graciously granted to Paul for executing. And thus it was God's decision to change the contours of that ministry whenever the Lord deemed it necessary. Paul's responsibility was only to obey the Lord's leading. Thus Paul continued to be an effective preacher of the Gospel even while in prison.

Every believer can learn much from Paul's example of flexibility in service. What we do is not our accomplishment. Instead it is and always remains God's work. We are privileged to get involved in it. As Paul affirmed to the Corinthians regarding himself and Apollos in 1 Cor. 3:9, **"For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building,"** θεοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν συνεργοί· θεοῦ γεώργιον, θεοῦ οἰκοδομή ἐστε. In that passage he goes on to speak of the day of accountability for each worker at the judgment seat of Almighty God (vv. 10-15). Success -- or failure -- in ministry is measured solely by faithfulness to God's leading, not by the products of ministry. This demands flexibility on our part to always obey God's leading regardless of where it takes us.

I believe that we can learn much from Paul's ministry circumstance at the time of the writing of this letter. The challenge is to put it into practice in our service to Christ.

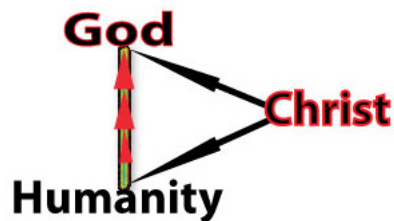
#### **b) How relevant are the ideas in the letter?**

Additionally we can learn much from what Paul said to the believers in the Lycus Valley. This was a relatively new community of believers that had been in existence less than a decade. It was made up of numerous small house church groups scattered across the Lycus Valley in the cities of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Although not large or particularly significant towns, a good number of people resided in the valley. The culture was a mixture of Greek, Romans, Jews and regional ethnic groups. From all indication Christianity was growing and expanding there at this point in time. The only directly stated problem in the letter was the growing influence of false teachers who were basically home grown and sought to integrate Christian teachings with other religious and philosophical ways of thinking. This represented a serious twisting of the apostolic Gospel because it falsely elevated human action to salvational achievement before God. Such syncretistic tendencies represented a dangerous perversion of the true Gospel that came solely from God through divine revelation to the apostles, i.e., the original Twelve and the Apostle Paul.

The so-called doctrinal aspects contained in the letter center on how the Christian life begins and then how it should be lived. Both dimensions are woven together in most parts of the letter, especially in the first

part of the body proper in 1:9 - 2:23.

Regarding *Christian thinking* the central doctrinal emphasis of the letter is built around a triangular construct between God / Christ / salvation. Sinful humanity stands alienated from the holy God, and Christ alone is the solution for establishing a relationship of divine acceptance of humanity.



In the *Praescriptio and Proem* sections of 1:1-8 particular emphasis is given to Jesus Christ as the object of faith commitment. This is in response to the Gospel message which provides hope of eternal acceptance before a holy God in Heaven. Thus Christ is identified as the center of the Gospel. The Gospel promises hope, τὴν ἐλπίδα, of eternal blessing. The required human response to this message is faith, τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Clearly building off the traditional vertical / horizontal structure of Christianity Paul complements the Colossians for their faith in Christ and their love for the saints, as two natural aspects of true religious commitment.

In *the body proper* of the letter (1:9-4:6), this triangular construct is developed in greater detail, especially in chapters one and two. Coming into this saving relationship means commitment to understand and obey God's will, which Paul pledges himself to pray for a growing awareness of that by the Colossians (1:9-14). The Christian life that emerges from this conversion is driven by thankfulness to God for this salvation now defined as a rescue from darkness and transformation into the Kingdom of God, ὃς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ. It can be summed up as τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, redemption which centers in forgiveness of sins, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν.

It is in Christ that we enjoy this transformation and by using portions of an ancient Christian hymn Paul celebrates the exalted state of Christ as the very image of God and as the source of the church (1:15-23). The celebratory tone of this passage arises out of its background as a *Christus Hymnus* which lifts praise to Christ in a most eloquence expression. As the divine image Christ is the channel through which all creation came about. And He is the source of the church as well. Consequently the complete fullness of God resides in Him, ἐν αὐτῷ ... πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι. Thus Christ's connection with this world is first as the channel of creating this world, and then as the reconciler (ἀποκατηλλάγητε) of this fallen world to God, its ultimate Creator.

Paul saw himself as a servant of this Gospel message, ἐγὼ Παῦλος διάκονος (1:24-2:5). This included a suffering in ministry that is profoundly linked to Christ's suffering on the cross. The challenge of ministry is to declare this spiritual mystery of God that has been hidden for centuries, τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν. But now in Christ this mystery has been disclosed to God's saints. The heart of this secret is Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης, **Christ in you the hope of glory.**

*Prominent emphasis is given to the work of salvation*, especially in the first two chapters. (1) The all inclusive terms used by Paul in this letter include εὐαγγέλιον (Gospel), τὸ μυστήριον (mystery), τὸ θελήμα τοῦ θεοῦ (the will of God), ὁ λόγος τῆς ἀληθείας (the word of truth). In these general terms the idea of salvation from conversion to consummation is included and indicated by various terms and depictions.

(2) Conversion is defined as ἀπολύτρωσις (redemption), which is equated with ἡ ἄφεσις τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν, the forgiveness of sins. This forgiveness is also defined as χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα, **"having forgiven us all our trespasses."** It is further described as a rescue and a transformation, ὃς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ. Additionally conversion is to be reconciled to God, ἀποκαταλλάξαι. This is then defined as εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, **"having made peace through the blood of His cross."** This assumes the prior condition of estrangement from God: καὶ ὑμᾶς ποτε ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἐχθροὺς τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς, **"and you previously were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds."** Also, it is being made alive with Christ after being in spiritual death, καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ. Through the symbolism of baptism by immersion conversion becomes a rising from the dead and a being made alive together with Christ: καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ, **"and you being dead in your trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, (God) as made you alive together with Him."** This means that God has ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἕρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ, **"erased the record that stood against us with its legal demands and He himself set**

it aside by nailed it to the cross.” This action by God of Christ dying on the cross represents a dramatic triumph over the forces of evil: ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.”

(3) The spiritual life that emerges from conversion then is to be lived in thanksgiving, εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ πατρὶ. It begins in conversion with a faith surrender to Christ, and it continues to be a faith surrender throughout our journey through life:

2.6 Ὡς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον, ἐν αὐτῷ περιπατεῖτε, 7 ἑρριζωμένοι καὶ ἐποικοδομούμενοι ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ βεβαιούμενοι τῇ πίστει καθὼς ἐδιδάχθητε, περισσεύοντες ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ.

2.6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Human accomplishment plays absolutely no role in either establishing this saving relationship with God or in maintaining it. Thus Paul adamantly denies the stance of the false teachers in 2:8-23 who argued this point of the necessity of human accomplishment in adhering to a dietary code and a religious calendar.

(4) The ultimate objective of this salvation is an eternal relationship and acceptance before God, ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῆ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ, “when Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.” That life is also labeled τὴν μερίδα τοῦ κλήρου τῶν ἁγίων ἐν τῷ φωτί, “the share of the inheritance of the saints in light.” Additionally it then becomes Christian hope. The Greek term ἔλπις for hope underscores expectancy rather than possibility. Paul describes this ἔλπις as τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, “having been laid up in Heaven for you.” It was promised by the Gospel of Christ: τῆς ἐλπίδος τοῦ εὐαγγελίου οὗ ἠκούσατε. Further it is the expectancy of being accepted into the glorious presence of Almighty God: ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης. Its exclusive basis is ὁ ἔστιν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, “which is Christ in you.”

The application of these insights to our world is clear. The spiritual principles set forth by Paul remain unchanged from then to now. The essential structure of salvation is the same today as it was when first established by the work of Christ as Savior.

Regarding *Christian living*, Paul paints a rich and detailed picture of the nature of the Christian life. The most detailed discussion occurs in the epistolary paraenesis section of 3:1- 4:6. The emphasis here is primarily on behavior, especially in terms of relationships with other people. But in the first two chapters Paul touches on the Christian life at points also. The perspective here is the spiritual or religious approach to the Christian life.

In the Proem of 1:3-8 living the Christian life is defined in two ways: faith in Christ and love for other believers, τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους. The presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit is central to both aspects as Paul says in 1:8, τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι.

In first part of the body proper of the letter, 1:9-2:23, emphasis is given to the Christian life as growing in the knowledge of God’s will: τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ συνέσει πνευματικῇ. Out of this deepening understanding of God’s desires then comes the living of a life that is worthy of the Lord and fully pleasing to Him: περιπατῆσαι ἀξίως τοῦ κυρίου εἰς πᾶσαν ἀρεσκείαν ἐν παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ καρποφοροῦντες καὶ αὐξανόμενοι τῇ ἐπιγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ. One of the key portrayals of the Christian life in Colossians is that it is *a walking through life*; the verb περιπατέω is used in 1:10, 2:6, 3:7, and 4:5 as a key concept.

Living the Christian life then is to be done **περιπατῆσαι** ἀξίως τοῦ κυρίου εἰς πᾶσαν ἀρεσκείαν, ἐν παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ καρποφοροῦντες καὶ αὐξανόμενοι τῇ ἐπιγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ, “**to walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God**” (1:10).

The Christian life is an extension of the union with Christ established in conversion: 6 Ὡς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον, ἐν αὐτῷ **περιπατεῖτε**, 7 ἑρριζωμένοι καὶ ἐποικοδομούμενοι ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ βεβαιούμενοι τῇ πίστει καθὼς ἐδιδάχθητε, περισσεύοντες ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ, “6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, **continue to live your lives** in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (2:6-7).

The Christian life stands in stark contrast to the lifestyle prior to conversion: ἐν οἷς καὶ ὑμεῖς **περιπατήσατέ ποτε**, ὅτε ἐζήτε ἐν τούτοις, “**These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life**” (3:7).

The Christian life is lived in wisdom regarding non-believers: Ἐν σοφίᾳ **περιπατεῖτε** πρὸς τοὺς ἔξω τὸν

καιρὸν ἐξαγοραζόμενοι, **“Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time”** (4:5).

This image of walking through life graphically portrays the living of the Christian life properly. The initial expression of walking ἀξίως τοῦ κυρίου is defined as targeting a day of accounting before God in final judgment so that we can stand in judgment ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους καὶ ἀνεγκλήτους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ, **“holy and blameless and irreproachable before Him”** (1:22). The objective of Paul’s ministry was ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ, **“so that we may present everyone mature in Christ”** (1:28). But standing acceptable to God in final judgment is not something we accomplish. Rather it is the outcome of God’s presence and activity in our lives. Our responsibility is that of faith surrender to God in obeying His leadership.

This understanding of the Christian life stood in stark contrast to that being advocated by false teachers in some circles in the Lycus Valley. Paul provides some insight into this alternative approach in 2:8-23. At its heart was the attempt to incorporate human responsibility into achieving acceptability before God in judgment. Drawing upon aspects of traditional Judaism, Greco-Roman religious customs, and philosophical principles current in that world, these teachers were convinced that salvation heavily depended on human adherence to prescribed rules and regulations. These centered in strict adherence to dietary rules and ritualistic following of a religious calendar of activities: ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων (2:16). Paul labels these things τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν, **“philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ”** (2:8). They were deceptively empty shadows devoid of the substance that Christ gives: σκιά τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ (2:17). They claimed superiority based on visionary encounters with angels: θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων (2:18). In reality all these accomplished was phoney elitism and a turning loose of Christ, the source of genuine spiritual life: εἰκὴ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν (2:18-19). In appearance they suggest a superior spirituality, but are in reality merely worthless human based regulations with no ability to solve the human sin problem: 22 ἃ ἔστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρῆσει, κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων; 23 ἅτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἔθειλοθρησκίᾳ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος, οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τιμῇ πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκὸς (2:22-23).

With this stern condemnation of the view of the false teachers Paul then turns in the epistolary paraenesis section to present the true Christian way of living in 3:1-4:6. Based on one’s conversion as a spiritual resurrection (Εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ) the foundation for living the Christian life is a re-prioritizing of one’s life defined as τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε (**seek the things above**) and as τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (**set your minds on the things above, not on the things of the earth**) [3:1-4].

With such focus firmly established in our life, then we are to Νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, **“put to death then the earthly things”** (3:5-11). Using the common literary device of his time, a vice list, Paul lists several of these traits that have no place in Christian living. Essentially these are attitudes and actions that are destructive of spiritually healthy relationships with other people. Conversion means that such practices have been stripped out of our life (vv. 10-11) and that an ongoing spiritual renewing process has been launched in our lives. Important to that renewing process is the lifting of believers above the racial, ethnic, religious barriers that are divisive and thus destructive (v. 11).

The positive aspect is then presented in 3:12-17 in terms of clothing ourselves with a series of traits the lead to healthy spiritual relationships with others: Ἐνδύσασθε οὖν ὡς ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ,.... The encouraging of these qualities comes through being actively involved in the community of believers (vv. 16-17).

The role of the Christian family in living the Christian life is addressed in 3:18-4:1. Using patterns already established in the ancient world Paul addresses the idealized Christian family in terms of wife / husband, child / father, and slave / master relationships. Very distinctive to this Christian view of family in Paul’s day was the mutual responsibilities of both pairs of relationships. The male leader of the home, addressed as husband, father, and master, is heavily obligated to caring and encouraging the members of the family to become all that God desires them to become. The level of mutual responsibility set forth in all three relationships rises dramatically higher than an similar emphasis found in ancient literature. Central to Paul’s emphasis is the role that Christ makes in the family. Becoming this kind of family is impossible otherwise.

The moral responsibilities of the Christian community of believers is then summarized at the end of this section in 4:2-6. Two key responsibilities are stressed: prayer (vv. 2-4) and proper conduct toward non-believers (vv. 5-6). Through genuine communication with God we gain what is needed in order to live a

Christian life before non-believers in a manner that presents a positive witness to the difference our God makes in our lives.

The application of these principles of the Christian life have relatively easy and mostly direct application to us as Christians in the modern world. Cultural gaps between the 'then' and the 'now' meanings surface primarily in the exclusion of slaves as members of a family unit in the modern world (3:22-4:1). Some potential gaps may be present with the specific false teachings about the Christian life by these teachers at Colossae (2:8-23). Yet timeless principles can be found in both these sections that come over the application bridge with relevancy to our lives today.

Hopefully, what has become clear is the marvelously rich perspective presented by Paul on how sinful humanity establishes an authentic relationship with the God of this universe through Jesus Christ. And then how the resulting life created in the establishing of that relationship should be lived out to the fullest. Our God has set up a wonderful plan for bringing sinful humanity back into a rich, abundant spiritual existence that will transcend this world and continue uninterrupted throughout the unending ages of eternity! The heart of human responsibility for all this is to turn completely loose of self in complete surrender to God through Jesus Christ. Then God will create something beautiful in our lives that lasts forever.



**True exegesis of scripture includes close examination of each tree in the scripture text and then stepping back to see how the configuration of these trees give design and distinction to the conceptual forest they produce.**

**Our nineteen study examination of Colossians has included a detailed checking of each tree (studies 1-18) and now is concluded by stepping back to take a look at the forest created by these trees (study 19). My deep prayer is that you come away from this study with much greater understanding and appreciation for this portion of sacred text.**

