

COLOSSIANS STUDY NOTES

Introduction

This is a letter written by Paul when he was imprisoned in Rome in or around AD 60. He wrote it out of concern that the faith of those in Colossae was being eroded by false doctrine. Specifically, Apostolic teaching was being co-mingled with the religious and philosophical thinking of the region and with Judaism. The result was that the doctrine of Christ was being compromised. Paul wanted to bring clarity to this situation and anchor the faith of the Colossians in a right understanding of the person of Christ and His work that the gospel proclaimed. This understanding would help order their lives.

The carrier of this letter was likely Epaphras, who may also have been the one who carried Paul's letter to Philippi. He was the one who was their key teacher and leader (1:7-8). He was likely filled the same role in the churches in Hierapolis and Laodicea as well. The whole letter aims at strengthening one's view of Christ, not only in terms of his identity, but his supremacy and centrality.

Gnosticism

This is the philosophy that influenced popular thinking on spiritual things in a good portion of the Mediterranean world during the first three centuries AD. The term itself is from the Greek word γνῶσις, which means knowledge. This was a very diverse religious/philosophical stream that was evident in the thought of Plato and continues to the present.

The general idea of Gnostic thought is that humans are divine souls trapped in a material world that was created by an imperfect god. This imperfect creator is referred to as the demiurge. This demiurge exists in sharp contrast to a more superior entity referred to by several terms including Godhead. Generally, the material world is considered evil in Gnostic thought, either a hindrance to or irrelevant to a spiritual existence. Hence a person is viewed in a dualistic way. The immaterial part of our being is good, and our physical bodies are evil.

Gnosticism embraces the idea that there is a revealed, esoteric (secret), knowledge through which the truly spiritual are reminded of their identity within the superior Godhead. Through this knowledge they can escape materiality and so experience salvation. So salvation is viewed as escaping the material world. It comes through knowing, being made party to secret knowledge. This knowledge was what it took to make one wise (see Appendix 1 on the terms used by the LXX and their influence on words like wisdom and knowledge as the NT writers used them)

Gnosticism and Christianity mixed to some degree, though apart from orthodox Christianity. Jesus was identified by some Gnostics sects as an embodiment of the supreme being who became incarnate to bring secret knowledge to the earth. Most Gnostics assigned him much lesser significance than this. Some in fact considered him a false messiah who perverted the teachings that would lead to truth. Gnosticism also mixed with Judaism and the philosophies of the Hellenistic world. This mixing was characteristic of the movement so that it became quite diverse in its view of God, or the gods, Jesus, Satan, angels, and the entire spiritual realm.

In the thinking of most Gnostics, Jesus was an example of a lesser being, an emanation that flowed from Godhead somewhere down a degenerating line of truth sources. This then made the knowledge of Christ a mere subset of a larger body of knowledge. He was only part of a supposed spiritual hierarchy that included all manner of gods and spirit beings. He was viewed as a source of light, but not *the* source of light.

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise date that this movement emerged. Some theories trace it back to several centuries before the Christian Era. That it existed in Paul's day and was influencing Christian thought is apparent. Its strains are varied enough that it is impossible to know with precision all that its adherents were propounding in the days of the early Church. It would evolve much over the first couple of centuries after Christ, so that the Gnosticism of the second and third centuries was more complex than that evident in Paul's day. Gnosticism never completely passed from the scene. Even in the 20th centuries in both Europe and North America groups could be found that identified themselves as revivals of earlier Gnostic thought.

In light of this growing influence this letter of Paul to the Colossians is concerned with keeping the doctrine of Christ pure and holding the Christians on course with what Apostolic teaching was. It does not take much effort to see in Paul's reasoning the basic tenants of Gnosticism being attacked.

Judaism

Another system of thought that was influencing the Church during Paul's day was what we refer to as Judaism. Judaism involved mingling the laws of the Old Covenant with the teachings of Christ. It demanded an understanding of Christ more as a continuation of the Old than a termination of the Old. The effect was that Judaism imposed the demands of the Mosaic Law on the Church. It demanded from Christians the observation of certain holidays and feasts, and participation in the rite of circumcision. Its teachers were numerous, since most of the early converts to Christianity were Jewish. These false teachers were aggressive. They tended to swoop in behind Paul and the other Apostles, masquerading as the learned and skilled who would get the churches on "the right track."

Paul wanted to clarify that Christ was the substance and reality of what the Law's ceremonies pictured and illustrated. He presented Christ as the end to which the Law pointed. He demanded that the faith be practiced in this way without compromise. He would not accommodate in any way teachings that integrated Old Covenant rites with the practice of faith in Christ. His clash with these teachers was particularly brutal. This is reflected at times in the words of this letter.

Angel Worship

The worship of angels was a part of local religion, and it is likely that this grew out of Judaism or at least was influenced by it. In some of the secular histories and writings that mention the city this is spoken of. It is mentioned that a temple to Michael the archangel was located in Colossae. The belief was that Michael had saved the city from a destructive deluge. This worship of Michael no doubt reflects the presence of a Jewish or Christian cult, though not much is known about it except the existence of this temple. This seems confirmed by Paul's mention of the worship of Angels (2:18).

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Colossians 1

1:1 “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,”

Paul knew that there were issues that his letter would have to address with unbending authority. So in just a few words he states his own authority to address such matters. This was important because he had no personal relationship with these people, having never met them (2:1).

Paul presents himself as one commissioned by Jesus Christ. As such a one he had authority in spiritual matters whether doctrinal, or matters of practical life, or matters of church polity. This was not an authority he had sought for himself or gained by some selfish pursuit. It was by the will of God. It had been choreographed by Him and brought about at a decisive moment (Acts 9). It was confirmed by an ensuing revelation or series of revelations from God Himself (Galatians 1:11-2:20; 2 Corinthians 12:1-9).

Paul states that this letter is also from Timothy, who was by this time known as an up-and-coming leader. Paul included other leaders in his leadership process in order to provide for the future and to provide for direction in the present when he was imprisoned. The citation here of Timothy was a wise move. It was a good affirmation of Timothy so that his presence someday, if needed in Colossae, would be of greater impact.

1:2 “to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”

Paul regarded the Colossians as saints and faithful ones. Even though his tone will become urgent at times, he regards the readers as true children of God. Good people and sincere people can be led astray in their thinking, and they frequently are. That is why God has placed leaders in any movement that He has ever envisioned or inspired. It is not that they are better than the rank and file, or not that they themselves cannot wander. It is simply the way God has chosen to work. He generally does not reveal His whole heart to everyone in His community. That is not to say he does reveal it to the leaders exclusively. Rather the entire picture emerges from its parts. It is not that the leaders are the source of all God's leadings and stirrings. Rather they are given wisdom to understand the whole that is emerging from the parts. They are given understanding to keenly observe, to discern, and to tie together. Good spiritual leaders understand the flow of God through the community, and they watch for it, ponder it, collate it, and tie it together into an understandable whole. And so Paul, though troubled by the thinking of the Colossians, still respects that they are saints.

His greeting is that which he always used. It was and is a Jewish tradition to bring blessing into a house and Paul's letters reflect this desire on his part. Grace, a concept rooted in the chesed of Yahweh portrayed in the Old Testament, was what every human needed. Paul knew this and knew that the gospel imparted it. Peace, the *shalom* of the Old Testament that spoke of being at rest, remains the greatest felt need of humanity. There could be no more relevant thought to every culture and in every era than that of the concepts of grace and peace.

1:3 We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,”

A system of thought was building in the cultures of the Mediterranean world that would reach full bloom much later than Paul and become known as Gnosticism. As that word indicated, the Gnostics pursued knowledge. They sought a higher, or true knowledge that lay beyond what mental processes could impart. Part of the teaching of the Gnostics was that from a supreme power had come a series of “emanations”, lesser lights, or inferior sources of truth. This influence would lead many to assert that Jesus was one of a number of such lesser influences or beings coming from a higher source. This led to the conclusion that something lay beyond Christ and the knowledge He had imparted.

Paul speaks to this influence immediately with these initial words. He speaks immediately of relating to God through prayer. Thanksgiving is given to one who has brought about favor and so implies both personhood and relationship. Then he speaks of God being the Father of Jesus. This alludes to the virgin birth brought about through Mary by an act of God, and again confirms both God and Jesus are persons and are at the very least related in essence. His instructions later in the letter will show that they are one in essence.

Paul uses the full combination of name and title that belong to Jesus. He is ours in the sense that we embrace Him, but also in the sense that He gave Himself to us. There is much more to the word Lord than just a title. It was the term used in their contemporary Greek translation of the Old Testament for God’s personal name, Yahweh. It was an assignment of the divine essence to Jesus. Jesus is Yahweh given to us and for us. So He is our Lord. He is also the Christ. That term means “the anointed one,” and refers to His God-given designation as ruler of the universe.

There is in these opening words a calling back to soundness and clarity with regard to the faith. It begins a series of thoughts strung together for several verses, all of which will have a similar effect of taking the readers back to the faith they had embraced in Christ.

1:4 “since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints:”

Paul had not ever been to Colossae, and so was not directly involved in their coming to faith in Jesus. But his heart was with them and for them from the time he heard that this body of believers had come into existence. It is likely that Epaphras, who had apparently brought the Gospel to Colossae, was one of Paul’s converts and designated leaders. That would explain why Paul would write this letter and expect it to be accepted by the people who did not personally know him. There was an early knowledge of each other and an appropriate affection.

Paul has said that he prays for them always. We can only imagine Paul’s prayer habit as the Spirit brought into his mind thoughts of various people in faraway places while he himself was imprisoned.

Paul cites two things he has heard of the Colossians. Both were good to remind them of. Their faith had been Christ-centered. Their faith was also shared by an entire community of people in other places. They had believed in concert with others and there was respect and love for that larger whole. They belonged to a person, Christ,

and were a part of a larger family, the Church. So they practiced the faith, and they had the love that grows with it. As such people they had also been a part of Paul's heart, though they had never met. God's Spirit was at work between themselves and Paul though they had not become acquainted. That is an important dynamic we must cultivate.

1:5 "Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel."

Hope is the great motivator. Where there is hope, there is a dynamic atmosphere. Where there is no hope there is stagnancy and where there is stagnancy there is soon both atrophy and entropy. Paul names hope as that which had inspired the faith and love in the Colossians spoken of in verse four.

Paul speaks of this hope as being "laid up for you in heaven." Christianity is at its best when it is reminding believers of what awaits them there. It de-generates if it seeks to be a means of helping people get what they want in this life. Though the Scripture has much to say about how this life is to be lived in the present, its advise is primarily given with the day of accountability before Yahweh in mind. Ultimately eternity is what we are to have in view. That is what is being captured most of the time by the term "heaven" in Scripture.

The Gospel is the key piece of information that inspires hope in us with regard to eternity. It enables us to know beyond conjecture of the parameters God has established governing our eternal well-being. The gospel is different than any other theory about heaven in that it is the word of truth the official message from God. It is the official word on the issue of how to be right with Him. It is information that inspires hope because it is good news. That is the meaning of the word Gospel. It describes what He has done on our behalf to make us right with Him. It is not a message primarily about what we must do. It is about what love, and grace motivated Him to do. It is the body of facts God wanted us to know and believe so that we could be restored to relationship with Him. That restoration has great impact on our remaining years on earth and our position in eternity.

1:6 "which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth."

The Gospel reveals to all who hear it the extent of God's grace. It is not another religious "feel good" story. It is a story that comes from the domain of truth and realism and is about that domain. Wherever and by whomever it has been understood in truth, the grace of God constantly bears fruit and increases. To understand the grace of God in truth is the key thought in Paul's words in this verse. This means to understand it as true and that experience happens relatively quickly. It also means to learn the length, breadth, height, and depth of that truth, and that understanding grows throughout a lifetime.

Paul is speaking here of both of these things, the moment of truth and the process that unfolds. All over the world people were coming to an understanding of God's grace through the story of the Gospel. Paul could not have known how true this would become in the centuries that were to follow. There would continue to be great fruit in this sense of new people being added to God's kingdom daily through the telling of

the story. Paul also saw the increase happening in the Church. Individuals were maturing and whole Churches were maturing. What was happening in Colossae was the norm. It was happening everywhere and has continued to the present. That is the unique power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16).

When Paul speaks of the Colossians coming to an understanding of the truth, he uses a word which expresses the idea of “true knowledge,” *ἐπιγινώσκω*. The idea that there was a “true knowledge” that only the initiated came to an understanding of was common among the false teachers at Colossae. So from the outset Paul assigns the knowledge of the truth of the Gospel the deepest significance. There is nothing deeper that could be known. There is no next level or next step except to ponder the implications of the Gospel and all that it reveals of God’s grace.

The phrase “just as” occurs twice in verses 6 and 7. Paul uses that conjunction to link thoughts that remind the readers that there is one Gospel, and there is one Christian belief system. It is not a different message from place to place, taking on the local deities or mingling regional philosophy. It is standardized, the same worldwide, or it is not the Gospel. The fact that it bears fruit across ethnic lines and international borders highlights its truth and uniqueness.

1:7 “just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf.”

Here Epaphras is the one named as having taught the Colossians the Gospel. So he was either from Colossae or that area in Asia Minor, or else made his way there under Paul’s direction. Either way, he is identified as the one who brought them knowledge of the truth. This is a way of affirming Epaphras as a leader. The truth was being eroded and it was important that Paul signal the Colossians as to who could be listened to and trusted with regard to sound doctrine. This affirmation is clear that Epaphras “is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf. In other words, Epaphras spoke for the apostle and was to be regarded as one with authority.

In the book of Philemon (verse 23), Epaphras is referred to by Paul as a fellow-prisoner. There it is inferred that he is with Paul in prison, conveying his greeting to Philemon through Paul. Paul says simply that he is in prison for the cause of Christ. So at some point this “beloved fellow bond-servant” becomes a fellow prisoner. We have no record of how this came about.

1:8 “and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.”

The Colossians demonstrated the Spirit’s presence in that they loved others. That is a tell-tale sign of fellowship with God (1 John 2:10; 3:14-20). To a leader when this sign becomes visible in those they lead they know that they have led them rightly. There is always love present in what is choreographed by the Holy Spirit. This is mentioned here by Paul because it is from a Biblical standpoint the highest commendation and affirmation that could be extended (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Love in the Spirit is an important idea. It has all kinds of implications regarding love’s authenticity, its practicality, its constant presence, its perseverance, and so on. Love in the Spirit will be manifested in different ways in the Church depending on one’s giftedness. A person who is an encourager might express love in such a way that we say, “Wow, that’s love!!” A person who is a prophet might demonstrate love for the

body of Christ in a way that leaves us puzzled. The same is true of a teacher, a servant, and a leader. Each will express their love a little differently. Hopefully all of these are demonstrations of love. That is the love the Spirit is orchestrating, and it is our challenge in exercising our giftedness to have our ministry be shaped by love.

It is the challenge of the 21st century Church to understand that there is more than one way to demonstrate love. We tend to see the love of Christ much more easily in a person with the gift of mercy, whereas we might doubt the presence of the love and character of Christ in a teacher or leader. Paul's point in placing his description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 amid a discussion of spiritual activities in the Church is probably along these lines. The love that is directed by the Spirit is for the welfare and spiritual health of the body of Christ and so takes on different shapes in different moments. Clearly however, our ministry to each other should be an outflow of love for God and for each other. There is no other legitimate motivation for ministry.

1:9 “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”

Because he had heard of the growing faith of the Colossians, Paul had continuously prayed for their maturity in the faith. What he is about to set forth has been his consistent prayer for them. This is a valuable section of Scripture for this reason. It reveals Paul's thought on what maturity is and how it comes about. It describes life on a higher plane and so shows how such life comes to be. Paul writes verses 4-12 to summarize his prayer for these people, and likely for many others as well. It is not that this is an exact prayer he prayed by memory, although one could do worse. It is a summary of his thought in their behalf that was continually expressed by him in requests to God in their behalf.

People who are mature are filled with the knowledge of God's will. The doing of only that which the Father wants done is the essence of Christ-likeness (John 5:19). Paul prays and asks to this end. Again, he uses the word for “true knowledge” when he speaks of the knowledge of God's will. This is done to direct the Colossian's thinking back to the all-sufficiency of Christ, the fact that there is no knowledge beyond what is to be gained in Him.

Paul associates this state of being filled with the true knowledge of His will with spiritual wisdom and understanding. This relationship between “all spiritual wisdom and understanding” is defined in the NASB by the preposition “in.” This is an English rendering of the Greek preposition *ἐν*. That preposition can be understood as expressing the location in which the knowledge of God's will is found, the means by which it is found, or the person or thing for whose benefit God's will is found. It is apparent that it does not in this case express the latter option. It is either expressing where such knowledge of God's will is found or the means by which it is found. The NASB, by choosing the word “in”, has chosen to understand this phrase as describing the logical sphere in which one finds the knowledge of God's will. The word “in” renders that meaning. The meaning conveyed by this is that as we lay hold of all spiritual wisdom and understanding we will find in these the will of God. The two are synonymous.

The other way of approaching this would be to understand “all spiritual wisdom and understanding” as the instrument by which we are filled with the knowledge of God's will. This meaning would be expressed by a preposition such as “by” or “through,” or

by short phrases such as “by means of,” or “because of,” or “ in a manner consistent with.” This is the direction the NIV takes. The message of the verse if taken in this way is that through the pursuit of spiritual wisdom and understanding we lay hold of the true knowledge of God’s will. I believe this is a more favorable rendering.

The wisdom and understanding spoken of here is spiritual. When the Scripture speaks of such spiritual wisdom and understanding it is speaking of that which is resident in God and made known to us through the activity of the Holy Spirit. The activity we must engage in to gain this is both objective and subjective. It is the Spirit energized meditation on the objective data in Scripture. It is also the Spirit energized pondering of life from the viewpoint of what we learn from Scripture to glean from it Divine wisdom. Wisdom is the acumen we develop by experience meditating on Scripture and it comes rapidly as we partner with the Holy Spirit in applying Scripture to real life.

All of this is to say that “all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” the thing false teachers and philosophers in Colossae were holding above Christ, is by Paul’s choice of words either resident in God’s will or only a means of finding His will. Either way, God’s will or thought is the commodity of value and that was what Paul wanted to remind the readers of.

The message of the letter is shaping up. Put your focus on God. Everything else is assigned value in whether it helps get you there. Later Paul will define the fact that Christ was God made flesh so that in Him we have God’s essence clothed in human flesh. There is no need to look further or higher or deeper. In Christ all mysteries are hidden.

1:10 “so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

Throughout the Scripture we see both relative and absolute language used with regard to righteousness. In the absolute sense, there is no one righteous (Romans 3:10-20). Humanity is totally incapable of living in a manner worthy of the Lord in this sense. There is also relative language used in the Scripture such as Paul uses here. It is legitimate to call one another to living a worthy life and Paul defines what he means by that idea in this verse. Relative to those without knowledge of the truth, believers can live righteously.

Christians bear the name of Christ whom nearly all humanity regards as a great moral teacher at the very least. He is, of course, much more than that to us. He was God in human flesh, undiminished deity and perfect humanity united forever in one person. He was also our sin-bearer and Savior. To live a life worthy of Him does not demand that we lead a perfect life. A worthy life begins with a summons to shape our lives by His teachings. These tell us that He died to save us from the penalty of our sin and to provide grounds for our forgiveness. There is an appropriate response for forgiven people, and it is to live a life in which we forgive others, and in which we don’t willfully engage again in those things for which we’ve been forgiven. He has placed His Spirit in us. We should appear to have His Spirit in us. We should appear to be saved people in the sense that we are being rescued and separated from the things that bind us. If we are the Lord’s, then His power, love, and wisdom should mark our lives.

In Colossae, the so-called deeper knowledge of the mystery religions was leading people into license. The idea that their bodies were “just matter” and so didn’t matter was taking root. This movement would sweep through the Mediterranean world in the centuries ahead. This has always been the tendency of humanity, to mix religion with excess so that religion creates opportunity and justification for excess. That road is not to be traveled by Christ-followers. There was no room for it in what He modeled or taught. To live the life that Christ lived is to experience the next installment of what our salvation is. It is to begin to bring about God’s design in initiating it.

Three statements are made in this verse by Paul to clarify further what it is to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” The first statement describes such a “walk” as one that pleases Him in all respects. When we speak of “pleasing” it is easy to envision a Deity that is angry, or offended, or arbitrary and grouchy. But that is not necessarily true, and certainly not in this case. Even in human relationships there are those we seek to please who are wonderful to us and who we love dearly. That is the relationship Paul is describing here. A father or mother can be completely pleased by their children yet be pleased even more by certain actions they take. A walk that is worthy of the Lord grows out of such a love relationship. It is a focused life in which He is central. It is not self-centered. It is bent on doing what He desires done in the moment.

The second phrase Paul uses to describe a worthy life is “bearing fruit in every good work.” All lives bear fruit. The question is, what kind of fruit will they bear (Galatians 6:7-8). Among the Lord’s people there is to be continued growth in good works. Christ’s teaching indicates that good works are those inspired by faith and trust in God. They are works that we see God doing and we trust them as such and join Him in bringing them about. Sometimes it is a voice within us that we must trust as His. Sometimes it is the words of Scripture. But if it is a work that is His it will involve faith of some sort. They will not flow out of our own instincts for our own pleasure.

The third phrase Paul uses to describe a worthy life is “increasing in the knowledge of God.” A life worthy of the Lord is one in which learning is taking place. There is always new understanding as we process life experiences in the light of what Scripture reveals. There is a deeper understanding of Him and all He has revealed. The person who has begun to understand God, rightly sees life as a stewardship. The stewardship of life requires an understanding of what is true. It was what Jesus knew of Himself, of the Father, of humanity, of specific individuals, of the Scripture that made His life extra-ordinary. It is said of the child Jesus that He increased in wisdom even as He grew in stature (Luke 2:52). The life that is lived in a “worthy of the Lord” manner is intent on knowing more of what God has revealed.

1:11 “strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously”

A fourth phrase Paul uses to describe a life worthy of the Lord is one that is strengthened with his power. He then describes the power he is thinking of. It is the power that results in all steadfastness and patience. Steadfastness is the rendering of a compound word composed of “remain” and “under.” It speaks of one who can endure or carry a responsibility for a long period. The word rendered “patience” is also a compound formed from the word for “long” and the word for “passion.” Passion is characteristically powerful, but short. Those who are passionate are usually flashes in the pan. Passion usually flares up and dies down. God’s delight is when we become long in passion, where our zeal and energy is prolonged, and pronounced.

The difference between the power of the flesh and the power of God is found in sustainability. These terms, steadfastness and patience, describe an effort and commitment that is sustained and drawn out. These are produced by “the power of HIS glory.” The legacy of Jesus’ life was a new era that He brought about in the lives of those who served him. There was a glory among those who served Yahweh under the old covenant. But its distinguishing mark was that it faded. This was best illustrated by the face of Moses, which glowed from the impact of God’s glorious presence, but the glow faded away to Moses’ dismay (Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:4-18). The new relationship with God the Father, brought about through Jesus’ work on the cross, is one of constancy. The might of His glory, the Holy Spirit, He has placed within us. The result is that we are blessed with an ability to endure and to be sustained in our pursuit of Him and our work for Him.

The life that is worthy of the Lord is so because it is produced by Him. He can produce it in us because he has made us worthy of being His temple. So when we speak of living life in a worthy manner it is not us deciding that we must prove that we deserved to be saved by Him. It is about us believing in what He has done and implementing it by faith. A worthy life is produced by Him through a body that we donate moment by moment.

This verse ends with the phrase “with joy.” Early translators believed it belonged with this verse, verse 11. The idea was that we were strengthened with all power resulting in steadfastness and patience with joy. In other words, the Christian life is not a kind of divine stoicism. It is a joyful life of endurance, a light-hearted but steady and consistent journey. Later translators observe the verse divisions but have generally linked the phrase “with joy” to the verse that follows.

1:12 “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”

The short phrase “with joy” that occurs at the end of the previous verse likely goes with this verse, so that it reads, “with joy giving thanks to the Father...”, Paul is still setting forth those things that are characteristic of a life lived worthy of the Lord. Here he speaks of that life being characterized by thanksgiving. Christ’s life was marked by spontaneous thanksgiving (Matthew 11:25; John 11:41). Before this verse was written, He gave His disciples this perspective, that above all they should be grateful for the heavenly inheritance that would be theirs (Luke 10:20). This verse is the testimony of God through His Spirit to us. It is also the testimony of a man who had witnessed heaven’s wonders (2 Corinthians 12:1-5). Heaven should be constantly on our minds and thoughts.

Thanksgiving is deserved by God and is right and proper. It is a kind of worship that must minister greatly to Him. It also ministers to us. All that we have discovered about “positive thinking” was enjoyed for centuries by Christians who, like Jesus, engaged themselves in spontaneous times of thanksgiving. In our darkest moments we can give thanks for what Paul speaks of here, our inheritance in heaven. So vast is its blessing that it will shrink any trial we experience here on earth.

Our thanksgiving is to be joyous. We are to reflect on God’s gift to us in a way that makes us celebrate. This is done through thoughtfully turning our minds to our eternal inheritance and reflecting precisely on it. The more we know of Him and His truth, the more we can do this. But we are to reflect on it deeply enough to rouse within us

joyous thanksgiving. Our thought should not be in passing so that our thanks is obligatory, and emotionless.

This is an important detail in these words that Paul has given us. God has qualified us for this inheritance. Evil had disqualified us. God didn't lower the standard of judgment by mercy. In that case we would have spoiled the inheritance, as the first creation was spoiled. He qualified us, meaning He embarked on a plan that would release us from sin's penalty, which was separation from God. With our relationship to Him restored, we can be released from the power of sin and eventually its presence. It is a big thought that God didn't just hand over his wealth to evil people. Earth's history is full of stories of men who have passed on huge inheritances to their sons but have not imparted the character that their sons needed to successfully manage them. These are tragic stories. God makes no such mistake. He has done and is doing a meticulous work of imparting qualifications to us.

It is noteworthy that the verb "to qualify" (ικανῶ), and its related words, refer to what has been made fit, or what is worthy, or up to capacity or capability. This is expressed here in a context in which Paul is speaking about living a life worthy of the Lord. This verse points out that if we do live such a life it is because God has enabled it.

The inheritance of the saints is that which Christ has inherited. We know that His inheritance is all things (Hebrews 1:2). We know that we are "joint-heirs" with Him (Romans 8:17). We know that He will freely give us all things (Romans 8:32). So certain is this that we are told that all things belong to us (1 Corinthians 3:21-22). So each person is given a share in all that is.

Now there are some important questions connected with this. Does each person receive a share in the whole, as Americans today hold together "public land"? Is it more like our experience in holding shares in a public company, where we exercise control over it? Is it more like owning a piece of real estate, or a business, where we exercise full control over it?" Perhaps even more important is this question: will each person receive an equal share?

The dilemma of all these questions is that we tend to project what life on the new earth will be like based on the only thing we know, life on this present earth. That experience is marred by evil. At the same time God Himself through writers of Scripture, often described that life in terms we would understand, that relate to this present life on this earth. So there is a certain limit to our ability to sort out the coming reality from the parables and symbols that compare the picture we are given of eternity and the inheritance to today. On the other hand, the information we are given is what God calls revelation. By its very nature revelation makes something clearer. So we cannot throw up our hands and give up trying to understand our eternal inheritance. We must simply know that our understanding will be limited, and we must not run beyond the boundaries and principles the word pictures allow.

From all that is said in the Scripture about the inheritance, there are certain things that seem clear. First, it seems that within the being of the Triune God there is a distinction in roles, and even authority without any compromise of equality. This is very difficult for us to imagine because the moment evil is injected into beings, distinctions become warped and abused. But since there is no evil in God there is perfect harmony within the Trinity, though things like authority and submission are being exercised. Earthly experiments like the "Separate but Equal doctrine" in American race relations have made us fear distinctions. Our experience in an evil world immediately and rightfully

sounds an alarm in our minds. But in God's realm there seems to be no problem with differing rank. It seems that these distinctions are true among angels as well. So distinction in role, authority, and in glory received cannot be inherently evil, or God himself would have to be judged evil.

Second, there seems to be distinct roles set aside in God's kingdom for some. A specific case is cited by Jesus. The apostles were told they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel in Christ's kingdom (Mark 10:28-31). Furthermore, it is said that this is a reward for their faithfulness. In Paul's writings we see the same concept when he speaks of Christians judging both the world and angels (1 Corinthians 6:2-3). So there is in Paul's writings a sharing with Christ on the part of believers of His role as judge of the earth.

Third, there is the clear idea in Scripture that God will evaluate stewardship and reward it individually (Matthew 25:15-46; Luke 19:11-27; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10). This means that distinctions will be made by Him relating to decisions made by us in this life. These distinctions seem to be quite apparent during the millennial reign of Christ on this earth (Matthew 19:27ff; Mark 10:28-31; Luke 13:28-30). It is not apparent to what degree these carry over into life on the new earth.

It seems that our experience of all things will be both uniform and distinct. All saints will inherit all things in the sense that all of them will enter into the experience of the great glory that accompanies God's visible kingdom, just as God's angels do now. At the same time their role in that form the Kingdom takes may be quite varied individually, assigned by God in accordance with their faithfulness to Him in this life. Amidst all the imagery used in Scripture to describe the future realities of the Kingdom there seems to be both an "all things" and a "some things" dimension to our inheritance. Another way of seeing this might be to see a collective and an individual experience of it. We will experience together all the fullness of God's glory. We will experience individually with Him the fruit of our labors for Him on this earth.

The entire idea of God rewarding us seems superfluous when we properly understand His work of grace and our own depravity. Some object strongly to the idea of reward on this basis. It is entirely true that any accomplishment brought about by us is entirely of Him. That is the reality. And so the idea that He would compensate us in any way can seem far-fetched. But isn't that the nature of His grace anyway? That He blesses humanity we all embrace and believe. The reward He will bestow is just more grace. We should simply understand it as a continuation of His blessing of us. Any reward given will simply accentuate His grace and so magnify His glory.

We are told in this verse that we will share the inheritance of the saints "in light." This expression, "in light," involves the Greek preposition *εν*. The question that this preposition raises here is whether it is conveying to us where this inheritance will be enjoyed, or the instrument that has brought about this privilege of sharing in the inheritance. Light is used as a symbol of the place of God's dwelling (1 Timothy 6:16). It is used more frequently in both Testaments as a symbol of truth (Isaiah 5:20; 42:6; Luke 11:32-36). As such it becomes a symbol throughout Scripture of the presence of Yahweh, and therefore of truth (Isaiah 9:22; John 1:4-9; 8:12; 1 John 1:5-7). Walking in light is the symbol used by Jesus and in the writings of John for living in fellowship with God and therefore in harmony with the truth.

In this verse the “in light” phrase certainly captures all of this. It is through the truth that we come to share in the inheritance of the saints. So our inheritance comes to us through the light. That inheritance is to live in light, in absolute harmony with all that is true. We will become as God in this sense, like Christ, who was the truth incarnate in human flesh. This is a sphere of existence that will be ours and will be so by the power of God to change our makeup including our physical bodies. The tiny preposition “en” seeks to capture this amazing sphere of existence where there is no pretense, no lie, no mixture of truth with untruth, no ignorance of what is.

1:13 “For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.”

This verse states more of the reasons we should joyously give thanks to God the Father.

First, he has delivered us from the domain of darkness. From a spiritual standpoint the earth is a mingling of two domains or spiritual powers. What is called here the domain of darkness dominates it in terms of number of subjects. Light in Scripture represents truth and so darkness represents an absence of truth. The power of that realm lies in ignorance, in lies, in superstition, and in half-truth. It is the realm we are born into and exist in apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit. We have been delivered from that domain. To escape it requires deliverance. One does not know to escape it on their own and apart from God cannot escape it. To be delivered is to be drawn out of something by someone else. Everywhere in Scripture this is taught that God has intervened to draw us out of the spiritual domain of darkness (Ephesians 2:1-10).

The second reason we should give thanks to God is that we have been transferred to that other spiritual domain. It is the domain of light. By numbers of human subjects, it is smaller. By sheer power it can overwhelm the domain of darkness and eventually will dominate the earth through its King Jesus Christ, the truth incarnate (Daniel 2:44-45, 7:26-27; Revelation 19:11-21). All who come to believe in Jesus Christ are transferred into this kingdom of light. By His power they are able to put to death the old deeds that they did while subjects in the realm of darkness (Ephesians 5:11-12).

This is the work of the gospel, to bring about this “transfer” in humanity. The gospel is the power of God in this regard, the specific truth that enables one to cross over into light and then find freedom from their old way of thinking and behaving. Its central figure, Jesus Christ, performed the only acts required for our rescue. The only act we must add is our faith, and that itself is even of God (Ephesians 2:10).

1:14 “In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

In Jesus we have redemption. That is, through what He has done a price has been paid that meets the demands of God’s justice and so we can be transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of Jesus. There is no longer any judicial claim against us, blocking us from God. We have been redeemed. The price for our freedom has been paid. It is not a redemption process that simply pays a fine and leaves our offenses intact. It involves Jesus being substituted for us and bearing our guilt and punishment. This redemptive plan of God involves forgiveness, full and complete, because Jesus bore our punishment. The result is unique in the annals of criminal justice, where criminals compensate for their crime by time served or by money paid or both. Their guilt remains, though they have been released. Forgiveness is not really an element of the process. In Christ we are released because we are forgiven, and that is foreign to most of our understanding of crime and punishment.

1:15 “And He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

With the former thought on the redemptive work of Christ, Paul sets up this natural shift to his next subject, the person of Christ, though it should be mentioned that grammatically it is a continuation of the previous thought. This kind of flowing, smooth shift from one idea to the next is very typical in the writings of Paul.

He makes two important statements about Jesus here that will be followed in the ensuing verses by a number more. He states first that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, which is somewhat of an oxymoron. In this case the invisible God chose to make Himself visible, becoming a man. As such He was fully Divine and fully human and named Jesus. And so for a period of time there was the experience of seeing God on earth.

This appearance of God on earth did not make visible to us the physical glory of God. It is doubtful that is possible in our present state. In that visit Jesus came in the “likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3). By that we are not saying he sinned or had sin. Only that his human appearance was like that of fallen humanity. It was a body subject to the physical weaknesses that ours are but without sin (Hebrews 4:15). There was only one occasion when the glory of this great King became visible and only a few were privileged to see it (Luke 9:27-36; 2 Peter 1:16-18). Jesus will come again, and this will be different. He said He will come again in power and great glory (Matthew 24:30; 25:31). And so at the first coming he demonstrated the glory of God’s character and attributes (John 1:14-2:11). But that first appearance on earth did not make visible to us the full glory of all that God is.

Paul’s point here is not what Jesus wasn’t, but what He was. Jesus was God Himself made visible. He was not a different, lesser being than the Creator and sustainer of all that is, as the Colossians were being led to believe. The central figure of our faith is none less than the central figure and ruler over whatever else is. The Colossians need look for no one or nothing that would lead them higher or deeper in their understanding of reality.

There are several statements made in Scripture that speak to this appearance of God on the earth, the incarnation. Several Greek words are used to express the different dimensions of the appearance of the God/man. There is considerable overlap in meaning and usage of these words, but there are also noticeable differences in them as well. In Philippians Paul says that Jesus existed in the form of God and took on the

form of man (Philippians 2:6). The word used there and rendered form is μορφή. It is a term that can speak not just to the shape of something, but its essence. By using this term Paul wished to teach that Jesus was Divine in essence. Without giving that up Jesus took on the essence of man. In that same passage we find that He had the appearance of man (Philippians 2:8). The word used there is σκεμα. That word relates to what the eyes observe and see, the outward form of Jesus observed by those who laid eyes on Him. Elsewhere, Paul uses the term ομοιωμα to speak of idols, objects made that bear the likeness of something or someone (Romans 1:23).

Now in this passage, Paul uses the term εικων to speak of the identity of the incarnated Christ. That term speaks of that which is a manifestation of something and so representative of it. Christ was a manifestation of God such as has never occurred.

So here Paul uses the term εικων, and it is likely that through it he wishes to make a strong statement about the humanity of Christ. He is the image of God, a statement that harks back to what is said of the first Adam (Genesis 1:26-27). We know that Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. We know that when they sinned that image became marred in humanity. In Jesus that image of God was more fully present. I say more fully present, because His body was like that of fallen man, subject to fatigue, sickness, weakness, and death. But He Himself was without sin and lived a life of unbroken submission to the will of God the Father (John 5:19). He was in this sense a manifestation of God in the way humanity was originally intended to be and as such He was a representative of what God desired in humanity.

So we conclude that Jesus revealed not only who God was, but who God designed humanity to be as the bearers of His image. In looking at Jesus, we see not only God, but ourselves as we will be when God's plan of salvation has run its course and His image restored in us. The first threat against a healthy doctrine of Christ was that many began to deny His humanity. He was of course different than fallen humanity, but He was human, and that is likely an important reason for Paul's choice of words here.

That Jesus, the Creator-God, relates Himself to creation by becoming human is an important statement in this letter. The philosophical thought that was developing in that part of the Mediterranean world would eventually propound the idea that because matter was evil a moral being would be disengaged from it—unconcerned because it was to be destroyed anyway. That concept would lead to the idea that what we engage in with our material bodies is irrelevant. They are immoral as is the entire material realm and therefore can and should be abandoned to whatever. That God became a material human being and that He was understood to be One who dealt in and had objectives in the physical realm, and that He did so without sin in perfect harmony with the Godhead was a very important distinctive to maintain in the practice of Christianity. So Paul's first statement about Jesus presents Him as undiminished Deity and perfect humanity.

Secondly Paul states that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. This follows very naturally the idea that He was divine and the first human to perfectly bear the image of God by living a sinless life. This He was appointed to do by His anointing to be the source of our salvation. As such he became the firstborn of all creation. This was important to the culture because it conveyed the idea of Jesus' right and authority over creation.

The idea of the right of the firstborn son has disappeared in western civilization and thought. But it is the motif of Biblical thought about Christ and His relationship to His creation, and His family. Though the actual word “over” does not occur in the Greek text, the phrases that follow clearly show that to be the thought here, that Jesus is the firstborn OVER all creation. The Greek grammar allows for such language and even can be understood as demanding some expression of distinction and separation.

Again, the significance to the readers and their culture of both of these statements about Christ is that Jesus was not one of a myriads of “emanations” that came from God. He was God Himself and was distinctly over all else that has come from God. He was not to be understood as detached from the material world. He is distinct from it in essence but it is a creation of His, and an expression of Him, though marred by evil. He intentionally immerses Himself in it for His own purposes and glory.

1:16 “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or rulers or authorities all things have been created by Him and for Him.”

These thoughts are connected to the previous verse through the conjunction οτι in the Greek, literally “because.” They are intended to add further information and explanation and weight to the idea that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. Specifically, they show that the intention of the statement of Him being firstborn was to convey Jesus’ authority over creation.

In our way of thinking, that Jesus was the firstborn of all creation would mean that He was the first thing created by God. This verse shows that Paul is using the expression according to its meaning in his own culture. It was an expression of Christ’s authoritative position as ruler over all that is. His thought in this verse can be summarized in this way. Jesus is the sovereign ruler over all that is because He made it all and made it all for Himself. Verse 17 will add further to this statement of Jesus’ sovereignty.

Verse 16 begins with the statement that all things have been created by Him. He is firstborn over them because they owe their origin to Him. This is true whether they are in the heavens or on the earth. This statement of origins will be made to relate to the entire universe before it is concluded and that is seen in terms of the way the word “heavens” was used in Paul’s day. All that we know, and know of even vaguely, and what lies beyond the boundaries of what we see, exists because Jesus has put it there. He is sovereign over it. All things means that there is nothing that lies outside the boundaries of His sovereign ownership.

This statement had powerful implications in terms of the philosophical systems of the ancient world, and all those that have been propounded since. It raises some difficult questions to be sure. These must be addressed with the understanding that His sovereignty is finally absolute and that it flows from a being who is good and loving. It is finally absolute in the sense that there are beings who exercise power of decision that bring about that which offends His character. In that sense things happen that are not His will. He exercises decisions that counter those and have the power to shape those evil decisions. He is able to bring about His will even through evil and in spite of it. This all has the effect of revealing the extreme nature of His power and sovereignty. So there is that which He has created, such as humanity and Satan, that has brought about what is NOT His will. But He is acting toward all that is not His will to bring

about what is His desired final outcome. All things are serving Him, and so He is the firstborn OVER all creation.

The phrase “visible and invisible” is added next by Paul. Jesus created the material world we see and so is sovereign over it. This was important to reinforce in the minds of the original readers. Matter is of Him and is made for Him. That includes our physical bodies.

There has been a reoccurring error in the Christian community over the years that somehow our material bodies are the source of our evil. This has given birth to two streams of thought. One is that our inner being is pure and our bodies useless. If, in fact, we could somehow escape them and their influence we would live a life of perfection. That is fundamentally against Scripture. A second strain of thought is that since our bodies are evil they are outside the realm of concern to God and what we engage them in does not matter. That too is fundamentally against Scripture. When the idea that the source of our evil is our material bodies, a dualism emerges that always creates a non-biblical view of the sanctification process.

The invisible things were also created by Jesus, and He is sovereign over them. This includes the forces of nature, natural laws known and unknown that shape the universe and life in it. But the primary point of Paul in speaking of invisible things seems to be clarified by him in the string of specific things he names. He speaks of thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. These are all personal beings that exercise authority. They include the kings and governors that we see as well as all spiritual beings that are largely unknown to us. This latter realm has been the subject of much speculation over the eons of time. There was a complex system of gods and beings in the Roman and Greek philosophies of the day. From the earliest written histories, we see polytheistic systems that include myriads of divinities, both good and evil. They explain everything from the weather to the fertility of the womb. Paul’s position is not to eliminate completely here the existence of such a spiritual world. It is certain that spiritual beings, known in Christianity as angels and demons, exist. It is certain that these have impact on our experience. Paul’s point is that these all fall under the sovereignty of God. Their work is not unscrutinized, uncontrolled or unmitigated. Jesus is acting against evil so that the outcome will be the one God desires, and has planned.

This is affirmed in a very far-reaching phrase that Paul lays out next--that all things are created for Him. The idea is that all things exist for His use and to benefit or bring advantage to Him. That is a very important idea with a number of implications. Now, before speaking to what this means it is good to speak to briefly to what it does not mean. It does not mean that all things in every moment bring about that which serves Him in the moment of time or era in which they occur. We know that some things do not serve Him in their existence, but in their destruction (Proverbs 16:4; Romans 12:22; 1 Corinthians 1:19, 3:17; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 11:18). It does not mean that all things benefit Him, as they are envisioned by their inventors. It does not mean that in everything and every being there is an innate goodness that He values and accepts. It does not mean that everything or being is such that good is produced by the offsetting forces of the whole.

If it does not mean these things, what can we say is implied in the statement and clarified in the rest of Scripture? First, since it is stated that all things exist for His benefit, it is only logical that He is using them for His benefit, since they do exist. So He is taking actions that utilize and will eventually reverse what is clearly initiated by others that are opposed to Him. In the end all will acknowledge that all things have

served Him and led to the triumph of His purposes. Second, it is implied that all things find their true purpose in the function they serve in His plan. That means that everyone finds their identity in His plan and blueprint. It means that the things we “own” and the experiences we can choose for ourselves have their highest return when used or experienced in conformity to His prescription. The implications are endless from a philosophy of wealth to one of personal satisfaction. Design defines function and dysfunction, and that is useful in all of life. It makes revelation of God’s mind something that is of supreme practical value.

Third, it implies that sin is not only a matter of innate moral character, but a matter of how something is used. In other words, there are beings that are innately sinful. We find that in ourselves as humans. There are also experiences that are amoral but become sin if they are not entered into in conformity with the plan and design of the Sovereign One. Even things that we view as innately good, such as preaching or doing charitable work, are sin if done in a self-serving way instead of a God-serving way. All things are made FOR Him. To the extent they are done for Him they are good.

Fourth, and this is primary, this statement is made with a view toward the end to which God is taking all things. It means that things are being and will continue to be acted on by Him in a way that He will bring about His purposes through them (Romans 8:28). This is true even of evil things and evil itself. All things that He allows to exist will be made to serve His purposes and desires, and to aid in some way His plan. So the statement is not of the nature of things themselves, or of their combined potential for good. It is made in view of action He takes of His own nature and volition that will bring about His advantage and benefit through all that has been made.

1:17 “And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

With this Paul continues to support his statement that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. He continues by this statement to undermine the teachings of the early Gnostics who believed that the world we know was the creation of an inferior being and as such was evil. He continues to show that in Christ we have the unique infinite One from whom came everything else. He is nothing less than the supreme God of the universe.

Paul states that Christ is ‘before all things.’ This could be construed as a statement of time or a statement of sovereignty over all things. The word rendered “before” is the Greek preposition *πρὸ*. In most of its usage in the New Testament it is a statement of time or space. However in the only other places that it is used with the term “all things,” it means “above,” and is a statement of priority (James 5:2; 1 Peter 4:8). So this could legitimately be understood as a statement of Christ’s authority over all things. But Paul seems to have already established that, it being his first desire in the clarification of Christ being the firstborn of all creation. That all things have been created by Him and for Him seem to establish Him as above all creation in rank. Likely then, Paul wishes to confirm that the statement of firstborn of all creation includes the element of time. He is before all things in time. Though this seems inherent in the idea that He created all things, Paul wants to clearly state it. Christ Himself had alluded to this about Himself (John 8:58; 17:5). Before anything else existed there was Christ.

Paul adds that Christ is the one who holds things together. The idea of the word he uses is that of coherence and order, as opposed to chaos. All of the New Testament affirms this about Christ, that the order we observe is preserved under His authority

(Matthew 11:17; Luke 10:22; John 13:3; Romans 4:11; 11:36). He has only to give the word and the entire natural order of things will be enveloped in entropy.

So the picture that is emerging in these verses is that Christ existed before anything else did. He brought into existence all that does exist. He assigned to each thing a role and order whereby it continues by His command to be sustained. From the viewpoint of many, creation is self-sustaining. But this is really a misnomer. The testimony of Scripture is that it would all collapse apart from His sustaining power (Nehemiah 9:6; Hebrews 1:3).

1:18 “He is also the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.”

From Jesus’ great position as the sovereign ruler of the universe, Paul moves to the logical deduction that He is also the sovereign ruler of the Church. Paul reminds the readers of the preeminence of Christ in the Church through the imagery that was characteristic of his teaching on the Church elsewhere, the figure of the human body (Romans 12:4; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 4:16). He presents Christ as the head of that body. He is the nerve center that unites the functions of the rest of the parts to sustain life and He brings about the activity of the body. Even with the limited understanding of physiology in Paul’s day, everyone knew what became of a headless body! It is perfect imagery in terms of Christ’s preferred style of leadership. He seeks to sway people and bring them to obedience through inner influence of grace rather than lord it over them. The figure of the head and the body describes the relationship perfectly. He is clearly the originator and imitator of the life of the healthy Church. Yet there is a clear identity, vitality, and even beauty to the function of each individual part. He leads and controls but does so in a way that also brings out the glory of what He has made.

Christ is also said to be “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” Paul has spoken of His present role in the Church. Now he speaks to the next stage of the kingdom of God, the lead edge of which we see in Christ’s resurrection. He is the first human to receive a glorified human body. In this sense He is the firstborn from the dead. He is the first in time. He is also the firstborn in terms of His preeminence in the ages to come, where He will rule over all those raised from the dead, which will include the evil and the good, believer and unbeliever. For believers, Christ is our head now in the Church and He will be our older brother, the controller of our inheritance, through the years of His kingdom on earth and into the eternal state. We will rule with Him, but it is clearly with Him, not apart from Him, and it is clearly because of Him (John 17:24; Romans 8:17; Colossians 1:13; James 2:5). For unbelievers Christ will be their sovereign, but not their Savior. They will be subject to His sentence in judgment with no hope of release.

Jesus’ title in Scripture is Christ, which means the Anointed One. It refers to a number of roles He plays in God’s plan, all of which make Him the central visible figure in that plan. He simply has first place in everything, and this is by design and so by qualification and activity. Were we to search for the greatest leader it would be Jesus the Christ. Were we to search for the one who had served humanity the fullest it would be Jesus the Christ. Were we to look for the one with the best character it would be Jesus the Christ. The same would result if we were to search for the most powerful, the most intelligent, the most loving, the most pious the most in-tune with people, the wealthiest and so on. He is by design and endowment pre-eminent. History is scripted to confirm the truth of this and to make it known to every living creature

(Isaiah 45:23; Phil 2:10). Paul's testimony here to the Colossians is of this. It is an important thing to remind them of since the thinking of the day was to understand Christ within a broader, polytheistic scheme, one of a myriads of greater-than-human beings. He is to be revered by His Church as wholly set apart and unique. He is to be understood by them as absolutely sovereign over all. He is to be worshipped by them as intrinsically worthy of every ounce of praise and admiration that could ever be afforded Him. Though no one has stooped lower than Christ, it is equally certain that no one occupies such an elevated position.

It is clear from the Scripture that the ideological end toward which events have been choreographed is that God be acknowledged by all creation to the full degree that He deserves (Psalm 46:10; Isaiah 45:4-5, 20-25; Habakkuk 2:13-14; 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 3:10). Since the visible manifestation of God is Jesus, it stands to reason that He has become and will become even more the focal point of humanity's praise and worship. Within the being of the Triune God however, we find the submission of the Son to the Father. This was demonstrated by Christ during His years on earth (John 5:19-20; Luke 22:42; John 18:11). Clearly much of the worship God the Father seeks for Himself, He brings about through the worship of the Son (compare Isaiah 45:23 with Philippians 2:10). He has clearly revealed that Jesus was Yahweh in human flesh (Philippians 2:9-11; John 1:1-14). But we also see what we would call internal submission within the triune God to the Father. This will not change and will become more visible (1 Corinthians 15:28). Christ will have first place in everything, as Paul tells the Colossians here. This will be the new order of things. He will remain the visible incarnation of God for all eternity, Yahweh in the form of man. We will also see clearly in Him His own submission to the Father. More of the mystery of the Triune God, three distinct persons who are one in essence, will become visible to us and more clearly understood by us.

1:19 "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him."

This idea is of such significance in Paul's thought to the Colossians that he will restate it in the next chapter (2:9). That idea is that all of the attributes of God are present in Christ. Both in scope and degree these things that make God who he is are present in Christ, and they are present permanently. This is a significant idea to set forth in the arena of polytheism. The characteristic of those systems is to imagine all the things that might be true of a single god as being carried out by a few lesser divine beings.

In the strain of thought that was flourishing in Asia Minor the terminology would be different than for example, Greek Mythology. But the idea of a few lesser beings who each carried out a function of the supreme entity in a monotheistic model was present. An example is that many were teaching that matter was created by an inferior moral being that had divine-like powers. Paul's statement here and in 2:9 stands against that idea, that a number of divine-like creatures were in control of our reality. His statement clearly defines the divinity of Jesus Christ. He was nothing less than God in His fullness and in visible form.

There are three important words in this statement that are used in specific ways in the Bible. Considered according to their normal usage they lend clarity and power to this statement on Christ. The first of these terms is "good pleasure." Here the term Father is added by the translators and that is legitimate. When this phrase is used of God's good pleasure it is always speaking of God the Father (Matthew 3:17; Luke 12:32; 1 Corinthians 1:21). The point is that it is not that the attributes of God had a will of their own and came to alight on the man Jesus, nor is it that Jesus was just a man and

clothed Himself through self-discipline with attributes such as God has. It was a decision of God, an intentional, purposeful course of action by Him to become human.

This decision of God related to His “fullness,” and that is the second important word. It is a word that means to be filled to capacity, whether it is used in a plain literal sense (Mark 8:20), or in a figurative sense (Galatians 4:10). When something is full in the sense in which this word is used, there is no more capacity. Of the infinite fullness that is God’s essence, nothing was held back by Him from Jesus. He was the full and complete essence of God.

The third important word in this statement is the term “dwell.” In the Septuagint, two words were used to express dwelling. One referred to a temporary state. The other to a permanent one. In Genesis 37:1 both words are used. There it says that Jacob dwelt permanently (κατοικεν) in the land where his father sojourned (παροικεν). Paul uses the word here that speaks of permanent dwelling. The fullness of God did not simply pay a visit to Jesus or come upon Him for a season so that His essence was otherwise normal. It permanently resided in Him. It was so united with His Humanity that it was truly His essence.

This then is the reason why Jesus has first place in everything. He is worthy by virtue of His identity and essence. It is this thought that Paul is seeking to strengthen by this verse.

1:20 “and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, / say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

In this verse Paul is expressing thought meant to strengthen the idea of verse 18, that Jesus was to have first place in everything. Verse 19 spoke to the idea that the worship of Him was appropriate due to His essential identity. He is God incarnate in human flesh. So Jesus is to have first place in everything because He is God. Here Paul transitions from that thought of Jesus’ essence to summarizing His work done in our behalf. He is worthy of our absolute worship because of what He has accomplished for us.

Through Jesus God “reconciled all things to Himself.” To reconcile means to bring back hostile parties to a former state of harmony and friendship. It captures in a word the state of original creation, fallen creation, and God’s new creation. While the English word “reconcile” or “reconciled” occurs many times in the New Testament, this word occurs only three times (Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20-21). It is the word αποκαταλλασω. In the other cases where reconcile appears in the English versions it is the rendering of a very similar word. It is in fact, the same word minus one of the prepositions prefixed to it, καταλλασσω. The additional preposition which Paul prefixes to this word here conveys separation and liberation. The resulting word does not appear in the Septuagint or in secular Greek literature. The addition of the preposition απο to this word that already meant to reconcile, emphasizes separation between what had come about due to sin and what now is because of God’s plan.

The presence of the term “all things” must be reckoned with when interpreting Paul’s words here. Some could drag out of this universalism, that somehow all people will be saved, no matter the diversity of their belief. This does not agree with the rest of Scripture that belief in Christ is essential (John 3:16). Even this verse speaks of reconciliation coming through Christ.

As always the context in which this phrase “all things” occurs is significant. Already in verses 15 through 20 Paul has used the term “all things” four times and the term “everything” once. This is a discussion not just about people but things. That was intentional on Paul’s part. He was concerned about the belief that was developing in the minds of the people of the ancient world that matter was evil, and that it was to be discarded by God and so by us. That view made everything in the material world, from the planet to the human body base and meaningless.

While it is true that the present earth has been spoiled by evil (Romans 8:20-21), and that it will be destroyed in its present form in the future (1 Peter 3:9-13), four other things are true of the present creation as well. The first is that God intends to restore the present creation in some sense (Romans 8:20-21; Acts 3:19-21; Isaiah 11:1-11). This appears to be both a spiritual and physical regeneration brought about on the earth and in it by the second coming of Jesus Christ who will physically rule over it (Matt 19:28; 25:31; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Revelation 2:26-27). The reconciling of all things then can be understood as God’s plan for the restoration of the present creation, as well as His plan for a new one.

A second factor in the understanding of this idea that through Christ all things will be reconciled to God is that the reconciliation of humanity to God will be fulfilled through a remnant of humanity. It will not be achieved in the case of every single individual who has ever lived. The entire story of Israel that occupies the whole of Scripture illustrates the idea that God is seeking out and choosing a remnant of humanity whom He will save (Romans 11:1-5). So it is that within the infinite field of “all things” we find that representative elements are reconciled. This can be understood in the way that Creation was “saved “ during the time of the flood through the representative humans and animals aboard Noah’s ark. God will reconcile to Himself angels, though not all of them. He will reconcile humanity, though not all of them. He will reconcile created things, though not necessarily every object created that has been warped by the presence of evil.

The third thing that must be understood in terms of this present creation being reconciled through Christ is that in the case of material things, their form can change very dramatically, while the matter that composes them remains essentially the same. This is true of all things from an ice cube to a log thrown on a fire to the actual planet we live on. Matter can be changed so that it becomes invisible in terms of its form, but it still exists. It is not hard to imagine an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator-God reconstituting matter to conform it to His desires. In the case of our material bodies this appears to be exactly what God will do (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). So in the reconciliation of all things this will undoubtedly be much of what God eventually does through Christ (Revelation 20:11-21:8). In terms of material things, they will be reconciled to God in the sense that God will certainly bring them into the form He desires for them, serving the function He desires them to have. We will see this to a degree when Christ rules on the present earth. We will see the work fully accomplished on the new earth.

The fourth thing is in view regarding the reconciliation of all things. It is a very important matter. Evil has caused many things to be compromised. An infinite number of injustices have been committed, evil people and beings still experience the blessings and mercies of Yahweh, and the earth’s environment has been extensively damaged by fallen humanity. For most of human history things have not been done His way and it has been devastating. There are many such conditions on earth that cannot be “reconciled” with what we know of the character of Yahweh. Christ will reconcile that situation. Evil will be judged and confined away from the experience of

Yahweh's goodness. Injustices will be made right and payment made for damages. The earth will be restored. Creation, both beings and things will in this sense be reconciled with God.

Paul says that this work of reconciliation is done through Christ's blood and that this blood of His has made peace. It is certain that without blood there is no remission of sin in the moral economy God has chosen to establish in His plan (Hebrews 9:22). This is consistent with the fact that our life functions are sustained by our blood and God has ordained that blood should be that through which atonement is made for our souls (Leviticus 17:11, 14). As to why God chose this we do not know. It is certainly no morbid, warped desire to inject more suffering into our life experience. It seems most likely that He wanted to establish a most somber, visual picture of sin, guilt, and atonement, and so chose blood as the instrument. Its sight arouses our fullest attention and our deepest empathy and sorrow. The thought of it is associated with pain and so arouses in us pre-emptive action. Animal sacrifice became the earliest picture God used to arouse in humanity the seriousness of guarding and guiding their power of decision (Genesis 3:21; 4:4). From this legitimate root blood sacrifice in time became quite perverted as religious thought took on its demonic bent. In God's way of practicing it, outlined in detail in the Mosaic law, animal sacrifice provided the perfect symbol of what God intended to do through Jesus the Christ. His blood is that through which reconciliation has occurred. It is so, not because of any intrinsic value of blood, but because of the value that God has assigned it in general and the value that He has assigned to the blood of His own sinless Son.

Paul ends the verse with a statement that reinforces the idea of "all things." It includes things in earth and in heaven. It is not that there are things in heaven that need to be reconciled to God. Rather, they need to be reconciled with man. Christ's blood allowed reconciliation between all parties in heaven and all willing parties on earth. It was the only thing that could accomplish this. The words of Paul are emphatic on this point. Heaven could only reconcile with earth because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. This role He occupies is added rationale for Him having first place in everything.

1:21 "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,"

Paul has been speaking of the right of Christ to be considered pre-eminent. This pre-eminence is commensurate with both His identity as God incarnate and with what He has done in our behalf. Here Paul personalizes Christ's goodness to humanity, speaking of the former mindset of the Colossians. Two things characterized them and all of humanity apart from Christ.

First, they had been alienated in mind with respect to God and the things of God. The compound word Paul uses to express this alienation is *απηλλοτριωμενου*. The word is formed from, *αλλοτριος*, meaning that which is foreign. Emphasis is added to this word by the prefixed preposition *apo*, meaning away. It captures the hopelessness of our plight (Ephesians 2:12, 4:18). Because there is no knowledge of God, much less relationship or fellowship with Him. His thoughts and desires completely escape us. So there is a compounded estrangement. The normal suspicion, misunderstanding, and ignorance expand to outright hostility. The word *απηλλοτριωμενου* portrays our condition having moved towards that of Satan, who not only is estranged from God but is intentionally opposing God. So the Colossians and all of humanity journey away from God becoming increasingly hostile to His

thoughts, His family, and all the normal processes He uses to communicate His heart to his people.

Second, this estrangement and hostility was and is more than a mindset. It involves evil deeds. In truth, the evil deeds are the cause, according to Paul, of our hostile mindset toward God. That is an important order. We start out alienated from God. As we engage in evil, we justify ourselves and incriminate God, even as Adam and Eve did. So the deeds themselves are evil, but the biggest problem becomes what they produce in our minds, a pattern of thought that is anti-God, in which we fabricate a god to our liking and a theology to match. So our hostility to God is compounded as we defend our actions instead of confessing them. What started out as a lack of relationship mutates into a hostile relationship. God becomes utterly alien to us.

Where this occurs there is a relational degeneration in human relationships that happens. One of the things we observe among humanity is a distrust of those who are different. A distrust of those of a different race, language, or social custom, becomes quite natural. This distrust is very volatile. Through suspicion and ignorance, it easily is manipulated and degenerates into hatred and war. This is symptomatic of our spiritual incapacity which fosters in us all that is contrary to what is true and therefore right. This is our condition before Christ intervenes. It is to dissipate as we learn to think as He does with His help.

1:22 “yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.”

The worship of Christ as pre-eminent is proper because of who He is, and because of what He has done in our behalf. Namely, He embraced us as hostile rebels and is imparting to us freely the capacity to live in intimate relationship with Him and so at the other end of the moral spectrum. The previous verse looked to the Colossian's past. This verse looks to the future God would like to lead them into. The following verse will describe their present challenge.

By taking on a material earthly body Jesus could live as we must live and do so without sin. He would then be qualified as man and as sinless man to bear our sin and give His own body as a sacrifice for our sin. The idea that Christ took on a material body like that of the rest of humanity was and is a critical doctrine for all to affirm. It was being eroded in the early Christian community.

Jesus' vicarious death removed the guilt of all who would believe in Him. The result is that they are reconciled to God. **αὐτοῦ****ῥα****καθ'ἡμᾶς**, rendered reconciled in English versions is an important word in the New Testament. It too is a compound word formed from the word **καθ'ἡμᾶς** which means to change mutually, with the prefix **απο** prefixed to it. It jumps out at the reader by its similar beginning sound to the term **αὐτοῦ****ῥα****καθ'ἡμᾶς** in the previous verse that expressed our hostility. This drives home the depth of the restoration God has affected through Christ.

Our reconciliation is as deep and profound as was the hostility. Those so reconciled with God are restored to friendship, partnership and more importantly into union with Him. His Spirit lives in all of us who have believed. His purpose in our lives can now be worked by Him. His purpose is to change how we think and so to change how we behave. This process of saving us from how we instinctively live is called sanctification, and it means to set apart for special use. Yahweh does different things through us than use to be done. This happens all along our journey until we arrive in His presence

eternally where our bodies will be transformed, and we will live in perfect conformity to His will.

Paul defines this process of sanctification as the process that started in us through the death of Christ. This journey is a present reality because we are now re-united with God through His Spirit. It is a journey that aims toward bringing about three things in us for the benefit of that day when He presents us as His family to His Father.

Three words are used by Paul that capture the intended fruit of our day-to-day journey with God, God's intent when all the lessons of life are learned is first that we be holy. This is a familiar word that means set apart. The noun form, used in the plural means holy ones, or saints. We are separated ones. Holiness has to do with the designed purpose of something, with a specific designated use it is assigned and its resulting dignity and honor. The separation conveyed by the word is as much a separation to something as from something. In terms of what it means in day-to-day living, holiness is very much a matter of what one does. What they don't do is shaped by what they do. The journey God has His children on is meant to lead them to do that which other people do not do. Namely, He gives impetus to them to do in each moment what God desires and to do it in the way He wants it done. As this is done, there are many things that are not done and some things that will never be done. Being holy is being pure in one's inner being, single-minded, facilitating what He desires. That is our highest use, the noble use He has designed us for.

The second word Paul uses to define God's intent in our journey is blameless. The word is best understood by backing into its meaning. When someone is to blame, it means they bear responsibility for the presence of something, usually something evil. They either initiated it or they could have prevented it. Therefore when someone is blameless it means they are not responsible for the presence of evil. They have not failed to do what they could to prevent it, and they have not initiated it. Now this is obviously not true in the absolute sense of any human being other than Christ. However this term is always speaking in the more relative sense when used of people. God is seeking to build character that keeps us from initiating evil and moves us to prevent, deter, mitigate, even destroy its work in and through others. This is the work we are set aside to do. Where others might dabble or even traffic in it, God is seeking to move His children to a place where together they are a force against it.

The third term Paul uses is beyond reproach. This is a similar idea to that of blamelessness. It looks to that time in believers lives where they begin to have credibility in the minds of others. Their character is respected, though perhaps not embraced. It also looks far forward, as blameless does, to the day when "before Him" we are vindicated in the eyes of all who have ever had existence. The choices we have made to believe and trust, to sacrifice and serve will be acknowledged as shrewd and wise, right and good. The one who accuses and slanders us will be silenced.

These are the fruits that the journey God has us on will bear in us. Ultimately, they are "before Him" experiences in the sense that they are only tasted in this life. As Paul has written, the life we experience through the Holy Spirit in this life is only the earnest of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14). The degree to which we enter the experience of these we could refer to as the degree to which we are saved. That is not to suggest that our justification or sanctification are by works. Both are by faith. However, the degree to which God's salvation from what we instinctively are and become is experienced by us depends to some degree on both the speed and consistency of our submission to the promptings of His Spirit. This to a large degree depends on the level

of trust and confidence we place in the truth our faith. Paul's thoughts in the next verse will speak to this challenge in the present that our faith must rise to.

1:23 “if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I Paul, was made a minister.”

There is a wonderful future ahead for those who are a part of God's family. The previous verse has spoken of the destination God has for us. This verse speaks to our present challenge.

There is an urgency to Paul's message to the Colossians. The faulty ideas about Christ that were creeping into their doctrine would have a devastating impact on their ability to experience God's salvation process if they embraced them. That salvation process is fueled by truth. We find truth in the statements of God about what is that He has miraculously placed in writing through human authors in the Scripture. We find truth modeled and fleshed out through the record of when God became the man we recognize as Jesus, the Christ. To let go of Christ's unique identity by putting other beings on equal footing with Him and mingling other ideas with His teaching is to undo revelation. It dilutes the very thing God has placed in our lives to rescue us from what we were. We become destined at that point for spiritual wandering, not spiritual maturity. This is always the threat of false doctrine, in particular those ideas that minimize Christ and that assign equal authority to teachings not sourced in Him.

From a pragmatic point of view, the only means the family of God has ever had of protecting itself from this danger is to compare what they might think or hear with what is written. What stands written Jesus said, cannot be violated (John 10:35). And so the challenge is to be firmly established, steadfast, and unmoving with respect to what has been delivered to us by God. There must be the constant mental/spiritual activity of comparing what is being heard with what has been already delivered (Deuteronomy 17:18-20; Isaiah 8:20; Jude 3-4). There must be congruity. This does not mean stagnancy. It simply means consistency and harmony. All of the New Testament writers took pains to provide such linkage with the Old Testament. They did this because they knew that truth is ultimately what sets people free (John 8:31-32). To alter truth, whether our movement is in a conservative or liberal direction, is to compromise the energy of the ongoing salvation process.

Paul says that we are not to be moved away from the hope of the gospel. Usually when material is added alongside God's revelation of truth it has the effect of eroding the tremendous hope the gospel provides. The hope of the gospel is this; God has acted in humanity's behalf so that the image of God will be restored to fallen humanity. The only requirement on their part is that they believe this good news.

The gospel is simple, and it is a message of great hope. The devil hates it because it undoes his work. He inspires additions and corrections to it because they appeal to the pride of men, dilute the truth, and impede the experience of God's salvation. The appeal of these “other gospels” is fleshly rather than of the Spirit and whenever fleshliness is fostered hope is ultimately sacrificed. When hope is lost, it is because gospel-centered thought has been sacrificed.

Paul speaks of this gospel having been proclaimed “in all creation under heaven.” He is not supposing that every person on the earth has heard this good news. There remain unreached people groups to this day. He means that God has made the proclamation

and intended it for all. The news is not hidden under wraps. The good news that God would rescue humanity was revealed beginning at the fall (Genesis 3:15), it was affirmed through God's revelation to Israel (Isaiah 42:5-7; 49:6), and finally confirmed and announced by God Himself when He became a man (John 3:14-17; 6:40; 12:44-47).

Paul then makes a statement about himself, linking himself firmly to this greatest of causes, the gospel. He says he was made a minister of it. This was by a very definite act of God in which He dramatically and physically intervened in Paul's life. He stopped him from his work of persecuting Christians and charged him with representing Christ to the Gentiles, to kings and to Israelites (Acts 9:1-22). He was a chosen instrument of the Lord. Paul had a tremendous sense of the urgency of the gospel and the work of establishing it in the minds and hearts of people. It was not simply a means of answering the dilemma of the afterlife. It was and is a means of entering into an entirely different way of living the present life.

Christians must remain true to the gospel and all the truth that under-girds it and flows from it. They can be robbed of their experience with God by compromising it. They stand in danger of falling short of what God wants to do for them and in them if they begin to dilute the truth of it. This verse constitutes a grave warning to believers of all time, one that is often repeated in the writings of the New Testament (Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:12-19; 6:1-8).

1:24 “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the Church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

If one is to help move along the salvation process in the life of others, and if one is to help bring maturity to local Churches, it is certain that this will involve suffering on their part. The suffering could be physical in terms of persecution, sickness, weariness, and various stress-related maladies. It could be emotional, due to its relational nature and all the accompanying misunderstandings, concerns, wounds, and unresolved traumas. But it is certain that the work requires suffering and sacrifice by its very nature. It is mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical work rolled into one.

The mental aspect of the work involves balancing and maintaining many vexing theological tensions that are only so maintained by faith. Because it is spiritual work, it is unseen and subjective, and results are often intangible. There is an invisible enemy and invisible obstacles. Because the work is emotional it is characterized by wide swings within moments of each other and so is unpredictable. It is physical because it requires being places at certain times and it takes a toll on the body. It results in sleepless nights, is never done, and must be engaged regardless of how the body feels.

Paul rejoiced in such suffering. He likely did so as an endurance-athlete “enjoys” an event. There's just something that feels good about the push, though it may not feel good to the senses in the moment. He rejoiced in his spirit because God's Spirit witnessed within him that this was all right and good and the absolute will of God. That is the greatest of feelings. It is produced by the combination of faith and obedience.

When we think of Christ's sufferings our minds go first to His death and rightfully so. Without His death the rest of His life would have had less impact on us. But His entire life involved sacrifice—spiritual, emotional, mental and physical sufferings. There was

the mental work of wrestling with the written word and learning His own identity and calling from the Old Testament writings. There was the emotional load of the resistance of people He loved, broken relationships, being maligned and misrepresented. There was the spiritual work of resisting temptation, knowing the leading of the Father, choosing people, discerning hearts, and whole nights of prayer. There was the physical work of long days and sleepless nights. This was His life. All the stress of it was visible in Him before the actual events that were involved in His torture and death. These sufferings of His life were essential to His work of revealing the Father to us.

The work of justifying us before God was essential to us having relationship with God. For that work to be done He had to die. That is the work He declared finished, and the veil of the temple being torn was the visible sign that work was complete.

The work of sanctifying us and bringing all of His family to maturity though provided for, is not finished. That is the work He partners with us in. His sufferings were essential and foundational to that work. Without the baptism of the Spirit, we could not be sanctified. The Old Covenant proved that. Without the fuller revelation of God, the information disclosed through the teachings of Christ and the actions of Christ, we would not have the truth that sets us free (John 8:31-32). He finished the work of revelation through His apostles of which Paul was one. He is presently finishing His work of bringing about the gathering and maturing of His family through His family (Ephesians 4:1-16). This is the sense in which our sufferings in behalf of His family add to His and bring to completion His work. His sufferings lacked in the sense that they did not propagate the truth to all of the world, they did not establish local Churches, they did not complete all He wishes to do on the earth and in the earth's people. Our sufferings are added to those of Christ as He completes His work through us by His Spirit.

There is a large sense in which the sufferings of Christ are sufficient. There is nothing we need add to them to bring absolution to our guilt for our sin. There is nothing we need to add to them to be embraced by Him as His children once we have believed. There is nothing we need to add to them once we have believed in Him to receive His Holy Spirit. But His work of bringing others to such faith involves us, and it involves our own sacrifice and suffering for which we will be abundantly rewarded.

1:25 “Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God.”

There are two terms added in this rendering by the NASB. The first is added to clarify that the health of the Church, the body of Christ, was that which Paul was to focus his efforts on. The second term added by the NASB seeks to bring additional clarity as to what it was that Paul was to fully carry out. And so the translators added “the preaching of” to the term the word of God. This has the effect of saying that the proclamation of the word of God was the specific task Paul was to fully carry out. There is an alternate way of understanding this latter phrase that may be better, which will be addressed below.

These thoughts of Paul follow after he has referred the readers to his own sufferings that he has joyously endured that have been added to those of Jesus in behalf of Jesus' family. They give us great perspective on the issue of life calling and purpose and on our own quest for significance.

Paul suffered with joy because this course of action that led to suffering for him personally was of benefit to the body of Christ. The phrase “for your benefit” occurs in the middle of this verse and is central to its thought. Our life purpose and our call relate always to benefit for the Church. Whenever we ponder our own purpose and calling, the benefit of the body of Christ should be the primary factor we find ourselves pondering. It is a fundamental error to base our perspective on our own purpose and calling in life on what will benefit us, feel good to us, or fill up our lives.

We should learn much from this statement by Paul because he found what he had been made for and called to do by God by direct interaction with Jesus Christ. It was not a subjective process as ours is, that could be warped by Paul’s own desires or the subtle influences of guilt or some unperceived emotional need in him. That is the path he WAS on. Then Jesus Himself interrupted his course. There was no subtle leading, no still small voice. There was dramatic intervention, a blinding light and a booming voice. If anyone has ever known with certainty what God wanted them to do with their lives, it was Paul. The design and purpose of God for Paul’s life was not something that would make him feel good, or loved, or embraced. It would not be clearly known because it was effortless, or because it had a good “flow.” It would lack much by way of warm feeling and predictability. It would be filled with conflict and stress. It would entail broken relationships and disappointments that would certainly detract from the spiritual highs. Paul’s purpose was to bring benefit to the family of Christ, and before any of us can find our purpose we must embrace this grand over-arching one. Each member of the family of God finds their purpose in this larger one of benefiting Christ’s Church.

This idea of Paul’s purpose is central to his thought in this verse. From this idea, expressed in the middle of the verse we can work backwards through the first part of the verse. We find that this purpose was being realized in Paul because of a “stewardship” from God. A “stewardship” in biblical terms is a trust. It is being entrusted with an important responsibility to manage something that belongs to someone else. It involves privilege, responsibility, accountability, and reward. In that sense it is what we would call a “position of responsibility.” We infer in that phrase that something is more than a job. It is both demanding and rewarding. So Paul’s purpose became the benefit and welfare of the Church, and this was the result of a position of responsibility bestowed on Him by God.

Paul’s title, the one associated with this position of responsibility, was “minister.” The term refers to one who serves by providing what is necessary for certain processes to move along. It likely came from a word that described one who ran errands. In our day it is used of those who make their living as a religious leader. In Paul’s writings it did not refer necessarily to a paid position or even a religious one (See its use in Romans 13:4). It simply described one who provided a necessary service in the accomplishment of a larger objective. In this case Paul provided such service to advance the Church, the body of Christ.

The stewardship, or trust, bestowed on Paul by God was ministry to His Church, but this did not mean his ministry was shaped by the Church. It was bestowed by God and shaped by the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. It is the same for every leader called by God to His work. This is always a delicate balancing act for spiritual leaders. They must serve the Church, lead the Church, even be submissive as any other believer to the Church. They must shepherd the Church, by being certain that all parties are being led by God. A minister in the sense Paul and the Lord uses the term does not simply provide what the people of the Church want. Aaron did that with disastrous results

(Exodus 32). Leaders must serve the interests of God and facilitate the godly interests and leadings in their people.

The last phrase in this verse shows that this was true of Paul. His ministry was not about what people wanted or clamored for. His stewardship, the specific mission God had entrusted to him involved revelation of a new era, of logical but sweeping change in and among the community of God. Paul would proclaim that which had been heretofore unknown. The “preaching” referred to here is not the normal work ministers and teachers have done for centuries, that of teaching and applying the Word of God. In fact, the word preaching does not occur in the Greek text. It is added to convey the idea of proclamation that is inferred in the following verse. There was information God wished to add to his written word, that would make the revelation of the Old Testament clearer. The next verse will clearly bring this out. The mission God entrusted to Paul was to convey this expanded message through spoken and written word, so that it would become known to all.

Paul says here that his mission, according to the stewardship given to him for the Church’s benefit, was to bring to fullness or completion the Word of God. This involved the disclosure of information that brought clarity to four areas. First, it made the sufferings of Jesus clearly visible in the Old Testament and so made the way of salvation for man clearly visible. Second, it made known how the community of God was to conduct itself now, given the death of Jesus Christ. Third, it made known how God’s word to Israel, both His directives and His promises would be fulfilled. Fourth, it made clear the error that tends to develop in us that leads us to believe we can obey our way into favor with God. The New Testament exposes completely the inadequacy of the works of the Law to justify us with God. Paul’s writings are key in shedding light on these mysteries of the Faith.

Much of God’s purpose for Paul involved the orderly presentation of information that would provide these four important lines of truth to the Church during the coming centuries. Most of us will not do a work anything like that of Paul. But the principle of purpose is the same. Our purpose will in some way contribute to the health of the body of Christ. We move closer to our purpose as we focus on that priority.

1:26 That is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints,”

The stewardship or treasure entrusted to Paul was truth. That is the most prized possession of God we have access to in this life. It was in Paul’s case, truth that had been obscure, but now was made plain and was to be proclaimed. It was not that this truth was not present in the Old Testament. It was like any other hidden thing. Its presence was concealed and could be passed over, and its detail missed. Paul will identify this mystery in a concise statement in the next verse, but for now he simply calls it a mystery.

A mystery exists where a result is seen and the detail of how it came to be is unknown. The Old Testament projected much that would come to be. There were four important things prophesied. First, that there would be forgiveness of sin extended by God to all men (Ezekiel 36:24-27). Second, that God’s Spirit would be poured out on humanity (Joel 2:28; Jeremiah 31:31-37). Third that Israel would be restored (Zechariah 8:8). Fourth, that Gentiles would turn to Yahweh (Isaiah 49:6). These things were apparent throughout the Old Testament, but how exactly they would come to be a mystery. There were hints, such as the allusions to a suffering Messiah (Isaiah 53). But definitive

statements about how this would all be achieved were absent. It remained for God to reveal exactly how this work would be done, and His chosen instrument in this revelatory act was Paul. Paul brought to light the truth latent in the types, symbols, and statements of the Old Testament that had not been set forth and explained in plain statements.

There is much by way of theology, doctrine, eschatology, and the daily practice of the faith that we understand due to the writings of Paul. Dedicated men for ages searched the Old Testament for clearer experience of the things of God (1 Peter 1:10-12). It was not a lack of diligence that led to gaps in their experience. It was simply hidden from eternity past, through many generations of humanity until the time of Christ and the revelatory acts He choreographed through men of His choosing like Paul. In this verse, without stating clearly what the mystery was, Paul simply speaks of its former existence and the fact that it is now revealed and brought to light.

1:27 “to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

From the beginning of God’s relationship to Abraham and his children, God intended to use them to bring His truth to the rest of earth’s people groups (Genesis 12:1-3). Though this was not always understood or embraced by Israel, it was always a part of God’s plan for them. The time simply had to come for that to occur. And so when God became a man, He became a Jew by ethnicity and immersed Himself in life with them. He made Himself known clearly and plainly to them. Many did not receive Him, but some did. To these holy ones, or saints, He revealed more of Himself. Through them He began to make Himself known to the rest of humanity. Paul was among these Jews, part of a remnant, a small minority in Israel who believed in Jesus and began to live his life through the power of the Spirit. They proclaimed the truth about Him to all people and tutored them in the way of life He lived, a life of continuous fellowship with Yahweh. This is the transformation and evolution in God’s family that Paul is describing here.

The verse begins with the phrase “to whom,” which can be understood as “through whom.” It refers to His saints in the previous verse. These were His chosen ones from among Israel who believed in Him. These would make known among the Gentiles the “riches of the glory of this mystery.” Paul identifies the mystery, but first there is this descriptive phrase of its glory. To describe the immensity of the weightiness of the truth of the gospel would defy words. It is richly glorious. What it brings to us in terms of hope alone is beyond description. Its potential in terms of imparting character, wisdom and understanding is limitless. And these only speak of glories related to this life. The gospel supplies truth to our minds that then stimulates an endless array of mental journeys we must take to begin to imagine the eternally rich glory of the gospel.

The verse ends with a statement of the great mystery which Paul’s ministry would enable the Church to publish to every tribe and nation. It is the message of the New Testament encapsulated in seven words “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” It should be understood as this, “Christ, the hope of glory, residing within you.” It captures the magnificence of Christ, the wonder of grace, the end to which all events reported by the gospel work. It does so without removing the mystery of the faith.

Christ is the hope of glory. Paul is most likely expressing that He is the hope of all the heavenly hosts. He is the one whose character and nature guarantees all that defines heaven. He is the one who guarantees the subjection of Satan. He is the one whose work will restore creation. Very little is written for us in Scripture about how evil came to be or about all the characters involved in its evolution into its own kingdom. But it is evil and is a sordid threat to the well-being of humanity. Earth and humanity are small examples of the power of evil to bring ruin, a power understood fully among heaven's beings. Jesus Christ is the hope of these heavenly hosts, the one who has made the eventual outcome of this colossal contest secure and certain. It can go no other way. The very Spirit of this one who was Himself Yahweh incarnate, is now joined to all who believe, living within them. They are by that act of His sealed as His (Eph 1:13), so that they are secure as well. The restoration of the full glory of God to creation, including humanity, is certain to be fulfilled. His presence now in them is His pledge to complete this that He has promised to do.

This is the great mystery that can help all people interpret personal events and world events. It is a statement that alludes to what was and what will be and states clearly what is. In the chaos of life as it has been warped by evil, this is our stability. Christ the hope of glory in us (Isaiah 33:6), assures us of the outcome.

1:28 “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.”

As Paul daily gave his body to doing his share to carry on the work of Christ (verse 24), these were the tasks he engaged himself in. His desire was to present every man complete or mature in Christ. Christ's suffering provided justification for humanity and the basis for their sanctification. Our sacrifice and work provide for people's progress toward maturity.

There is the proclamation of Him that must happen, of His identity as God and as sin-bearer, as coming king and judge. These are the recurring themes in the apostle's proclamation of Jesus Christ. People cannot believe in and grow in that which they have no familiarity with. There is then this work of proclamation or publicizing the news about Christ. The proclamation of Christ takes on a dual tone. It is good news of a cure that lifts burdens and brings joy and celebration. It is also a warning of eventual accountability to this One whose love is reaching out.

Proclamation involves two things admonishing and teaching. In the grammar of this verse these two terms are participles that give definition to the idea of proclamation. So Paul wishes that the readers understand admonishment and teaching as two primary elements of proclamation.

Admonishment is the work of motivating people to make the decisions that will lead them to maturity. It is pushing them along to the highest ground they need to occupy. It is gentle yet confrontive. It focuses on what is true, not what one wishes was true or hopes is true or projects as true in themselves. Admonishment is encouragement, but not of the sort meant to simply make someone feel good about where they are or how far they have come. It is meant to compel them to take the next step, one that might be overdue. This work of admonishment, done in a loving, caring way is quite often the missing element in Christian fellowship. We are unable to occupy this middle ground, tending either to be vindictive and controlling, or soft and permissive. Either extreme can be uncaring. Admonishment begins with and is carried out with discernment. It perceives the realities of a person's life, their physical, emotion and spiritual stability

and capacity to receive truth, and chooses the time, place, words, and tone that will bring about their progress in the faith. It means to place something in the mind of someone. That requires sensitivity and skill.

Then there is the work of teaching. Motivating people to action without instructing them in what they are to do will only frustrate and discourage them. There are always “how to’s” in life skills, and there are the rational and logical reasons that underlie certain choices. Teaching focuses on bringing others to a point where they have learned the detail of what is true about spiritual matters. Its goal is action but action that is guided and shaped by precise understanding.

Admonishing and teaching were carried out by Paul “with all wisdom.” That is an important part of his thought here. The end he was aiming for was the maturity of the people of God. So his activity could not be mindless, clinical, or imprecise. There is no mass production process whereby raw material goes in one end of an assembly line and mature Christians accumulate at the end. It is certain that there are specific things that should happen by a certain time in one’s experience with Christ. But that doesn’t mean they will (Hebrews 5:12-16). So for any who lead this individualized work, wisdom is required. Now wisdom in the Scripture is always found where the Spirit of God is listened to. And so Paul’s words imply his dependence on the leadings of the Holy Spirit and His continual shaping of the moment at hand. The next verse will fully clarify that the work done must be done in accordance with this Person who is the great choreographer of all that God wishes to bring about in His creation. He allows us to do only what the Father is doing as Christ did (John 5:19).

The work Paul did was individualized and inclusive. It involved “every man” or every person. Paul felt a calling to enhance the spiritual welfare of everyone. His work was personal. He knew names and situations. He invested in individuals. I also knew the burden of the whole of the body of Christ. He sought to neglect neither.

1:29 “And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.”

Proclaiming and laboring were the two activities that occupied Paul’s time. Proclaiming involves our words. Laboring refers to the effort we exert in making our lives credible and relevant to those we wish to impact. It describes all we do to live the message and to model it to others. The goal of our efforts is to bring people to maturity in Christ.

This purpose of bringing people to maturity is the grand one that should capture us all. After speaking in the previous verse about being a part of the company of those who embrace this purpose, Paul now speaks of his personal commitment to it. This is a signal to the readers of some significance. Sometimes it is possible to be a part of something which is so big that our individual effort lags. The entire movement has a momentum that we do not contribute to. We can get away with doing little or nothing. We are “hangers-on.” We enjoy the company and being part of the success, but we make no real sacrifice to help move the load forward. This can be true of those at the entry level but can also be true of us the higher up in the organization we move. The flesh can lead us to this thinking the more tenure we see ourselves as having and the more authority we have. Somehow, we think we arrive at a point where we have “paid our dues.” It behooves the leaders of any organization to ask, “Am I working hard doing the things that this movement needs to do or am I resting on my laurels?”

The other trap that spiritual leaders can fall into very easily is to not work according to God's power. They work hard, but it is all human, fleshly effort. The difference between hard work done in the flesh and hard work done in the Spirit lies in the motives that drive it and in those motives, it appeals to. It is not that one is less effort than the other. But what drives the effort of the one is the glory of God, and the heart of God. It is done because there is a strong sense, He wants it done. The effort expended is great. But the spirits of those who do it are at peace. There is a certain spirit of rest in the air though intense labor might be going on. Work that is done in the flesh is for the glory of some person or persons. It is done to meet some need they have. A craving drives them and so vexation and frustration are their companions. They have never done enough. It is never big enough or good enough. Such work appeals to the flesh in others, and they are attracted to the effort. In time there is an assemblage of those who have deceived themselves completely, laboring hard, investing years in that which is not God's heart at all. They experience little of His touch and so must invest even more of their own emotion. Eventually it all collapses under its own weight.

How much Church work and ministry falls into this latter category is hard to surmise. But each person who leads it must ponder what it really is that God wants done. Either way they will work hard and exhaust themselves. That is certain. The question is will they experience God working mightily with them or in them. Are their efforts complimenting His, or is He absent from the labor?

Colossians 2

2:1 “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face,”

Paul’s commitment enabled God to create in him a single-mindedness extraordinaire. It is remarkable that one would “struggle greatly” for the spiritual development of anyone, much less people they do not know. This is simply “off the radar” of most people, even many Christian people. Paul cared for the health of the people of God in the way that others cared for themselves. In words like these that we see in Paul’s expressions of his own emotions, we see the work that God wishes to do in our hearts to bring us to a point where we love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind. It is the attitude of Christ who laid down His own life for others (John 10:11; 15:13; 1 John 3:16).

When the work of God moves forward it does so because this work moves forward, very often in the heart of just one person. That person becomes so concerned about that which remains undone in some part of God’s work that they ‘struggle greatly.’ This is the first work of God’s Spirit in bringing about change in the spiritual climate somewhere. When we are willing to bear a burden for the eternal good of others, we are beginning to hear the voice of God and an empowering to act in His behalf will soon follow.

Colossae and Laodicea were towns in modern day Turkey that were roughly 100 miles east of the principal city of the province of Asia, Ephesus. They were 15-20 miles apart and it is believed that Epaphras was the leader of the work in both these cities (1:7-8; 4:12-13; cf. Philemon 23). Paul was entrusting the work that was his heart to faithful others because it was simply so great in scope. The downside was this, that his heart was with the people in such places, but he had never had opportunity to meet them.

That Paul had never met them yet had the authority to influence them from afar speaks of a side to the ministry that is often missing today. It is certainly true that ministry is relational, even as God is relational. Paul’s words here are quite relational in tone, anything but clinical and detached and authoritarian. But there was an understanding of his spiritual authority that obviously existed, though he was personally unknown to the readers. His word carried weight and would add weight to the leadership of Epaphras.

This reflects God’s relationship with humanity. He is one who longs for relationship and approaches us relationally. But He is God and does not set aside His authority as such. God’s church is led by servant leaders like Christ, whose master is God. They are caring and relational. They are friendly by temperament, perhaps not naturally but by the seasoning of God’s Spirit. But their words are to be heeded because of the spiritual authority that God has bestowed on them.

2:2 “That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself.”

Paul’s struggle for these churches grew out of his desire to see a certain string of results come about in them. These were things that he knew the Lord had for them and that leaders, like himself had to lead them into. The immediate result was that they might be encouraged. The intermediate result was confidence in the pattern of

life they were following. The result was the experience of Christ Himself. We see in the NASB rendering of this verse the domino effect that occurs when matters of the faith are properly ordered. There is steady progress toward maturity.

It is an important thing for individual hearts to be encouraged. There is a collective heart that grows out of this in a local Church that gives great impetus to the mission. Hearts are encouraged through the supportive fellowship that the Holy Spirit choreographs. If believers will just invest time in each other, time during which they behave toward each other as the Holy Spirit is directing, they will find that their hearts will be encouraged. Paul refers to this supportive fellowship as the knitting together of hearts in love. This captures what the Holy Spirit does between individuals in the body of Christ. The problem is that in all eras such relational living out of the faith can be set aside by busy schedules, by self-centeredness, by a merely academic approach to the faith, and by a host of other things that occur naturally in people. And so Paul prayed that these Christians would be willing participants in this that can be seen as one of the vital signs of the faith. Christians impact each other to the degree that they set aside self-interests and allow their hearts to be knit together in love.

The next phrase is one that expresses an intermediate result that occurs where such relationships are formed. That result is that something Paul refers to as “wealth” comes to be discovered. This is an expression for strength in faith. As we engage in the spiritual growth process with other Christians, we come to a greater confidence in the way of life we have chosen. This confidence grows through a growing understanding of everything of God, ourselves, the world, other people, things, life processes, virtually everything that is. Paul calls this “the full assurance of understanding.” The term rendered “full assurance” refers to evidence that has become plain and is completely convincing. It is evidence in full bloom. In this case it is having evidence about truth that enables one to precisely envision the end result God’s plan is moving toward. Such assurance of the outcome of God’s plan is the goal of the Holy Spirit in His work in us and is always praised in Scripture (1 Thessalonians 1:5; Hebrews 6:11; 10:22).

So far then, Paul has described his struggle for the readers as the burden to see their hearts encouraged and their faith brought to completeness through the completion of their understanding. Their hearts would be encouraged through supportive fellowship. Their understanding would be increased through his ministry, and that is why he was specially burdened for all who had not seen his face. Paul understood truth that they needed. That understanding imparted by him, plus the ensuing conversation among them sparked by that fuller understanding, would lead to spiritual wealth for them. But there was a greater result still that Paul desired to see in them all, a kind of overarching purpose that explained his concern for them.

The final phrase of this verse states the result that God wishes to bring about in each believer. It is the result toward which all that is called ministry should aim. That result is a true knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ. It is not just knowledge of all the facts about Christ, though these are essential. It is the personal, moment by moment knowledge of His will that grows out of deep personal relationship with Him. This relationship is the mystery that unlocks and leads to life as it was meant to be lived. Jesus is the “seed of the woman” (Genesis 3:17), that would crush Satan and undo the effects of evil in creation for all who would believe. This is the mystery hidden in all the types and symbolic rituals carried out at God’s instruction by ancient Israel, spoken of in meticulous detail in the first five books of our Bible. All of the imagery and symbols pointed to relationship to Yahweh and all that Jesus would transact between Yahweh and humanity. The astute knew from the symbols that some great person and string of

events was coming. But the detail of this coming person and era was fuzzy. In the knowledge of Jesus Christ, it all became clear.

Paul was a key figure in explaining this mystery and making sense of it. This was his calling and role in the plan of God (Ephesians 3:1-13). A large part of the mystery of Christ was that His family would include the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:6). This was the truth that the apostles would have to apply in the fledgling church, raising the ire of the Jews.

Why such far-reaching truth was put forth by God in such mysterious form is itself a mystery to us. The truth that the promise ruler of the Old Testament would be Yahweh Himself in human form could be plainly seen in the Old Testament once Christ had come. But it was veiled apart from the teaching of Christ and His apostles. The same can be said about the death of Messiah for the sins of the world. God certainly could have stated these things very plainly ahead of time but chose instead to leave many things unstated.

Perhaps the reason behind the mysterious nature of the Christ lies primarily in two thoughts that we know about God. First, we know He wanted salvation to be through faith. Ultimately, there must be missing pieces for faith to be required. It is hard for us to over-state the significance of faith in the plan God has set forth for His dealings with humanity (Heb 11:6). Second, His plan was designed to prove His sovereignty over all, including evil. The plan therefore involved evil conspiring to kill the God-man. The death of that One would provide atonement for all of humanity who would believe. It was essential therefore to shroud the plan of Christ in mystery in written revelation so that the Evil One would not be alerted to the fact that he was helping to bring about God's desired redemption by killing Jesus Christ. Redemption is a matter of great intrigue at a cosmic level that the forces of evil gave an unwilling assist to. In doing so they proved God's sovereignty over them.

The use of the word "mystery" was likely purposeful and strategic in terms of the Holy Spirit's inspiration and Paul's thought. What history would call "the mystery religions," were on the rise in Paul's day. These were religious systems that searched for an esoteric knowledge and wisdom that they believed had been concealed by supernatural beings. Adherents to these movements would pursue everything from fictitious spiritual beings to supposed hidden messages in Scripture. They would propose hybrids of Christianity and mixtures of paganism and Judaism but would not simply accept Jesus as the logos (Word) of God incarnate. Their minds were bent on superstitions and so driven to search beyond Christ for all that God had unveiled in Him. Paul's statement here that God's mystery is embodied in Christ had profound meaning for centuries to the people of the Mediterranean world. Paul's next thought would emphatically reinforce the completed nature of God's revelation in Christ.

2:3 "In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

There are people whom, outside of Christ, come to gain both wisdom and knowledge. By all standards we admire them as learned. But in all things whom we come to be is finally judged by whom we might have been. In the case of the wise and learned, what do they have if they know nothing of the person of Christ? They may have studied thoroughly His works. But if they have not acknowledged His presence in those works, then they have missed the statement they make. The wisdom of such persons is great, even admirable. But they are missing an important piece of the intellectual and emotional puzzle. It is the piece that unifies it all and gives definition to the whole.

What might they have been if they had acknowledged Him? Without Christ our great wisdom becomes foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

The ancient world was becoming fascinated with wisdom and knowledge. This has always been an attraction to humanity. This quest to know comes from our design and the very spirit of our Creator. Since we became separated from God we have rightly sensed that we are missing a great body of knowledge that lies beyond us. This “secret knowledge” was thought to exist in the collective realm of the gods in the Greek world. Such a treasury of knowledge was understandably coveted. There came to be the theory that if we could get beyond the realm of our physical senses into the spiritual realm of reality, we could gain access to this reservoir of true wisdom. The next verse will reveal that in these words Paul is speaking directly to this mindset that was prevalent in Colossae. They are words that certainly were appropos in terms of what we know of ancient thought.

As with many things there is an element of truth to this idea of missing information. It takes a good direction if it is pursued by God’s revelation of the truth rather than by superstition. There is much wisdom to be gained through God’s revelation of truth. It provides for us wisdom that could not be known apart from God. Paul says that the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are indeed hidden, but not in strange mysterious beings. They are to be found in Christ. In Him and His words we find that which we otherwise would not have known. Through his work we can be re-united with God and His Spirit can be our constant companion. Whatever learning we pursue, this added perspective of His Spirit leads us to more precise conclusions about the relative meaning and application of what we have come to know. The facts must be discovered by the persistent and diligent effort of research and discovery. As these processes of learning are engaged in, the Holy Spirit makes aware of things like implication and application which are the real treasures or benefits of what is learned. This is the same whatever branch of truth is explored. Its real treasure is mined when it is applied in harmony with God’s design and purpose. It is the same whether that truth is found through Bible study or scientific study. The treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ.

2:4 “I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive arguments.”

Paul’s statement about all the mystery of wisdom and knowledge being posited in Christ was intentional. There were those who were trying to mislead the Church in this regard. They were persuasive clever with words. The study of ancient religious thought indicates that these were individuals who were the forerunners of Gnostic thought. The thinkers of the movement had complex, elaborate schemes that explained reality with myriads of mysterious deities, discovered and known only by them. They spoke of the existence of a body of knowledge that could not be accessed with normal processes of reason. They boasted of knowing what could not be known by others and delighted in drawing followers and admirers to themselves.

There is one thing about complexity, it can thoroughly intimidate the unlearned, and frequently does. There is a natural tendency in us to equate charm and complexity of argument with intelligence and veracity. It makes us vulnerable to all kinds of scams and schemes in every realm. The defense against this is the simple truth from the mouth of an expert witness. Paul’s letter is meant to provide this. It is the assurance that there is no more information they need other than Christ. To have Him is to have access to all the knowledge and wisdom that exists. He will lead us to it and can make it known in His time. There are no magic formulas or secret codes. He is the Creator

and sustainer of all that exists. If something has existence it is certain that He not only knows it but is its master. We need look no further than Christ, though it is certain that we can always draw closer and look deeper into Him, and that will be Paul's message in this letter.

2:5 “For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.”

We can say that these words of Paul reflect the feelings of Christ for his family in the present age of His absence from earth. Anyone who has accepted responsibility for the spiritual development of others has felt what Paul describes here. Any parent has experienced what it is like to be absent from their children physically, but with them in spirit. The words are another way of expressing the “struggle” (verse one), he has for their greater experience of Christ. To be present in spirit is a way of expressing this inner longing to be there in Colossae to encourage, protect, and nurture their growing faith.

But this idea of being present in spirit means more than just the normal, human emotional bond that is felt. Through the Holy Spirit there is ability to perceive need and ability to precisely intercede for those who are not present. There is some capacity to exercise spiritual authority in the situation (1 Corinthians 5:3-5) and bring about practical results. To be present in spirit is an experience that all humans have on an emotional level. To those indwelt by the Holy Spirit it can rise to a whole different level, beyond separation anxiety and nostalgia. There is a practical though spiritual work that can be accomplished by God's people in each other's lives through the leading and direction of the One Spirit that is joined to each of us. Paul's words here go on to show that this is the experience he is describing here.

He describes himself as rejoicing and seeing their growing faith. There is no worry or anxiety in those words. There is assurance and an actual perception enabled by the Spirit that order and stability are emerging in the Colossian Church. We conclude that there are spiritual senses, developed and energized with experience (Hebrews 5:14). These senses, employed with information he had likely gotten from Onesimus and others, enabled him to discern their condition without having met them. The same type of process can occur in us so that we can pray and act with precision with respect to those we are separated Romans There is vast potential for impact in such work.

The two things Paul senses present in the Colossians which he wishes to stimulate and develop further are rendered “good discipline” and “stability” by the NASB. The word for good discipline is *ταξιν*, which speaks of order. Such an idea can refer to things like organization and predictability, which the other word used here, stability, also speaks to. This no doubt refers to a conformity to the apostolic pattern that had emerged in their individual and collective life. It was not mere order and self-discipline, which are often present in false doctrinal systems, false religions, and cults. Paul was witnessing The Way, as it was called in Acts, the way of living and thinking Christ defined and modeled and the Apostles passed along. It was what the early Christian leaders were calling “the faith” (Jude 3-4). Paul was heartened by their conformity to this.

There is a spiritual order and stability and there is also a fleshly one. The former is to be cultivated; the latter is to be stomped out. The orderliness of the Spirit refers to things like moderation, restraint, a sense for priority. Orderliness in the sense of these things prepares a person for the degree of spontaneity that life lived by the Holy Spirit

requires. God has no interest in an order that quarantines Him and confines Him to certain times, places, and modes of action. Orderliness and discipline embraced to produce the safety of predictability is the enemy of true spirituality. Stability as Paul envisions it is the way of life he taught and advocated. It is the product of trust in Christ. It is strong conviction regarding His supremacy, His goodness, the sovereignty of His rule and the reliability of His teachings and promises. This trust within stays the course even in tumult. It is not taken in by sterile institutionalism or by spiritual sounding fads, by the lure of the sensual, or by the deceit of the pseudo-spiritual. It establishes no comfort zones. In the thoughts that follow, Paul will seek to minister to this faith-based orderliness and stability that was present in the Colossians to develop it further and so insulate them from the creeping death of the spirit of their times.

2:6 “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.”

This is a pivotal thought in Paul's letter. He has provided much by way of undergirding argument for the supremacy of Christ. Now He will get quite directive as to how the Colossians should be thinking as they are bombarded with these intelligent sounding schemes being pedaled among them.

Paul has spoken in some detail of the identity of Christ (1:15-21). This was how they had “received” Him, as the God-man, the creator of all that is, appearing on earth in human flesh. The teaching of the Apostles regarding Christ's identity was not to be compromised. It was the essence of the Gospel. Without this there was no Gospel. They, along with all Christians since, are to accept this teaching of Christ and then are to live by its implications. That is what Christianity is as a movement. It is all centered and contingent on Christ being the God-man. When we read the phrase “receive Christ Jesus the Lord” we think of what we have come to call “receiving Christ,” the moment of our first act of faith where we express our new belief in a prayer. We then take this verse as a call to faith. It is that, but more precisely it is a call to re-embrace the identity of the central figure of the Faith. So most likely here Paul is speaking of the specific apostolic teaching about Christ's identity, the apostolic doctrine of Christ that was first presented to the Colossians, likely by Epaphras. Paul's call to them is to continue to embrace that doctrine of who Christ is, rather than allow Christ to be made into a lesser being by false teachers who were bringing supposed “new knowledge” to them. The message and news of Christ they originally received was that He was God in human form. They were to maintain this teaching and preserve it just as they had received it. They were to have faith and trust in it as they had earlier, and then live by its considerable implications.

The little phrase “the Lord” is probably an affirmation of the identity of Christ. The Biblical language and terminology of Paul's day was based to a large degree on the Septuagint, the Greek language version of the Old Testament. In that version this word “Lord” is used wherever the personal name of God, Yahweh, occurred in the Hebrew version. In New Testament language therefore, the word “Lord” probably was used to convey more than a title of authority when used of Christ. Paul's description of Christ as the creator and sustainer of all in chapter one unmistakably identifies Him with Yahweh of the Old Testament. This term “Lord” is likely used throughout the apostolic writings very purposefully, to clearly equate Jesus with Yahweh. The thought of Christ's identity continues into the next verse, where continuance in the faith they had been instructed in is urged. It all is meant to give further definition to the command in verse 6 to walk in Him.

2:7 “having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

The One who enables the first step of salvation is the one who enables every step in its ongoing process. The same principle He established for our justification is applicable to our sanctification. To be justified we face our own inability to earn forgiveness and trust in His work on the Cross in our behalf, in answer to His conviction that this is what the truth prescribes. We then by faith each moment answers His call to holiness, face our own inability, and trust that through His work on the cross His Spirit will enable us to behave as the truth prescribes. We come to embrace Him for forgiveness at the start of our journey of faith, and as we embrace him in the moments, we are build up by Him as the journey continues. And so the truth prescribes that the journey continue on just as it began, by faith, centered in Him. He is its central figure, its enabler, and its sustainer.

This is how the way of life Jesus modeled was represented by Him to us. He used various figures such as the vine and the branches to illustrate this, that apart from Him we could do nothing (John 15:5). This is the way the apostles presented the life in their teaching. They did not present it as a way of life and worship that would take on any other form or be centered in any other being than the triune God as they set forth (Jude 3). Jesus was the Christ, the ruler appointed by God to be sovereign over all creation and to be its savior. He was both the source of its physical existence and its spiritual life, its breath and its hope.

Paul prescribes this to the Colossians as the antidote their present dilemma, as they are being seduced by new spiritual thought mingled with Christian rhetoric. He uses three words, all participles, to describe the centrality of Jesus in the Christian process. He adds the phrase “just as you were instructed” as a kind of certificate of authenticity to this thinking. The first participle is in the perfect tense, describing completed action that results in an ongoing state. He uses a word that describes what must happen to a seed to become a viable plant. A seed sends a sprout upward, which can sustain itself for a few days on nutrients in the seed. It must then send roots outward and downward to draw nutrients from the soil or it will die. Paul describes the Colossians as having done this critical thing. They were “rooted in Christ,” able to draw from Him that which they needed to nurture spiritual life. It is an apt description of new birth union with Christ. Our spirits have been joined with the Spirit of God.

The second and third participles are in the present tense, depicting action that is ongoing. The first of the two is a term used to describe the building of a house. Combining it with the first participle we see that union with Christ by the Spirit provides the foundation through which Christ begins to impart His character to us, resulting in a new kind of life. The second of these two participles is a word that describes stability and depicts the season when this process of growth becomes habitual and ongoing in a life.

All three participles are in the passive voice, depicting action Christ is carrying out in us. It is not that we have no role in it. Paul’s writings make it abundantly clear that we do. They would not be necessary if it was all just destiny and fate. But here he wishes to emphasize that our role is to keep Christ in His central role in that process and not to substitute anything or anyone else. We are being led in a process by Him. That process will continue if we do not interrupt it by misplacing our faith in things other than Christ.

He commands us to continue and to do so abounding or overflowing with gratitude. It is easy for Christians in time when their thought and faith is being threatened to get grouchy, arrogant, and self-consumed. There is instead a graciousness that should characterize us, the pleasantness that comes from someone who feels they have been graced and blessed. Our gratitude should be on display. Such people are embracing, they smile, they are not easily ruffled, they are accepting, they show ability to flex, they display no sense of entitlement, they are ready to serve. Their sense of all that is guaranteed them in Christ diminishes their need and concern for everything else that is a part of the earth experience. They hold it all with a loose grip. They come to understand they will inherit any of it that is of worth. And so they aren't vexed by grabbing it now.

This is the life of faith demonstrated by Christ, embraced by the apostles, and set forth in writing by them for all who choose to follow. It is available to all, but it is as the apostles defined it. Its terms cannot be altered nor its conditions, and neither can its central figure and sovereign Lord and Head, Jesus Christ, be compromised. It is ordained by Him as He has set it forth. Like access to the tree of life, He never releases the way of life from his sovereign control.

2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."

In the original language this verse is quite pre-emptive and directive. "Beware so that not any man shall be taking you as spoil..." This is graphic language. The Colossians were to be on guard because this was a very clear and present danger. Individuals were capturing and leading away the unsuspecting through philosophy and empty deception. In the great quagmire of religious thought people are the casualties and are viewed by the unscrupulous as the prize. A following brings power, a degree of acclaim, and opportunity for wealth. There are many who appear pious and good-hearted who move into Churches only to take people as slaves to their own desires. There are many such desires, from the perverted to the more complex passions for power and fame. But there is no shortage of people operating in a fleshly way in Churches.

The rhetoric of philosophy has always been intimidating. It can easily create an air of intelligence and wisdom. Paul is calling for alertness so that Christians will not be led away from Christ. None of his words are written to condemn the legitimate pondering of the great philosophical question of why things exist. Such questions are spoken of in the Scriptures, and they were spoken of by Jesus. Paul is concerned about turning away from God's clear revelation of the truth about such matters which is normal in the circles that explore these things.

There are two directions philosophical thought that excludes God tends to drift. When it does it becomes empty deception, a mere illusion. It drifts into what Paul calls the tradition of man. The tradition of man includes everything from legalistic religion to atheism, from the complex polytheism of the Greeks to the secular humanism of the 21st century. Traditional human thought also builds on the elementary principles of the world. Either the physical elements of the world or the metaphysical ponderings associated with them become the basis for an explanation of origins and destinies. All such things reduce God to an impersonal force, a collective conscience, a collection of lesser beings or some such thing that falls short of what He has revealed Himself to be.

Humanity tends to develop the god they wish to have and that affirms who they are. That is the bottom line of human religious tradition.

Christianity claims a God who has revealed Himself in written revelation and by becoming a man and living amongst humanity. Paul does not want the Colossians to exchange this God for a nebulous, conceptual series of beings fabricated by those who simply want a different god.

2:9 “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,”

With this statement Paul captures and repeats the realities associated with Jesus Christ. There are certain things that are true of Him. Because of these, certain things are true of those who have come to believe in Him. These follow in Paul’s discussion.

For the specific threat facing the faith of the Colossians, this statement was the rock in which they were to take refuge. Jesus is not just the full bodily expression of God, an idea that might diminish Paul’s meaning into something like “there could be no more of God expressed in human form.” He was not just full of God to the extent a human being could be. Rather, all the fullness of God, the complexities of His power and knowledge, His complete essence resides in the man Jesus Christ. Now granted, His willingness to take on human flesh involved stepping away from an existence in which He experienced all that those attributes entail, such as omnipresence. But the attributes themselves He did not lay aside. He is the full expression of the divine essence. The word fullness will be important with respect to what Paul will say about believers in the verse that follows.

This statement affirms that Christ did have a body that was physical and real. He didn’t just appear to have one an idea the Gnostics would embrace. And of course, the statement affirms that He was fully divine. All that characterizes God, all that is part of His essence we find in Christ. He was not a facsimile or a reproduction that reflected some of what one could find if he were to encounter God. He was the essence of God appearing in bodily form. There could be nothing more fully divine than Christ because the full portion of deity was in Him. It would be impossible for one more divine than Christ to appear. And since Christ is God’s only Son, it would be impossible for His equal to appear.

The first word of this verse, the conjunction rendered “for,” ties this statement on the essence of Christ to the thought that we should not be taken captive by human thought on the meaning of the universe we are in. All the optional theories are a monstrous step down from the person of Christ. To let go of Christ’s essence to be occupied with human ramblings on things divine would be the worst of spiritual compromises.

This verse captures the answer to the question “Why Christianity?” There could be no better direction given to man’s spiritual search than this crisp statement on Jesus’ essence. Since He is the fullness of God, all that can be known of God is found in Him. Why turn in any other direction? To ponder His behavior, His teachings, and His attitudes and emotions, all of which we have a printed, reliable record of, is to analyze and gain insight into the nature and character of God and all that He has brought into existence. It is all a watershed of truth with respect to understand ourselves and our world. Things like order, meaning, purpose, significance, pain, and suffering--all that is to be known is colored in some way by what we can understand of the person of Christ.

2:10 “and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.”

Since Christ is God, new realities emerge for those who are joined to Him by His Spirit. In Him we have been made complete. The term rendered “made complete” also could be rendered “to fill up.” It is a perfect passive participle which means it is describing an ongoing state of being which has come about because of a completed action. The rendering of the NASB, “you have been made complete,” could be changed to “you have been filled up with Him.” Combining this with the thought of the previous verse we have a word play that expresses this: “Christ is filled up with God, and you have been filled up with Christ.” The implication is clear. We have been joined completely to God filled up with Him! This captures perfectly what Paul wishes to remind the Colossians of so that they would not be drawn away to movements claiming to fill up what they might feel is lacking in their spiritual experience.

This fullness, or completeness, refers to what was lost in humanity through Adam’s fall, namely being joined to God. Apart from this partnership with our Creator something is missing from the design perspective. Once we are rejoined to God through the sacrifice of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that missing element is restored. Then there is the process of learning to function by that design. The old habits ingrained in us, the patterns modeled by everyone around us, and our lack of data about God’s thoughts and ways, deter our full experience of this bond with God. But the fact remains that He has provided for us everything that pertains to life and Godliness (2 Peter 1:3). The shortfall we all experience is the thing that our perseverance and faithfulness, nurture and growth will address.

It is being “in Him” that makes our progress in faith and character a possibility. Apart from Him this bearing of fruit is impossible (John 15:5).

This new potential in us is because of who He is. So Paul links our completeness to the headship of Christ. There is no sphere of power or authority that is outside the realm of His sovereignty. That is not to imply that they do only what He says. It means that they do only what He allows, and that He acts with respect to all those other authorities might initiate so that in the end His will results. As THE sovereign ruler He has embraced us and joined Himself to us. Because of this action He has taken and because His action is unthwartable, we have been made complete. That state of being is firm and unalterable in terms of our right, our privilege, and our access.

2:11 “and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ;”

It is common in God’s dealings with humanity for Him to borrow from our cultures things that become symbols that impart understanding to us of our relationship to Him. And so we have things like covenants, concepts like uncleanness, things like the serpent on the pole, the curtain in the temple, and thousands of others that can increase our understanding of ourselves and Him. We also are given ceremonies and rites designed not to enhance our standing with Him, but to enhance our understanding of Him. That is an important distinction.

Circumcision was such a rite. It was given to symbolize God’s covenant to separate us from all that separates us from Him to make us a people for Himself after His heart. And so it was symbolic of the whole journey of redemption and new birth. It spoke of belonging to this covenant community. It was a kind of brand. And so using

circumcision as a metaphor, Paul describes our new birth. Circumcision was an appropriate metaphor because it was a “hot button” of the day. Wherever the gospel went, because of the presence of Jews, the false notion that believers must be circumcised to have the full experience of salvation soon followed. This rite, which only pictured new birth, tended to be described as the vehicle of new birth. It then added to the gospel.

Paul describes salvation as a spiritual circumcision performed by Christ. He is describing us before salvation as being uncircumcised. In this imagery our foreskin was “the body of flesh.” This refers to the fact that we were slaves to sin because of a magnetic set of impulses within that drew us consistently into the error of self-determination. These impulses are innate in every human being since Adam and are called “the flesh” by Paul. The flesh is not synonymous with the body, but is inherent in it and discloses itself through the deeds it engages the body in. Our bodies, in terms of pursuits we give them to and activities that we engage them in, are bodies of flesh, using the term flesh in this ethical sense. They are bodies that are driven by this set of desires resident in each human being. We could call these basic human instincts. The closest term we have in twenty first century American culture that describes this is what we refer to as being “ego driven.”

The “flesh” leads us into sin. It creates a cycle of sin that is continuous in us. We cannot escape sin because we cannot escape the flesh. And so in more imagery of Scripture, we are slaves to sin due to the flesh. It is the flesh that causes our bodies to go in the direction of serving sin (Romans 6:12-23). Collectively we bring this out in each other and are driven together by it. Satan, knowing this, can put things in front of us that keep us pursuing passionately a course of independence from God (Ephesians 2:1-2). It is a hapless and hopeless lot that we bring on ourselves through evil.

The good news of the gospel is that God is moved with great compassion by the unfolding human tragedy. His solution is to personally intervene in humanity’s behalf. It is our only hope because the flesh has rendered us powerless to alter our own course and to be re-united with our Creator. And so He died in our behalf and His death provided forgiveness for our sin. His Spirit now lives within each one who believes this good news. In them the old relationship between their flesh and their bodies has been severed by the Holy Spirit. They no longer need to be flesh driven, but through the Holy Spirit can be God-centered. Paul likens this to a circumcision. It is not done with hands, that is, it is not physical. It is spiritual. Paul wants this clear. He is not calling the Church to physical circumcision. He is describing their spiritual circumcision. Christ severs us from the body of flesh. We no longer need to be merely creatures of instinctive desire. We can be freed from that whole course of living through the Holy Spirit that He has placed in us.

This is a radical change in our make-up. We were spiritually dead, spiritually dull and insensitive to God. Our sinful desires were just too strong. Now we are spiritually alive, our spirits united to His Spirit. In the deepest part of us is now His Spirit, a flowing spring of all that is pure and true. Things are possible in and through our bodies now that never occurred to us before. We are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:14-21).

2:12 “having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

Baptism is said by many to be to the New Covenant community what circumcision was to the Old Covenant community. To be sure, there are similarities. Both are symbolic rites that express one's identification with the community of those who believe in Yahweh's actions to bring them salvation and enter restored relationship with Him. Circumcision symbolized the separation of the Israelites out from among the other people groups by God as instruments of the revelation of Himself, His truth, and His salvation. Circumcision illustrated by its visible nature this separation and distinction, though doubtless, not all who were circumcised were Yahweh's people. There are these similarities between these rites.

It seems that circumcision symbolized more than this, that it anticipated the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Deuteronomy 30:1-8). And so it seems more precise to see the experience of the indwelling Holy Spirit as the New Covenant counterpart of circumcision. Circumcision was an external rite, done in the body by human hands. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is a work done in the heart, a miracle, made possible only by a work of God. Circumcision symbolized separation and distinction. The Holy Spirit brings about such separation and distinction. That potential for actual transformation was clearly anticipated throughout the Old Testament and circumcision was a rite that anticipated and illustrated this.

Baptism, particularly by immersion, profoundly illustrates the believer's participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. It illustrates the cleansing power of that work of Yahweh toward us. It also illustrates visibly the regeneration of the believer, their being raised to a new identity, inhabited by the very Spirit of God.

Baptism illustrates these things so clearly that the term baptism is used interchangeably of both the ordinance and the reality it represents. Colossians 2:12 is an example of this usage. Paul is describing the realities that are true of us through the spiritual work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. He is using the symbolic expression of this, water baptism, as the term for the reality of our new birth. The reality of this baptism, ultimately being baptized in the Holy Spirit, is that we are seen by God as being “in Christ,” meaning forever joined to Him. Just as Jesus died, God views the old, unforgiven slave to sin that we once were as having died. Just as Jesus was buried, that old slave to sin was buried. Just as Jesus was raised, so we have been raised, forgiven and united to Christ. As He is now destined to rule, so are we.

None of these realities come about through our volunteering to be baptized in water. They come as we embrace Christ's death as of God, meant for the bearing of our sin. That faith is brought about by the Holy Spirit and results in Him taking up residence in us. This marks the instantaneous joining of our beings to God Himself. Baptism in water symbolizes this great event that publicly testifies that we are the people of God, part of the body of Christ. But the reality is that the change came when we were baptized in the Holy Spirit, an act of God Himself. That Divine act profoundly changes who we are, as Paul's words here describe.

2:13 “And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”

There are several times in Scripture where a single sentence captures our inability, our ignorance, our rebellion, and our neediness along with Christ’s mercy, grace, forgiveness and power. This is such a sentence (see also Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:10). It speaks to the fact that God’s efforts toward us were not focused on us because of our merit. Our salvation did not come due to a good moment or season that we put together. It came as a sovereign act of God.

Even if from a human point of view there was a process involved in our salvation and a great deal of time passed, the truth is that such a process became our experience at God’s initiation. Even if in the process leading up to our faith we became “better” by human standards, it does not change the reality of who we are by His standard. Our salvation came when our moral shortfall was immense. And the truth is that at our best, our moral shortfall is immense.

God’s love was extended due to our hopelessness, not due to our goodness. His salvation came to us because He rescued us, not because we found Him. Paul’s choice of words capture the entire scope of humanity’s plight apart from God. There is the problem of our sinful actions, what we usually think of when we think of sin. Then there is also the problem of our sinfulness, that innate drive in us to serve ourselves rather than God, the desire Paul calls “the flesh.” These two things, the guilt of our sinful deeds and our incapability due to our flesh render us “dead” in the spiritual sense. We are locked in a realm of existence that is apart from God. There is nothing in us that enables us to break out.

Though extremely offensive to God, this state of being we are in moves Him due to His innate love for us. It is while we are in this offensive, vile, helpless and hopeless condition that He acts toward us. His action can be seen as administrative and legal, in that it involved proceedings, payments, and the satisfying of moral law and debt. But it was personal in that it involved God’s own Son dying to satisfy all these legal demands. His action can be seen as broad and impersonal, in that it was taken for the benefit of millions who would choose to believe and so become its beneficiaries. But it was clearly personal in that God would personally intervene in individual lives to bring about this belief. It is personal in that God’s Spirit indwells each individual who so believes. It is personal in that He embraces each as a son and daughter, not simply collectively as a nation. We are alive together with Him and so His actions result in personal relationship with Him and with each other.

Believers are spiritually alive, and it all happens because of initiative taken by Him to forgive our transgressions. It is because of the availability of this forgiveness that life eternal, a whole different kind of life and living, can flow from God to us and through us to others.

2:14 “having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having hailed it to the cross.”

Paul refers here to a certificate of debt and tells what this consists of and its tone toward us. He is describing here what amounts to a handwritten promissory note that is due and payable against us. This certificate, actual or symbolic, documents the shortfall between the behavior we owe God and what we have given Him.

Paul refers to this outstanding note here as singular, but it relates to every member of humanity except Jesus Christ. Their moral plight is the same. They are named as moral debtors to God. Whether this is referring to an actual document or is simply an illustration cast in human terms is irrelevant. The point is that our condition is grim, and our doom declared and impending.

The wording of the document expresses decrees against us. For all humanity there is a proclamation of condemnation. One has only to read the curses associated with disobedience to the Old Covenant to realize the hostile action that awaits all who are not forgiven (Deuteronomy 28:15-16). It is not just that there is loss of relationship with God. It is that God has decreed certain things against such as are not forgiven. He is hostile toward them and will move against them swiftly and with great severity.

This hostile action that awaited us, this legal judgment against us, this outstanding warrant has been dealt with through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Some say that such certificates of debt when satisfied in the ancient world were nailed up and posted in a public place. There seems to be no consistent evidence of this however. But Paul's imagery captures such action in the case of this moral promissory note and solidly links its resolution to the cross of Christ. When Christ was nailed to the cross as payment for our sin, it amounted to the end of hostility between God and all who would believe, what we could call the community of the cross. This certificate of debt is no longer a factor in the case of their relationship to God.

Our sin is well-documented and very public. In a most public act, nailed to a cross, naked for all to see, God's own Son was sacrificed as the payment for the sins of all who would believe. There could have been no more of a definitive statement by God of the closure in the matter of our guilt and coming punishment. It is a statement of His love and commitment to us, of our redemption, of His resolve to recover a remnant of humanity to bring about His honor and glory through them.

2:15 “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.”

It seems certain that this verse is speaking of the resurrection of Jesus and His various presentations of Himself alive to reliable eyewitnesses. The rulers and authorities likely include the Romans and the Jews as well as Satan and his demons. In the case of all of these their ultimate weapon is death. God disarmed them in the cross in that Christ was raised from the dead and in death He provided how humanity could escape spiritual death and eternal separation from God (Hebrews 2:14-15). Humanity can be raised from spiritual death and so their resurrection from physical death is to eternal union with God not separation from Him.

In describing God as having made a public display of these rulers, very deliberate and definitive action is certainly in view. This could be a reference to something beyond post-resurrection appearances to His followers. That action alone would not seem strong enough to warrant these words. So this statement may give additional credence to the idea that Christ appeared in Sheol, demonstrated His resurrection both to believers and unbelievers, as well as to all the accompanying spiritual powers and authorities.

These tantalizing subjects can so occupy us in a verse like this that we do not focus enough on its main idea. Two words are very significant in this verse. They are the word disarmed, and the word triumphed. The mission of God in becoming a man, living and dying in behalf of humanity brought about these two important things. Through Jesus God disarmed the enemy and He triumphed over the enemy. There is no power or authority except what God ordains and allows to function (Romans 13:1-2). There is no threat to what God has planned to do and that includes what he plans to do for those who have believed in Him (Romans 8:31-39; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10).

Paul's point to the Colossians is that there could be nothing more profound to contemplate or possess than the person of Christ. To move from the exclusive embrace of Him is to move back into slavery. It is to subject oneself to spiritual authorities that have been disarmed, to pay tax to those who have been conquered and subdued. It is to be intimidated by a bluff and to be taken in by a scam. It is to be victimized by a protection racket! The danger to them and to us is real. It is a terrible mistake to make to fall back under the spell of the superstition you have escaped. That is Paul's primary message in these words.

Now, what about the tantalizing subject of what Jesus was occupied with between the time He uttered His last words, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," and when His body was raised from the dead on the third day. This is an intriguing subject though highly speculative. It raises collateral ones. Where do we go when we die? What are we conscious of? Do we have bodies? Are we active in God's work? Are we even observers? The fact of the matter is that God has revealed very little about any of this. Most of what we know is by what is implicit in the Scriptures rather than explicit. Therefore, we must state at the outset that we know very little about the so-called "intermediate state," that period between our death and our resurrection, and we can say very little dogmatically about what Christ did during this time. In His case we surmise that because He was fully man, His experience of death was similar to that which normal humans experience. This seems to be confirmed by His promise to the thief hanging on a cross alongside Him, to whom He said, "Today, you shall be with me in paradise." This would be the normal expectation of one who by faith was right with God. We imagine then, that due to His humanity He experienced just what any of His earthly peers would have experienced.

Christians have long suspected that because Christ was also fully divine, there may have been differences in His experience of the intermediate state and ours. Their speculation is fueled by two statements made in Scripture. One is in Ephesians 4:9 where Paul writes, "'When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives and He gave gifts to men.' (Now this expression, 'He ascended,' what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?)" This verse is dealing with something that happened in conjunction with His ascension into heaven, which would put the event it is referring to in the general timeframe we are concerned with. It has led to speculation that after Jesus died and before He ascended into heaven, He did some work involving the freeing of captives somewhere in a region called the "lower parts of the earth." A second passage that many have related to this time

period is found in 1 Peter 3:18-19. There it is said that in the spirit “He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient . . .” It has been popular among Christians to combine these two accounts and teach that after His death Christ preached the gospel to the spirits of unrighteous, condemned dead. They were given a second chance to respond, which many did, and so were rescued from eternal damnation and led instead into heaven. This has given impetus to much more speculation and to actual formulation of beliefs in such things as purgatory. So the question of what happened on the second day is a little more important to think about than might be initially thought.

At the outset we must say that this is speculative work and controversial. There is no statement in Scripture that forms a detailed account of Christ’s experience between His death and bodily resurrection. There is nothing wrong with speculating. But when we do so we must reach a conclusion that harmonizes with all that the Scripture teaches on the subject. In this case our conclusion must agree with what the Scriptures clearly teach about life, death, salvation, and the opportunity for salvation. We will start with what we know to be true, and what is clear, and then move into the less clear passages cited earlier. Following then are some things that we know to be true and very clearly taught in Scripture that our speculation must support, not contradict.

We know that no person comes into the presence of God apart from Christ. Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me” (John 14:3). Peter observed that “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It is His atoning work on the cross that conveys forgiveness to those who believe. Knowing this, it is legitimate to speculate that thousands were granted salvation “on credit.” By this we mean that they were granted salvation based on their faith and that their sins would be atoned for in the future, in many cases thousands of years later, by the death of Christ. They were saved from sin’s penalty “on credit.” By this we mean that they were saved by His work, yet before it occurred in time and without knowing Christ. We should note that in using the term “credit,” we assign our reality of time to God who is a timeless being. So credit is a useful term to help our understanding, but in the strictest sense not a precise one. So we know beyond a shadow of doubt that no human can enter into the presence of God apart from the atoning work of Jesus Christ being applied to them.

There is a second thing related to life, death, and judgment that we know. A most important statement made by Scripture relative to these matters is in Hebrews 9:27. There we are told that “it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.” This verse indicates that judgment is entered into once death is final. Now we know that there have been cases where people have been raised from the dead. They were so raised because they had not arrived yet at their appointed time. Once that appointed time comes, there is death. It is complete and final. After that there is judgment. Now what does this mean? It is not a statement of time in the sense that a person is judged immediately upon death. We know from the testimony of other Scripture that there is a specific time when men will be judged that remains in the future. So this verse is not talking about the actual appointment each person has with their Creator. Some will obviously wait many years for that event. Rather it is a statement that at death we are confirmed in whatever state we are in with no opportunity to change it. We die and await judgment with no opportunity to change, compensate, or atone for anything we did during our lives. Our lives will make the

decision, our deaths will confirm it. The actual judgment will simply formalize and institute what has already been made evident.

We have now solidly affirmed two things. First, that in Christ alone sin is finally atoned for. Second, that there is no second chance once a person has finally died. Knowing these things we raise and deal with a question that will eventually guide our speculation of what Christ did between His death and resurrection. Is it possible that once Christ died and the atonement for sin was made, He brought about a great change in the intermediate state of believers?

It would seem from Scripture that will be cited in a moment, that before the atoning death of Christ, the spirits of God's children who died went to a place called paradise, as Jesus promised the thief on the cross. It was a good place, a place of rest, but it was not heaven. They could not enter heaven, the abode of God, because their sin had not yet been atoned for. Christ's sacrifice had not yet been made. They could not come through Him to the Father, because the way had not yet been provided. Therefore, when they died they went to what is referred to in the Old Testament as Sheol, the place of the dead. But they went to a part of Sheol that was good, reserved for the righteous dead. It was a place of rest and paradise. By the time of Christ's death tens of thousands of righteous dead would have been in this place, unable to be fully in God's presence because the sacrifice had not been made. On the other hand, the wicked dead went to the other part of Sheol which was a place of torment and dread. There they were confined awaiting judgment, with no opportunity to change their eventual fate.

Now, how do we know what we have said thus far is reasonable? We must say that it is not explicitly taught in Scripture, but it seems to be affirmed by Scripture. Much of this is solidly supported by the story told by Jesus of a godly and an ungodly man who died and their individual experiences after death in Luke 16:19-31. There is added evidence for these ideas in the contrasting outlook of death between an Old Testament speaker and a New Testament one. Jacob, speaking of his own death described himself as "going down to Sheol" (Genesis 37:35). Paul speaking of his potential death said, "we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5:6-8, see also Philipians 1:23). This rather dramatic difference in perspective could be because a very special work had been done by Christ that impacted what we have termed the intermediate state.

We can now speculate as to a special work which Jesus may have done between His death and His resurrection. It is possible that having completed His atoning work on the cross, Jesus in spirit journeyed to the place of the righteous dead, that portion reserved in Sheol for them. There He presented Himself to them as "the Lamb of God" who was sent as the sacrifice for their sins, which by virtue of their faith they would affirm. Since their sins were now atoned for by His death, He could lead them out of that place to a better place where they would be consciously in His presence until their bodies were raised from the dead. A work of this nature could be what Paul is referring to in the verses cited earlier in Ephesians 4:8-9. When Christ eventually ascended into glory it is possible that He took with Him the spirits of all who had died before His time, who were captives of the era in which they lived. It is likely that the realm of the dead believer changed dramatically at Christ's exaltation, just as the realm of the living believer on earth changed through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit and the gifts He energized in the Church.

But we must not go too far in this speculation. The verse cited earlier from 1 Peter is a little more difficult to deal with and requires great care. It says that Christ in spirit “went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through *the water*” (1 Peter 3:19-20 NASB, italicized word were added by translators). There is nothing inherent in this verse or in its context to link Peter’s words to the words of Paul in Ephesians 4 or to the time surrounding the resurrection. The two passages could easily be dealing with very different and separate events.

Five observations should be made about Peter’s actual testimony. First, no mention is made about when this proclamation by Christ occurred. Second, this proclamation is clearly made to unbelieving spirits. Third, they are either the spirits of a specific group of unbelievers, those from the time of Noah, or, they are a specific group of spiritual beings, the worst of the worse so to speak. In the latter case these would be a group of imprisoned demons who so corrupted humanity that they made the judgment of the flood necessary. Fourth, there is no indication that this proclamation led to them being freed. It is simply recorded that a proclamation was made to them by Christ in spirit. We have already established that any idea that unbelievers would receive another chance to believe after death goes against the testimony of Scripture. Judgment comes after death and because of death. Fifth, there is nothing said about what specifically was proclaimed. To suggest that the gospel was proclaimed is pure speculation.

These five observations severely limit what we can say about the incident reported by Peter. The most that can be legitimately said in trying to relate this text to the time period between Christ’s death and resurrection is to say that it is possible that He did go into the portion of Sheol reserved for unbelievers. He may have done this to demonstrate to all the powers of evil His utter triumph over them. In the process of doing this He might have made a triumphant proclamation of His completed work on the cross. His purpose in doing so would have been to simply state His victory, not to grant them a second chance. If this were the case, His proclamation would have been a dramatic affirmation of His words to Peter that the gates of Hell would not triumph over His Church.

There are several other plausible explanations for Peter’s words above. It is quite likely that Peter, James and John heard things from Jesus that no other human being heard. These words could refer to something which they heard about from Christ which is not otherwise known. We know that Christ existed before He became a man. He could have at any time made such a proclamation as this in spirit to such an audience. These verses could be a reference to such a proclamation whenever it occurred. Many have suggested, and it is reasonable, that these verses are a reference to the fact that Jesus’ spirit was working through Noah and Noah made proclamation to that generation before they died. They did not respond so that their spirits are now imprisoned. There are in truth many different explanations that have been put forward regarding these words written by Peter. The meaning of them remains elusive.

So what about the second day? What did Christ spend that time doing? We must reiterate that we can speculate wildly, but the truth is that we know very little about the activity of Christ between His death and resurrection. We suppose that because He was fully man, the normal experiences of the death of the righteous would be His, whatever those may be. We also realize that He was God and therefore unique. His death changed many things and that very likely included the so-called intermediate state. Whatever we believe Christ may have done with respect to the dead or the

realm of the dead, we must be certain to embrace two ideas that the Scripture is definitive on. First, the only prescribed way of gaining one's way into the presence of God is through the atoning work of Christ. Second, there were no second chances given and there are no second chances given during the time that elapses between our death and resurrection.

This is all highly speculative but does tie together some bits of information we are given, without violating the rest of the testimony of Scripture regarding the finality of death (Heb 9:27).

2:16 "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day "

There are many things which have a spiritual function and which may have a practical spiritual value in the lives of those well-grounded in doctrine and seasoned in the practical experience of the Spirit. However, just as commonly such things interfere with proper thinking about God and Christ. They add to the truth of the Gospel and so harm faith rather than strengthen it. In verses 16-23 Paul addresses these kinds of things that attach themselves to the faith like parasites and to some degree alter it.

The problem seems to begin when we let people be our judges rather than Christ and His teachings. Now there is a fine line in this matter because we are to be submissive to human authority both in civil matters (1 Peter 2:13-17), and in Church matters (Hebrews 13:17). So it is not as simple as shutting out all outside influence but that of our own conscience. But this submission must never be mindless. It must be regulated by that which we know to be true. In the case of the Colossians, it was to be in line with what Paul had taught them. In our case it is all to align with the testimony of Scripture.

There are several things resident in our flesh which can make us victims of pseudo judges. They subject us to false guilt, and so turn us from what is pure and true. One of these things is the flesh's desire to be liked and accepted. It can cause us to compromise to meet this need for acceptance. Another of these is the flesh's desire to achieve and distinguish itself above others. Ritual and religious routine provide an avenue for this need to be met. Another of these is the flesh's reaction to past pain and rejection that brings us feelings of inadequacy. Well-defined procedures and structures allow us to know where we stand and feel better about ourselves. Another of these is the flesh's desire to belong. This makes us susceptible to strong leaders and growing movements, fads, and bandwagons. We must remember that following the flesh is never good. The "legal flesh", a desire to be well thought of, is not any better than the "illegal flesh," our more indulgent side. The flesh always leads us away from the Holy Spirit and so away from God.

When Paul says let no one act as your judge regarding the things he lays out, he is providing a great guideline. We all need leaders, especially those of us that are spiritual leaders. But if those who lead us begin to attribute to food, drink, religious festival, new moon or Sabbath observance the ability to improve or maintain our standing with God, they have strayed from being led rightly themselves. This list is not exclusive. The principle given in the next verse shows that. But this list is a very good start. One of the things on it will generally capture the strain of things a problem leader is caught up in.

In Paul's day Judiazers, those attempting to impose the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament on the Christian Church, always brought teaching on the dietary regulations of the Old Testament. With that they also sought to impose the events of the Jewish religious calendar on Christians.

Today this has not totally disappeared. Those who do not understand the teachings of Jesus and the apostles impose selective regulations from the Old Testament on the Church. And so work on Sundays is prohibited in the name of "keeping the Sabbath." There is always a teaching popping up somewhere against the eating of pork.

Today we also have in place several Christian traditions that do not align with the teachings of the New Testament. We have developed a calendar full of Christian "Holy Days" and seasons. We have in some American evangelical circles denied consumption of alcoholic beverages. To reiterate, all such things may be of value in one's pursuit of the Spirit and may even be orchestrated by Him to such an end. But to be imposed on us by another as a kind of index of our spiritual condition is ridiculous. That is the practice Paul is speaking against in these verses. The essence of true spirituality is present when the Holy Spirit prompts thought and action in the free spirit of a person. That is spiritual activity, the sort that an imposed standard of spirituality quenches. This section of Scripture is meant to guard the readers against classic ritualism and its more pious twin, asceticism. Both generally become great enemies of true spirituality.

2:17 "things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ."

The Old Testament is full of regulations on all of the things Paul mentioned in verse 17, food, drink and special days on the calendar. Paul gives a concise statement of how we are to view these things as we read of them. We would be wrong if we thought that the Old Testament was the record of a mistaken religion. There were certainly mistakes made in the practice of those under the Old Covenant, but the Old Covenant itself with all its ceremonial regulations was established at the direction of God. Here Paul clarifies to us His purpose in doing so. It was to provide a shadow of what was to come, specifically of Christ. Now it is important to note that we should not view each thing as a shadow, but the collective thing as a shadow. There is one shadow, the individual parts contributing to the whole. So the prohibition against eating certain foods is not in itself a picture of Christ. Rather it provides some speck of detail in the whole, which is a shadow of Christ. It is not that Sabbath observance provides a picture of Christ. Rather it provides a speck of detail in the whole, which is a shadow of Christ. When we read the Old Testament, we are seeing details which combine to give a rough representation of the person and work of Christ and His kingdom.

A major point of Paul's however is to depreciate the value of ritual and ceremony, even that of the Old Covenant. Together they form a shadow. That is all they do. Now a shadow reveals an outline shape. It reveals the existence of an object or person, but very little of its detail. Things like size are distorted, color is absent, even whether the object is living can be uncertain in a shadow. The object itself is of so much greater importance. It dismisses the testimony of the shadow or causes us to interpret the shadow differently. When we have the reality, in this case the person of Christ (literally in Paul's words, "the body is that of Christ"), why would we consider the shadow sacred. Why would we spend time and energy pondering what we can learn from it. Embrace and ponder the reality! That is the obvious message of Paul to the Colossians in the few words of this verse. His words are powerful and profound in their simplicity.

They help us see through many complex schemes that can intimidate us and force their way into our thinking.

2:18 “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,”

Just as we can be victimized financially by con-artists so we can be victimized spiritually by false teachers. They will receive their punishment, but God warns us of our responsibility to protect ourselves. The implication to that is sobering. We have a role in shielding ourselves and others and we must execute that role. We can be defrauded of our prize if we fail.

This prize Paul speaks of can only refer to the prize associated with good stewardship where God rewards us in this life and the next for our management of all that He has entrusted to us. This includes the treasure of our own mental capabilities and extends to our material things. All of it can be invested in the wrong things if we listen to the wrong people. These can keep us from that which God would love to bless us with, His grace that enables us to steward His truth and his property well.

What is our protection from this spiritual fraud? First, it is to know the truth well enough to be able to spot the counterfeit. This lifts things like meditation on God’s word, the pursuit of the meaning of its words, and the perception of its ideas to a whole other level of priority and urgency. Ignorance always creates vulnerability, and that is true in every realm including the spiritual realm. Second, we are protected through the ability to step outside our emotions in the moment and reach decisions based on what is true rather than the emotional appeal of the presentation. This ability is present in every human being. It can be abused to our endangerment but can be set aside to our ruin. It is something the Holy Spirit will energize properly in us as we seek His guidance. Fraudulent schemes always find their victims where there is ignorance and the unwillingness to see things as they are. Christians must equip themselves with the truth and the ability to apply it even when they don’t like its implications, or they will be defrauded of reward from God.

Paul speaks of the trappings of some of the spiritual con artists that were operating in Colossae. The trappings are surprising, which is why fraud works. It always comes in deceptive packaging. These individuals delighted in self-abasement. Paul does not elaborate, but we can speculate that this involved a show of false humility. Perhaps it was through clothing and grooming, perhaps through diet. Very likely it can be termed asceticism, the intentional depriving of oneself believing that this conveys greater spiritual power. Asceticism, the antithesis of grace, makes frequent appearances in all of the world’s religions. It is difficult to combat because self-abasement always inspires admiration in us. We are extremely vulnerable to the influence of any who show a high capacity for discipline and who deprive themselves of pleasure. We associate this with goodness, humility and a pure heart and so are taken in.

Paul also speaks of the worship of angels. We do not know much by way of the particulars of this practice. Christians since that time have fallen into the practice of believing people become angels after death and the practice of praying to dead saints. So we know that such things appear to be what we slip toward if we do not hold ourselves to a pattern of belief and behavior (Philippians 3:16-4:1). In the Church at Colossae this slippage was apparently a real danger, though one would think that

the first three commandments of the Decalogue would forever insulate Jews and Christians from such a practice.

The next phrase adds an important piece of information that serves us very well in protecting ourselves against spiritual fraud. Paul represents these hucksters as taking their stand based on visions they have seen. The word vision is supplied by the translators and appears legitimate. A mark of fraudulent spirituality is that it takes a direction other than that modeled by the Apostles and recorded on the pages of the New Testament. It does so because of additional material supposedly made available from God. This supposed new material comes through visions, encounters with angels, supposed lost books of the Bible, supposed appearances of saints or even of Jesus. It is a common theme new knowledge and some phenomenon seen and experienced by a “sincere” leader. This has given birth to all the major religions and cults of the world from Islam to Mormonism. Angels, visions and new material are common threads. It all copies Christianity where we find things like the burning bush, the God-man, and the Damascus road experience of Paul. But contrary to these, the linkage in Scripture to these supposed visions is incomplete and lacks harmony. It doesn’t match the pattern of God’s legitimate revelation when examined closely.

Paul in his writings does not question the occurrence of spiritual phenomena. Here he says that these hucksters take their stand based on what they have seen. He does not use terms like “supposedly seen” or in our language “allegedly seen.” In Paul’s thought spiritual experiences happened both among the godless and the godly. 1 Corinthians 12-14 are about shedding light on our ignorance about such “spirituals” or we could say spiritual phenomena. 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 is a great “short course” on the matter of helping us sort through the grab-bag of spiritual phenomena to find true movements of the Holy Spirit. We are spiritual beings, and our physical world is immersed in an invisible spiritual reality. The result is spiritual experiences and phenomena. The challenge to our faith is not simply intellectual. It is spiritual. There are forces that can draw our intellect along to false conclusions. The standard of sound words laid down by the Apostles, preserved completely by the Holy Spirit through the writings of the New Testament, serves as our rule by which to judge all the ideas spawned by this spiritual activity.

Paul mentions next one of the forces that draws our intellect along to false conclusions. It is the flesh, our innate drive to be our own master and gratify our own desires whatever they might be. One of the things our flesh does within us is to “inflate us.” It loves imaginary scenarios that give us hero status. Then it loves to send us seeking those moments in real life. It leads us to abandon what reality says about our abilities, strengths and weaknesses. We blame others and imagine conspiracy if proper “acclaim” does not come our way. In the spiritual realm it leads us to desire a following and the acclaim of having insight and deep spiritual understanding. These desires and imaginings make us vulnerable to the pseudo-spiritual experience. Either our own emotions produce it for us or evil beings do. Either way we are now armed with something that we can parlay into the attention and recognition we crave. But it is nothing, a vain pursuit. It came about through our own mind as it was driven along by the cravings of our own flesh.

In many this experience is moderated from what Paul describes here. There is no specific spiritual phenomena. There is no vision, no false doctrine. It’s all very sanitary. But the person seeks more than what their gifting and ability would bring them. They write books that have little to say. They are excessively driven and produce efficient organizational machines. They may even achieve some notoriety. But it is all over-

inflation. It is just what happens in the world as men seek promotion and fame, but with a spiritual look.

The fleshly mind, a mind that is not subjected to the Holy Spirit, is capable of great deception. It can manipulate in amazing ways. In the end it manipulates itself and destroys its own ability to identify what is true and reject what is only imagination, wish and fantasy. Such people die bitter, convinced that life has robbed them, that they have never gotten the recognition they deserve. All their lives they have imagined an innate greatness, a certain destiny. They become increasingly frustrated that others don't recognize it in them. It is a miserable way to live and die and every one of us must deal with it. It is a great achievement to recognize this in us and to give it no nurture. The flesh is never done, but it can be crucified in the moment (Galatians 5:24).

2:19 “and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.”

From Christ comes that which allows Christians to minister health to each other. The result is growth, and the growth is clearly from God. Therefore, the critical thing is to have a vibrant relationship to Christ. This involves submission and obedience but also the elements of healthy friendship like communication, honesty, loyalty and service. All of this is captured by the phrase “holding fast to the Head.”

The spiritual con artists that were troubling the Colossians had not held fast to Christ. They had let go of Him. In Christ's own words they did not remain in Him and so could not bear fruit in keeping with Him (John 15:1-8). The result was that they were cut off from the very organism that by God's decree and design promoted spiritual life, that is, His Church. They were speaking of the spiritual and they were promoting themselves as spiritual gurus, but they could not minister spiritual life because they had none.

We can only imagine Paul's frustration at this scenario. Here is a church in Colossae made up of Spirit-filled people, intimately connected to Christ. There was a miraculous element to their life together. They each contributed to one another's lives just the right thing at just the right time. They felt the growth that resulted in their personal character. They saw it in each other. They saw outsiders embracing their faith and becoming part of this kind of supernatural, organic process. It all was happening without pomp and ceremony. It was genuine, deep and powerful. Yet it was being threatened by these pseudo-spiritual leaders who were selling the idea that the Colossians did not yet have the real thing. It was the equivalent of taking someone who had experienced modern medicine to a witch doctor. It was a huge step backwards. It was working because of the ability of these religious hucksters to manipulate the truth and so sell their wares. We are suckers for routine, ritual, self-deprivation, for any merit system. Those trappings gratify our flesh. The angriest moments in the lives of true people of the Spirit and their sharpest words come when they see this kind of exchange unfolding, where the authentic is replaced by the routine and ritualistic (Matthew 21:12-17; Matthew 23; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-22).

The growth that comes from God bears the impress of Christ but is noteworthy in that it also bears the impress of many of His own family. The strength of that family is found only by broadening one's field of view to the whole body of Christ. There are a

variety of expressions of it, which when dissected and analyzed all have the common DNA of Christ. It is not the Holy Spirit who produces gurus, or an independent, self-sufficient spirituality. He brings about health when there is among the Churches strongest leaders the dynamic of humility, interdependence, and accountability. The Church is healthiest where there is the cross pollination from the diverse perspectives within the bounds of orthodoxy. This healthy conversation invariably makes the Christian community expand and grow. The Church is no place to seek to prove one's exclusive hold on spirituality. That is the cry of the flesh for recognition and affirmation and unfortunately it is heard frequently in the Church.

The attempt was being made by some in Colossae to lead the Church in a wrong direction and for the wrong reasons. Paul emphasized that the real thing grows out of the work of Christ in all its members. The implication is that we are not missing the secrets that someone can open and reveal to us. What we are missing we will find through our mutual submission to one another as Christ moves and speaks in and through us.

2:20 "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,"

Paul now applies the truth he referenced in verses 12-14. It is truth which is very easy to leave in the theoretical compartment of our minds and not move into the practical, moral, ethical decisions we confront in the moment. We died with Christ in at least two ways to the elementary principles of the world.

First, to believe in Christ as God's atoning sacrifice for our sin is to reject the universal human notion that we can and do save ourselves by our own acts of merit. So to believe in Christ's death is to die to classic religious ideas and philosophies of the world. We no longer believe they have any merit and have accepted the death of Christ as our only hope. This is the message of the Gospel.

Second, it is a biblical fact that when we believe in Christ, God views the old us as dead (Romans 6:1-11). The old us was that person who was by guilt of their sin separated from God. We are forgiven and so rejoined to Him, indwelt by His very Spirit. All the elementary principles of the world, in particular the principles that relate to what we must DO to be right with God have no bearing on us. They are irrelevant because we have been declared righteous by Him. This is true of all the various "merit" systems developed by humanity. It is also true of those principles that governed the terms of Divine blessing under the terms of the Old Covenant. We are forgiven through the cross, because of faith. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing, and so freed from all obligation to ritual imposed by the law and every superstition imposed by ignorance.

Paul says specifically that for the Colossians to re-subject themselves to the ritual of the Law or to the various practices of the world's religions, was for them to live as if they were in the world, or worldly. That is very important terminology. It means that it is possible to have a very separatist lifestyle, even monastic, yet be worldly! So the question becomes what kind of separation should we look for in ourselves as born again people?

When a Christian discussion of worldliness happens today, it is invariably such elementary principles as these that are embraced as proving one's separation from the world. The truth is that the only outward demonstration of separation that is

legitimate is that which emerges from who we have become inwardly. Legitimate separation is demonstrated in such things as an outlook of faith and trust in trial, by our willingness to serve rather than be served, by our decreasing need for accolades and status, and by our moral choices. It is an outward demonstration that we are dying to the self-obsession that characterized us before our new birth. An expression of the change in oneself brought about by the presence of God is orchestrated by the Spirit. If it is done by the Spirit, it might be too subtle for some tastes, as in the case of the false teachers in Colossae. But it will be genuine, and it will be God's design for the moment. So our choice is that of pleasing God or pleasing men, as it always is in this important matter.

2:21 "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!"

These are the types of commands that human religious dogma often seek to implement in our lives. It is not humanism's only disguise. Humanism can also push us in a direction of moral abandon and unrestrained pleasure. Most Christians however, like the Colossians, are more vulnerable to that which can be passed off as biblical, based on the regulations of the Old Covenant. They are vulnerable to that which appears pious, that which the nonbeliever sees as sincere but silly. And so they fake it, and use this kind of shortcut to credibility. In doing so they find themselves in the maze of misdirection that most shortcuts lead to. They and their movements create much that must be undone.

It seems quite likely that Paul was quoting a line here that the Colossians were familiar with. They had either heard it from the false teachers, or else Paul had given it to them as a test of false doctrine. It is a good phrase to know. It provides us with a good question by which to evaluate any system of thought being advocated. Does this teaching in question seek to address in people things like diet, cleanness or uncleanness that the Old Covenant was concerned with? Does it attempt to clean up the outward appearance or does it focus on thoughts and motives? If we would ask such a question, we would successfully sort out much that is false teaching.

The black and white teaching of pietists and legalists has a certain appeal. Its boundaries are clear. It feels right and the alternative feels like moral ambiguity. The trouble is it is creeping death. There is no struggle necessary to know the mind of the Lord in the moment, no need to do the hard work of developing an accurate view of the Scriptures. Plus, it feels good. It is affirming. It makes one feel like part of an exclusive club the chosen few. That is very appealing to the flesh. Such piety distinguishes one as being more than just one of a multitude of believers. They are part of the inner circle, the faithful few. This is a mentality that we must watch for in ourselves. It is the most common of the lusts of the flesh, the one that led Adam and Eve to the fatal choice.

The leading of the Holy Spirit unites us with a diverse community of believers. We will find many who have arrived at the same conclusions as we have. The leading of the Spirit separates us from the world and all that is fleshly. Now that means we will always be in the minority. But we must not fall for that which shrinks this minority further to a select few. There was the equivalent of a mega-church in Israel when Elijah thought he was alone! This is a delicate matter to manage in our own thinking. We must always be prepared to stand alone, but we are vulnerable if we find ourselves seeking to distinguish ourselves from among the mainstream of believers.

“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” That will always be a mantra of a demonic strain who seek to blind humanity to the truth of the gospel. It is a worldly fleshly message in a pious disguise, the perfect alternative to having to accept one’s own inability to save themselves. It is the substance of much of the diverse religious practice in world history. It is the opposite of the truth of the cross and the message of the gospel, yet easily takes root in the Church.

2:22 “(which all refer to things destined to perish with the using) in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men.”

After the fall of man the knowledge of God was lost, as was the ability to instinctively know the mind and heart of God. So humanity was initially in a situation where they knew God existed but they had diminishing understanding of how to access Him or be restored to friendship with Him. With the passing of time this deteriorated further so that even knowledge of God’s existence was abandoned by many and lost to many.

God countered this growing darkness with revelation of Himself. As time past and the darkness grew, He revealed more of Himself. The revelation became more detailed and dramatic, culminating in Him becoming a man and living among men. This was followed by detailed accounts in writing by eyewitnesses who reported the detail of what they saw in Him and heard from Him. They applied it all to real life situations relationships, thought, morals, ethics, and everyday behavior.

This special revelation, this unveiling of the truth by Yahweh, was not flattering to humanity. It spoke against our self-centered pursuits. It called for our humble submission. It condemned actions independent of God. So most ignored and rejected it. They substituted their own imaginings, based on their own limited understanding, and biased morality. The result has been an abundance of alternate thought on God, both His nature and His desire for man. There came to be many commands and detaching of human origin accepted as godly by most of humanity.

All of these religious systems developed among the various cultures of earth have much to say about “things destined to perish with the using.” By this phrase Paul is speaking of the things he has mentioned in verse 16 and referred to again in verse 21, things like what we eat, so called holy days, weeks or months, even the seasons of deprivation we might institute in normal religious practice. These practices all have to do with what comes and goes. Much of it is in the purely physical realm and concerns things that according to Jesus can neither defile us or make us holy (Mark 7:14-23). It is an important thought that Paul is reminding us of, that such religious practice accomplishes nothing for us in God’s eyes. It is not just ineffective. It is irrelevant! That is a most important thing to know.

2:23 “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

Paul acknowledges that from the strictly human point of view, evaluated with the normal teachings of man regarding God in mind, the teachings in question appear to be a “word of wisdom.” He adds to this a word that can be rendered “indeed,” or as the NASB has rendered it “to be sure.” This phrase “word of wisdom” consists of the same words he uses in 1 Corinthians 12:8 of activity of the Holy Spirit. A word of wisdom was a message spoken by someone in the Church at the prompting of the

Spirit that gave practical direction as to the mind of God in a matter. It is one of the great things that occurs between believers when they fellowship together. However, such utterances must always be passed through the grid of Scripture by mature people to determine that they are truly of God's Spirit and not just of man's own spirit. Paul speaks here of the messages of these false teachers as appearing to be or feeling like a word of wisdom from the Holy Spirit. But it is only because such messages that call for things like penance in us appeal to our own spirits, conditioned as they are by human ideas about God. These so-called words of wisdom do not align with what God has revealed of Himself and His thought for man. They grow out of a pseudo-piety, which is nothing more than a desire to distinguish oneself and elevate oneself above others.

Pseudo-piety has three elements, all of which appear noble and sincere to us. First, they consist of "self-made religion." This is the NASB rendering of a compound word used only here that could be rendered "will worship." It likely refers to the exercise of extreme levels of self-discipline, grinding out routine to distinguish oneself in some way. It is belief and reliance on the human will, the belief that moral weakness is essentially an issue of self-discipline which can and must be eliminated through sheer will power. It is as the NASB has implied, self-made religion, personal holiness produced by a kind of focused willfulness or power of mind. It consists of rigorous, and so admirable routine. The problem is just what the word Paul coins for this implies. It is the worship and elevation of one's own will, which is clearly fleshly idolatry, absolutely contradicting to the message of the Gospel. So it is found to be pseudo-piety on this count.

The second characteristic of pseudo-piety is that it involves "self-abasement." This term can refer to a façade of humility and lowliness (Colossians 2:18), or the admirable, Christ-like quality of humility (Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12). Here it refers to the latter, the same kind of religious routine mentioned in verse 18, putting one's supposed humility on display. It was the outward embrace of humility to gain an advantage. So it was not humility at all. It was in truth self-promotion. This supposed sincerity of heart displayed in a very calculating way was just more of the flesh.

The third characteristic of pseudo-piety is that it involves severe treatment of the body. This is a classic element of human religion. It comes out of the embrace of the previous two. Depriving the body of things like food, shelter, clothing, and sex always seems to draw admiration and to authenticate sincerity. It is believed by many that depriving the body of such things will cure it from its desire for them. But this has proved to be fallacious. The whole practice has usually degenerated into a façade behind which all manner of indulgence has been practiced. But severe treatment of the body remains a pillar of religious routine in all cultures. To many it serves as a spiritual ideal and even as an index of spirituality.

This verse ends with a remarkable statement. It says that such rigors are of NO value with respect to the indulgence of the flesh. The word rendered indulgence in the NASB is a word used only here in the New Testament. It is formed from the word used of filling up. It provides a good picture of our moral dilemma. Our preoccupation with ourselves and our desire to gratify ourselves is insatiable. It can never be filled up, though that is the quest of the natural man. We would call it a "black hole." Paul is saying in these words that this gnawing quest within us cannot be thwarted through the classic approach of deprivation. Other teachings of Paul indicate that this is the exact lesson the era of the Law taught humanity through Israel (Romans 7:7-25). The Law aggravated our sinfulness and made it spring into action. This illustrates the fact that when we attempt to control our fleshliness by law and rules and will-power it has

the opposite effect. Now a particular rule may curb the presence of a particular sinful act. But that apparent success usually gives rise to pride, meets a fleshly need to be well thought of and looked up to and so actually indulges the flesh. In the end it has had no value in the fight against fleshly indulgence, and even becomes a respectable way of indulging the flesh.

All of this points to the dependency of humanity on God for their salvation. It is why the Gospel is such great news and our only hope. Our own sinfulness corrupts our every effort. When we aim at being righteous, the only outcome can be self-righteousness, which accentuates our lostness and confirms us in our state of alienation from God. Religious humanity outside the Gospel have certainly proved more resistant to truth than have the irreligious. Their depravity is equally apparent. Our own religion, no matter how seriously taken cannot gain for us the approval of God. It accentuates our offensiveness to Him.

Colossians 3

3:1 “If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

It is instructive in understanding the writings of Paul to watch his switch from the indicative to the imperative. These two words refer to what grammar designates as the “mood” of a verb. “Mood” has to do with the relative reality of some action. The various moods can be represented along a line with reality on the far right and what has potential to be reality on the far left. The indicative mood represents the highest degree of reality. It confirms the reality of the action from the viewpoint of the speaker. It is action conceived of as taking place, the tense capturing the time or kind of action. The imperative mood is the mood of command. It would represent action to the far left on that line. The action has the potential of taking place but it is not a fore drawn conclusion that it will. Two other moods lie in between the indicative and the imperative conveying shades of probability. Just to the left of the indicative lies the subjunctive, which indicates probable action. To the left of it we could plot on the reality line the optative mood, rarely seen in the New Testament. It expresses the wish or hope of the speaker and a lesser degree of probability than the subjunctive.

Paul’s switch from the indicative to the imperative in his letters is reflective of his belief in grace. All of his language reflects the fact that God has a plan that is a fore drawn conclusion. Part of that plan has been the extension of His grace to humanity and all of the concrete blessings that go with grace that are now true and that can be experienced by every believer. This is captured by statements made in the indicative mood. Typically, the first half of his letters are filled with such statements.

Our experience of God follows a certain universal pattern of behavior. That is, His processes in raising us to a higher plain of living, though individual, always includes common patterns of behavior that He reproduces in His offspring. These are captured by statements made in the imperative mood, commands by which we can clearly confirm the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives and so learn His subtleties. Typically, the second half of Paul’s letters contain many such statements in the imperative mood. They are often paired with re-statements in the indicative of those things that by God’s grace are a fore drawn conclusion. As imperatives we know that these commands represent potential action in the hearers. Obedience is never a given, from either a linguistic or theological point of view. From a theological point of view, all the power of heaven is available to aid one’s obedience, but there is still the element of free will in the matter of obedience, or it is not really obedience. There is a diligence that enters in which is supplied by the Holy Spirit but must be selected at His prodding by each person.

Our obedience is not automatic, but neither is it purely “up to us.” There is the constant conviction of the Holy Spirit in our enlivened consciences, His constant drawing of us toward the things of God’s heart. Our own faith is a product of His work (Ephesians 2:10), irrefutable evidence that we are born of God (1 John 5:1-5). This is the stuff of the indicative mood, the things which come our way because of the sovereign plan of God. They are true in us because of His grace.

The imperative mood, the commands of Scripture, describe checkpoints along the way that lead to maturity and completeness in Christ. They provide concrete confirmation of what the Holy Spirit says to every believer. They are the basis of a stewardship we have entered. Our faithfulness in discharging our responsibility toward these concrete,

universal things allows us to receive and discern more subtle individualized leadings of His. Through the actions of God expressed in the indicative we come to faith and are energized for a journey. Through the actions we are called to by the imperatives whole new spiritual horizons are opened to us and realized by us on that journey.

In this verse we see this switch. The first statement is in the indicative mood. It reaches back and captures a reality that is true of us by God's grace. "If then you have been raised up with Christ..." restates the reality laid out in the previous chapter (vs. 12). The second statement is in the imperative mood. It reaches forward to prescribe action that is a logical, sequential step given the reality of the indicative statement. The imperative is "keep seeking the things above . . ." This phrase provides a concrete example of something the Holy Spirit is convicting every believer in every place to do. Seek those things above. As with every command of Scripture, as we are faithful to it, new things will be opened to us. If we are not, even the spiritual ground we have gained will be lost (Matthew 13:12; 25:29; Mark 4:24-25; Luke 8:18; 19:26).

The grammar of this section of Scripture must not keep us from focusing on the meaning and message of it. It is an important thought in Paul's theology that we have been raised up with Christ. There are at least three ideas that he wants us to have in our minds through this statement.

First, there is a life and death difference in how God views us once we are born again. We were alienated from Him, enemies of His kingdom. Now we are His children. In the reality of the spiritual realm that both the agents of good and evil exist in, the old us is dead (Colossians 1:21-22).

Second, there is a life and death difference in the actual makeup of our being once we have been born again. Our human spirit becomes the dwelling of God's Spirit and so we are joined to Him. His thoughts begin to come from within us whereas before they were foreign to us (Romans 6:4).

Third, there is a life and death difference in our destiny once we are born again. We were on the wide path that leads to destruction. The end of that path is what Scripture calls second death eternal separation from God. We have been raised from that death march to a high road that is life and leads to eternal life in the presence of God. Our destiny in terms of our activity in this life and our destiny in eternity are forever altered (Ephesians 1:18-2:10).

Using the indicative mood Paul captures in this figurative statement these three important elements of our reality. The command that follows is a general one that is based on this reality. Many more specific commands will follow in the letter, but they are founded on this one that will then be applied to many practical issues of morality and relationships. But first, Paul will take several verses to reinforce this idea expressed in the indicative and his proposal of a logical response, expressed in the imperative.

The command is for us to "keep seeking the things above where Christ is..." When we see the word "seek" used figuratively in the Scripture we are seeing a word that describes a pursuit that grows out of an ambition or desire (Matthew 6:33). Obviously such a seeking can be toward good or evil. All human beings are motivated by something in life and so are on a search. Paul is telling us to be driven and motivated by the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. He refers to these things as being where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, a picture of the throne-room of the universe. We now understand and have access to things that we knew nothing of.

They are things which shrink to nothing the more normal pursuits of the world. These things we are to pursue.

Now pursuing has in mind laying hold of something. It is not simply a chase. That is what we call an empty pursuit, just activity. Pursuing also has in mind the care and nurture of the thing laid hold of so that it increases even more. This can be seen in one's pursuit of worldly wealth. That pursuit is understood to involve apprehension and increase. We consider ourselves to have laid hold of it when it is reproducing for us so as to supply us. So seeking is the pursuit and apprehension of something so as to cause it to increase for our benefit.

What are some examples of the things above? The first would be the relationship itself with the King. We pursue relationships that we think will benefit us in the things of this world. Why not pursue this relationship with the King above all those (Luke 14:26)? The second would be truth, which is sourced in the King. It is the treasure that is the key to all others. To seek it out so as to know it, then pursue it so as to shape one's life by it is to seek what is above. The third would be the agenda of the King. He certainly is seeking to bring about certain things in our lives and in lives all over the earth. To be His agent in bringing about these things is certainly the wisest use of our lives.

So to summarize what we see in this verse, there is a wonderful reality that describes us. We have been raised with Christ, brand new in terms of our essential makeup and our potential. There is a logical direction our lives should now move in, the pursuit of those grand things that are now available to us. Paul is reiterating the command of Christ to pursue the Kingdom and this pursuit will open up all other things to us (Matt 6:33). Now he will reinforce this reality and the logical nature of this pursuit.

3:2 "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth."

Paul casts his command for the Colossians in a little different language in this verse but it is the same command. He has told them to engage themselves in a certain pursuit, the pursuit of things above. Now he tells them to set their minds on these things. In commanding this Paul has in mind them becoming people who live alert and aware, in tune with what heaven is seeking to bring about in each moment in front of them. It is too easy for our faith to be an appendage to that which naturally occupies the human mind. Our faith becomes an add-on module for those situations where faith is required or is in some sense "appropriate."

The command of verse 2 is really the starting point for the life pursuit commanded in verse 1. If we wish to arrive at the end of our lives having pursued things of God's kingdom, then it starts by us thinking of these things. The word rendered "set your mind" is used of an intentional mindset (Philippians 2:5). It involves increasing in the knowledge of "above" things, increasing one's passion and heart for them by contemplating their importance, and increasing one's incarnation of them. It is having a mindset that is dynamic, continually being shaped by all that is known of the mind of God as His Spirit works and stirs within us. It is also a static mindset in the sense that it does not shift back and forth to the things of this world.

The things above are "upper things," things of eternal importance, things that effect many lives for all of eternity. They are "higher thoughts" that are occupied with what we are becoming rather than what we are doing or getting or experiencing. They are occupied with the eternal rather than what is passing. As stated earlier, they are about

deepening one's relationship to the King, about understanding more deeply the book He has given us about truth, and about doing those things He wants done in His world.

These are the things we are to think about, and when we do it is certain that our pursuits will change. Giving attention to the direction our mind is taking us will largely determine the overall outcome of our lives. There is much that passes through our minds, both good and evil. What we stop and linger on we can control and then it will shape us.

3:3 “For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

Paul's teaching always emphasizes our participation in the death, burial, resurrection, and current life of Christ (Romans 6). His embrace and proclamation of this idea are such that we conclude that he was not just adopting a handy metaphor. There is a spiritual experience in belief that happens that gives substance to these kinds of statements. It is doubtless that if we could understand this experience more fully it would deeply impact our victory over sin and the quality of our experience of the Holy Spirit.

This experience of dying and being raised with Christ lies outside of our physical senses. This death we died we did not feel, or touch, or smell, or taste, or see. That is why it is a complex matter to us, as are all things in the spiritual realm. We are physical beings and have physical senses that allow us to analyze and understand physical things. But our spiritual being has atrophied. It was separated in the fall from our Maker and so lies in a weakened state. Our own spirit is largely a mystery to us, much less the spiritual realm.

It seems that in the spiritual realm of reality, which is the realm that God, Satan, and all angels live in, death is not an end to existence. Strictly speaking that is true of death in the human realm as well. But we tend to understand death as physical beings and therefore it is an end, a ceasing of physical existence. In the spiritual realm death is purely a matter of being separated from one to whom you are joined. So when Adam sinned he died, and that death was spiritual first. He became separated from God. That's death in the spiritual realm. At that point the entire human stream became vulnerable to the evil one. The spirit of God no longer moved within them, though He moved among them. Their spiritual beings were deeply and continually impacted by the evil one (Ephesians 2:1-3). That meant that we were dead to God, but very much alive in terms of the evil one and evil (Romans 6:20). So the reality of every human being born since Adam is that when we were born physically, we were born into spiritual death separation from God. Though we were alive physically, we were dead spiritually.

When we believe in Christ death happens in the spiritual realm. We are separated in our spirits from the evil one and joined once again to God. This is the death Paul is referring to here. It is complex stuff to grapple with what is true in the spiritual realm. But death in that realm is just this, a matter of separation. When Paul says that we have died it is a death plainly recognized in the spiritual realm. The spirits of the evil one clearly recognizes our spirits as joined to the Spirit of God. It is as actual and real as anything can be to them. It is not that we exist in some state that insulates us from their influence. But we are clearly different from their point of view.

Our lives are now “hidden with Christ in God.” The term “hidden” is in the perfect tense. That tense speaks of action that has occurred in past time, resulting in a state of being that is ongoing. The term is used of that which is deliberately concealed from view. It is used of the hiding of Moses (Hebrews 11:23), of the concealing of a treasure by burying it (Matthew 13:44), of a person hiding themselves (John 8:59; 12:36), and of truth concealed by God (Matthew 13:35). Our lives are hidden with Christ. The language is specific and to say “hidden together with Christ” would capture its sense more fully.

The phrase “in God” could be understood in several ways. It could be that this is the place where our lives and Christ’s are located, in the very presence and even in the being of God. It could be that the phrase should be understood as “by God,” that He is the one who does the hiding and concealing. It could be that the phrase should be understood as “for God,” meaning for His purpose and glory. All of these would have grammatical, theological and biblical support.

This should probably be understood as “by God,” making it a statement of personal agency. The meaning is that God has acted on us so that we are united with Christ. The Spirit of God has so enveloped our spirits, that we are absolutely one with Christ. Who that makes us is not fully understandable to us in the present state. It has not yet become clear and visible (1 John 3:2). It is hidden from our sight, just as invisible as Jesus Himself is to us on earth. The new creation has only fully happened in our spirits, not in our bodies and minds which work is still to come. However, the spiritual view is primary in the spiritual realm. It is a critical piece of the reality of who we are.

Now, it is important to remember that our bodily being, with all its senses, emotions, actions and reactions, is still a central feature of our reality in this life on earth. Though it is joined to our spirit, which has been inhabited by His Spirit, it is of a fallen world and bears the weakness and vulnerability of humanity separated from God. The evil one can impact our bodily experience, and he does. There is sickness, sorrow, and death and many experiences of suffering. Our ability to function outside of the will of God is very real. But none of this changes the reality of who we are with Christ in God. That place we are in is a place of safety and wholeness, the very concepts that are embodied in the word salvation. We have become separated by an act of God from the spiritual kingdom of Satan. He has lost ownership. We have been joined to God. The things above are accessible to us. There is no reason to occupy ourselves with the lower existence of passing instinct and pleasure. We should set our sights higher, on all that has true meaning for the world that will come to be. Our life is that which is, but is not seen. It is a whole realm that God is preparing for us which one day will be ours.

3:4 “When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”

There is a day in God’s plan when he will reveal on earth His Son, Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah. On that day, whether dead or alive from a physical point of view, all who have believed in Him will also be revealed. They will be revealed as they are in Christ. They will not be fallen beings in mortal bodies but fully redeemed human beings in bodies like Jesus’ resurrected body (1 Corinthians 15:50-58).

Paul refers to this future state of being that awaits us as being “in glory” (see also 1 Corinthians 15:35-49). The primary way to understand it is to imagine all that was lost in Adam and envision it all restored. The image of God will be once again restored

completely in us. The consequences of Adam's spiritual death that spread to us will all be removed for all time (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). This is what redemption is. It is God purchasing through Christ's blood a people out from under the demands of his own judgment, to be restored to bearing His image for all of eternity. This is what it means to be "in glory," and it is the inner ache of all creation for this day to arrive (Romans 8:18-25).

The revelation of Jesus Christ is a future event. It will be an entirely different event than was His first appearance on earth. In that event His glory was veiled. He was in the likeness of sinful flesh, in a body that was subject to the weaknesses we are, though He did not sin. He came in servant's garb to die for humanity as an offering for sin (Romans 8:3; Philippians 2:5-11). There was nothing stately in that first appearance of His on this planet (Isaiah 53:1-3). So dramatic, even cataclysmic will be His second appearance that an entire book is given to describe the events surrounding it. God has scripted entirely different kinds of events for those times when Christ is revealed "in glory." He will come in full demonstration of who He is. Nothing will be held back. The fullness of His power, His authority, His justice, His love, His goodness, and His wisdom will be clearly demonstrated. All of this will be unveiled, and He will be seen, recognized, and acknowledged by all as Lord and King.

3:5 "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry."

The actual command given by Paul is that we put to death the members of our earthly body with respect to the things he lists here. Though there is this wonderful union that has taken place with our spirits and God's Spirit, there are still the desires that reside in our earthly bodies that we can be shaped by. These must be decisively acted against. They cannot be allowed to create a life of their own that we participate in against the leadings and convictions of the Holy Spirit.

Acknowledging the presence of these desires and acting against them is the sanctification process. It is initiated and stimulated by the Holy Spirit, whose promptings our minds become aware of and process. As we process we come to a point of decision. We either think further and then act out the thought, or we deny the thought and act against it. At the same time temptation arises from within that the evil one can manipulate through our various senses. What we have called "processing" becomes a battle for us against what our natural leanings and instinctive desires are and against the forces of evil themselves.

This battle is a regular feature of the Christian life. It is not so much occurring in the unbeliever whose spirit is not joined to God. That the battle is present is the sign of at least the beginnings of spiritual life. It is this battle that Paul is calling us to win, in war-like language. We do so by putting to death the members of our body with respect to the desires that are contrary to the will of God for us. From a practical point of view this means that by any means possible we deprive them of that which they desire to engage in. It is a premeditated, calculated, decisive response by us against a specific line of thinking and action. It is passing a death sentence against it and carrying it out in the name of justice and all that is good.

In using this kind of language, Paul would not want us to embrace the idea that our bodies are THE problem. This idea that sin, or weakness, or even various mental limitations are experienced by us only because of our bodily existence has been a common idea in religious thought. No doubt the evil one has used it to lead many to

destroy their own body, or to inflict pain on it as a means of penance. Another strain of thought that has grown out of this idea is that the entire physical realm is the host for evil. As such, it will be destroyed and therefore doesn't matter. So indulge it all, this so-called logic says. Our moral weakness does not grow simply from our physical bodies.

We rightly understand revelation when we see ourselves as being marred by evil in both our material and immaterial beings. The inner being of all, even believers, has been marred and altered by evil. In the believer the Holy Spirit is renewing our inner being, but that work is not completed. Our problem is not our bodies. Evil in us cannot be eliminated by changing just our outward makeup.

It must be emphasized that our bodies are of considerable use to God. Our bodies are what produce deeds, and our deeds shape our world and the deeds of others. In the case of Christians, our deeds shape the Church and the reputation of Christ. They can either validate or invalidate the gospel. They have very real potential. God wishes to capture their potential to bring about all that represents Him. He does this through the Holy Spirit, who leads us to act against sinful thoughts and deeds. Paul calls us to respond to this leading by exterminating such thoughts as these that arise within us in the immaterial part of our being. The result will be that our outer beings can and will bring glory to God (Romans 12:1-2).

3:6 “For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come,”

Paul creates solid linkage between the behaviors he has just listed and the experience of the wrath of God. The NASB has rendered the verb as a futuristic present. This is a legitimate way of understanding it. So certain is the future outpouring of the wrath of God that a present tense is used to express it. There are other ways of understanding this present tense. One is to see God's wrath as something that is already happening (Rom 1:18). Another is to see this as a statement of a spiritual principle, that the wrath of God always comes where these things are present. The clear message is that this behavior is offensive to God and He will respond in wrath, always.

In the writings of Paul we often see him reminding readers of the fact that their old ways are contradictory to all that heaven is seeking to bring about, bless, and foster (Ephesians 5:5-7; Galatians 5:20-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). This is a common idea in the New Testament (Hebrews 6:9-11; 12:16-17). Christians are divided on how to understand such exhortations by the writers of the New Testament. Some say they are warnings that we can lose our standing with God that justification has provided. Simply put, we can lose our salvation. Others say that they provide descriptions of who is really justified and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Their thought is that there are professors of faith, and possessors of it. By this thinking the pattern of one's deeds defines their true spiritual identity. Others say that these statements define who is living in fellowship and harmony with God, and who is not. Those who are living by the prescribed pattern are those who are listening to the Holy Spirit, being blest, who will be rewarded and who should be emulated.

The latter position I believe is the strongest from a biblical and exegetical standpoint. The first of the three positions is the second strongest. The second position has appeal at times to spiritual leaders but relies heavily on a theological system that elevates the sovereignty of God and views our sanctification as predestined. This is a widely held view which gained great influence in Protestantism through the writings of John

Calvin. It seems to me that the alarm that has been sounded that urges restrain against this way of thinking is appropriate for four reasons.

First, this alarm is appropriate because of the presence of so many imperatives, or commands, in the New Testament. The mere fact that the New Testament exists, with its teaching and commands indicate that human reason and decision enter the matter of our sanctification in the view of the various writers. Sanctification moves forward when there is adequate understanding of truth, diligence regarding truth, and willingness to put to death instinctive behaviors.

Second, this alarm is appropriate because there is clearly the issue of stewardship taught in Scripture with judgment's reward and blessing attached. A view that sanctification is predestined makes stewardship and reward or loss also predestined. How could we be regarded as stewards and be accountable for our faithfulness (1 Corinthians 4:1-2), if our response to truth is all predestined?

Third, this alarm is appropriate for philosophical reasons. If God sovereignly acts in our lives irrespective of our wills to create righteous vessels for His own glory, why would He stop short of perfection? It leaves us with the dilemma of the Perfect One sovereignly imposing His will on us and the result being varying degrees of imperfection! Would it not be a greater glory to Him to establish holiness in His children by drawing them to points of legitimate choice? Though the result is mixed and falls short of His perfection, the reason is clearly our fallenness. It would seem that a series of meager victories for holiness in the lives of fallen beings, who can still be legitimately drawn to evil, attests rather loudly to His grace and power.

Fourth, this alarm is appropriate in that this thinking inevitably tends toward a narrow view of sin. Interestingly it often is accompanied by an appropriate view of the depravity of man. Yet it tends to point to victories in visible sins such as carousing, drunkenness, adultery, fornication and the like as proof of the presence of the Spirit. Not living in a pattern of these things is seen as the sign of genuine faith. Where they are "habitually" present, the person's true spiritual identity is called into question. Such a person is seen to be "continuing in sin." But from a biblical point of view continuing in sin must be seen as persisting in acts of self-promotion. Things like manipulation, positioning oneself to gain advantage, the drive to prevail, the hunger for affirmation are the things that the flesh orchestrates in us. Who can say that they do not continue in these things? Our depravity is rooted in our fleshliness, and this fleshly person in us must be crucified continually. It is relatively easy to abstain from certain visible things. Millions are doing so without believing in the gospel. It is another matter to hold in check and put to death the things that are a part of our very essence.

Throughout Paul's writings salvation is presented as more than justification. There is this past aspect to this work of God's grace in us, but there is a present aspect as well. God is saving us through the leading of the Holy Spirit from our fleshly patterns of thought and behavior. This present process of salvation can be compromised and lost by us if we neglect the truth at points of conviction by the Holy Spirit. Paul's reasoning is this; why would anyone want to intentionally lose out on this salvation, this ongoing work of grace in their lives. Why would they take up courses of action that will alienate them from the workings of God all over again?

3:7 “and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them.””

There is emphasis in the Greek text on the fact that they themselves walked in the very things Paul is calling them to die to. This emphasis is made likely so that they will remember well their proclivity to such things. This will equip them to approach their sanctification humbly and persistently. It will keep them from arrogance toward those who still are enslaved to sin.

It is a natural thing to walk in such things when one is living in them. The language is definitive on the Colossians past and could be understood as saying that they lived immersed in the sphere of these things. This is the condition that Paul describes elsewhere as slavery (Romans 6:16-23) and as blindness (2 Corinthians 4:4), and darkened understanding (Ephesians 4:17-19). It is the natural state of all humanity apart from the indwelling Spirit. Paul's writings all agree that such living should be a thing of the past. Yet they all call Christians to set such things aside and to continue to do so (Ephesians 4:20-24; Romans 6:12-23; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Galatians 6:14). These persistent instructions and commands can only mean that there is still real danger that we will slip back into such things if we do not remain alert. They are the things of the past and are the things that account for the wrath of God.

3:8 “But now you also put them all aside; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.”

In the grammar of the previous verse Paul emphasized the personal pronoun “you.” The force of his statement was “You yourselves use to live this way.” In this verse he does much the same. The force of this statement is “You yourselves must put all this off.” There is always unfinished business when it comes to our sanctification. We must stay engaged in the process and take personal responsibility for it.

The command itself is an aorist imperative. The present imperative would indicate that they were already doing this and were to continue doing so. The aorist imperative often expresses action that must be initiated or started. So without reading too much into this, Paul is assuming that there are at least some in Colossae who had not realized that they needed to deal with those things. So Paul makes it very pointed, saying in effect, “This is for you!” He commands them to start out in this new direction.

The word Paul uses to command this action is used six other times in the New Testament. It is a compound word composed of the word meaning to put or place, and the preposition meaning away. Only one time is this word used in a way other than it is used here of putting aside certain sinful behavior. That occasion is at the stoning of Stephen when those involved took off their coats and are said so have placed them at the young man Paul's feet (Acts 7:58). They disrobed in this way so as to throw rocks well! This provides a good mental image of what Paul is commanding here. It is a laying aside of that which can encumber and impede other action that is to be taken. That other action is key. Except for this reference in Acts the word is used throughout Paul's writings and those of the other New Testament writers exclusively for this moral self-judgment that is to occur within believers (Romans 13:12-13; Ephesians 4:22,25; Hebrews 12:1; James 1:21; 1 Peter 2:1). It is an apt illustration of our role in the sanctification process.

To the list given in verse five Paul add these five things. They are elements of behavior that are primarily emotional and particularly destructive to relationships. The first two, anger and wrath, are closely related. There is overlap in their meaning. Wrath can be

seen to be a little more intense and usually is directly associated with acts of anger. We know that anger is not sinful (Ephesians 4:26). It is a legitimate emotion. But it very often leads to sin, inspired only for fleshly reasons. It is the most challenging of human emotions to place under the Spirit's control. In this list it can be seen as that which the rest of the sins listed grow out of.

Malice is ill will that we harbor toward someone. Anger often gives birth to it. It is the desire to see harm or difficulty come to them. It is rejoicing in or in some way feeling satisfied in another's hardship and pain.

Slander is speaking about someone in such a way that others think less of them. It may involve truth or untruth, but the intention is to detract from their reputation. Often the intent is to make oneself look better, or at least to advance one's own interests. Here the word Paul uses is blasphemy. It refers specifically to the activity of vilifying God. For whatever reason this is the frequent pastime of the unregenerate. They freely pontificate on who God is, what He is like, and what He has done. They do so in ignorance and arrogance. This type of rhetoric is to cease among believers. We must not allow our legitimate questioning and search for answers to degenerate into blasphemy. We must not allow our little bit of understanding to answer a matter too quickly and so cast doubt on this character of God. Satan is the great slanderer of God and His children and we must not follow his lead. It is very instructive that God's own family is cautioned here about this sin.

Abusive speech is literally disgraceful or shameful words. It is speech that is intended to produce shame in others for selfish reasons. There is legitimate shame that people need to be guided into and through when they have sinned. But there is much shame produced in people only for the profit of those speaking the words. Such words are usually a symptom of the speaker's pain, but they are not to be excused or dismissed because of this.

All of these things are to be put off, as one would a garment that impeded certain activity. They are related to the old life and served a sordid purpose there. God's power is bent on helping us turn from these destructive things to those things that produce life and forward progress in ourselves and others.

3:9 "Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices."

This is an important verse for two reasons. The first, is the obvious fact that Christianity and salvation is a truth journey. The truth sets us free and so we must protect it at all costs in doctrinal matters but also in practical matters. There really must be great care taken to free ourselves from this well-ingrained human tendency to speak lies.

The second reason this verse is important is a broader issue than the verse's primary subject. It is what it illustrates about the sanctification process. If it is true that the Colossians had "laid aside the old self with its practices," then why did Paul have to give them this command not to lie? If the old self has really been taken off and discarded like a garment, why would there be any deceit practiced? Paul viewed the holiness and purity of the Church through an "already-not-yet" lens. The barrier between God and man that prohibited godliness had already been removed through Christ. The reproduction of the life of Christ in individual believers was not yet completed.

The reproduction of the life of Christ in us begins with belief in Him. That requires us changing our minds about Him. So the essence of belief in Christ is a laying aside of an old way of thinking. Yet these ways of thinking, being instinctive and having become second nature to us, are not totally laid aside. That laying aside is an ongoing battle. To use the imagery of Paul, we keep finding ourselves with these old clothes on! Paul clearly concedes this with this statement. This laying aside is the secondary subject in this verse, but the main thought of the next verse and Paul will linger on it there.

The subject of dealing truthfully with one another cannot be overstated. Fallen humanity takes naturally to sin, and then engages in deceit to cover it up. As the Holy Spirit's work progresses in Christians there are sinful habits that are long standing that must be broken, but the practice of lying is an exceptional stronghold. The lie becomes a means to us of advancing all our self-interests. Through it we can bring about everything from material wealth to the affirmation of friends. It becomes the preferred shortcut to save us from work, from punishment, from rejection, from financial cost, and from confession of sin and guilt. It keeps us from transparency and true friendship and from spiritual power. We adopt at an early age this shortcut, then are stuck with its realities and the difficulty of escaping its clutches. Managing its mess becomes impossible and the sooner we allow its fantasies to collapse the more freedom we allow the Spirit to bring true transformation to our lives.

The power of lies is deceptive. All the power of heaven is aimed against it. It is short-lived in terms of its intended result (Proverbs 12:19; 21:6). It is long-lived in the work it does within the liar (Proverbs 20:12). Lying makes us overly concerned about the words of others because we are in the habit of over-estimating the power of our own lies (Proverbs 17:4). It is a habit that becomes a terrible scourge in terms of one's reputation (Proverbs 19:22).

When Paul tells us not to lie he gives us advice that will add greatly to the power of our lives, greatly reduce the stress and complexity of them, add considerably to the durability of our relationships, and lead to a more thorough understanding of truth. We are set free by distancing ourselves from all that is a lie.

3:10 “and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.”

There are a few big ideas woven together in this verse. There is the concept of the new self, the renewal or sanctification of the believer. There is something called “true knowledge.” Then there is the image of God. Each of those ideas deserve their own treatise, and each has elements that lie just a little beyond our understanding. This compressed statement of the complexities of our new birth was especially appropriate to readers who were being seduced by those who claimed higher powers of intellect and deep understanding of hidden mysteries. There is no deeper mystery than the mystery of Christ stirring within us and being formed in us (Colossians 1:27). There is nothing which is more difficult to grasp with one's intellect yet is so plainly true in God's revelation of His workings in humanity (John 3:8).

One of the complexities of the new birth is captured by Paul's presentation here of this new self, which we have both put on and not put on. As stated earlier, this work is seen by the New Testament writers as an “already, not yet” proposition. It is done in the sense of its organic reality. Our spirits are joined to God's, and that is unchangeable. It is not done in terms of all the effects and results God wishes to bring about. So it is true that through belief in the gospel we are new people. There has

been a mysterious miraculous shift in our essential makeup. It is also true that we do not have the entire package that God intends to deliver to us. So we have put on this new identity, we must put it on, and we will put it on. All of those statements are true.

Because of this it is proper to view our new self as a work in progress. Paul's words reflect that and describe it. This new self is being renewed. Paul is presenting this as ongoing, continuing action in which we are being acted upon. We can view this as reclamation, as one might take desert land and through sound agricultural practices make it produce crops. People who once were slaves to sin are being made into those who increasingly serve the purposes of God (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Paul then describes the end towards which this mysterious work is taking us. He uses two terms to set forth our destination. The first we see in the words "to a true knowledge." This is what is referred to as a result clause in Greek grammar, prefaced by the preposition εἰς. It describes the destination towards which an action is working. In this case that destination is called "true knowledge." This is significant in the context of the church of Colossae. It is important to remind ourselves that these readers were being enticed by false teachers claiming to have true and secret knowledge of all things spiritual. Paul assures the readers that they themselves, through new birth are on the pathway to such true knowledge. They need search nowhere else. They were organically linked to the source of every reality--spiritual, physical, and beyond.

Throughout Paul's writings he speaks of a certain "knowledge" God desires to bring His people to (Romans 10:20; Ephesians 1:17; 4:13; Philippians 1:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). It is clearly not just arrived at through normal search and reason (2 Timothy 3:17). Neither is it devoid of these or grasped and comprehended apart from the exercise of normal thought processes. It can be deduced from the above references that *Επινωσις* is the term Paul uses when he wishes to refer to the understanding that is sourced in and harmonizes with truth as God's Spirit reveals it. It is knowledge that can only be obtained through the work of the Holy Spirit, yet still comes through things like instruction and the study of written words. This is because it refers to both mental comprehension and belief or faith. Many knew Christ died. Few understood God's purpose in that event and believed. Few believed the empty tomb proved that a few ideas could now be embraced as factual data. Such a transition from the mere absorption of information to the perception that it is to be believed and embraced is the work of the Holy Spirit of God.

The arrival at this point of both mental and spiritual perception and the ensuing growth in it is what Paul calls true knowledge. Elsewhere it is called wisdom. It can be understood as the result of the leading of the Holy Spirit in the mind of a willing participant. The result is knowledge that continually harmonizes itself with what can be known of God. It is dynamic due to the presence of the Holy Spirit and the progressive nature of mental processes. So it is ever-expanding and increasingly complex, just as all fields of intellectual pursuit are. It is moving us toward a realm of knowledge that transcends our present capacities (1 Corinthians 13:9-12). This true knowledge is the first expression used by Paul in this verse to describe the end toward which our renewal is taking us.

The second expression Paul uses to describe the end toward which this mysterious work of God is taking us is found in the words "according to the image of the One who created him." This expression clearly names God as the Creator of our new self and His image, or likeness, as that which we are being conformed to. We were created originally in God's image, for the purpose of ruling over Yahweh's creation. As his image-bearers we were perfectly related to God, to creation, and to each other. When

Adam chose evil that image of God was marred in us. The glory of it was diminished. We still bore God's image in a kind of structural sense. We were sentient beings, capable of more complex emotional relationships, cognizant of good and evil, with capacity for many intellectual and practical pursuits. But His image was lost in us in the functional sense. We no longer functioned in concert with Him. We began to use our God-given abilities to our own purpose and advantage. This had deep negative impact on all of creation. We retained much of our power to rule, but our goodness was lost and our rule became twisted and tyrannical, hopelessly manipulated by the evil one.

It is this that God has set about to reclaim. That is the goal of redemption. He will restore in all who believe His image and convey to them the right to rule over His creation with His Anointed One (Hebrews 12:28; James 2:5; 2 Peter 1:11; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:4-6). The new self that we are as a result of the indwelling Spirit is the beginning or first stage of this work of redemption. This is the first installment in His plan to take back His creation (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Compressed into this single verse are all these watershed ideas and concepts. It is a reminder from Paul of the all-encompassing movement of which we are a part. It is a reminder not to squander this truth that is so grand, to embrace what are only the imaginings of fallen humanity in the religious, pseudo-spirituality of passing eras.

3:11 “a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all.”

God's salvation, with its eventuality of the full restoration of the image of God to man, knows no ethnic or cultural boundary. In all who believe it moves forward and it does so contingent only on their faithfulness to Christ. There is no greater or lesser experience of Christ that comes about for any other reason. Paul's words are very clear. Though the NASB has added the words “no distinction between,” they clearly capture the force of Paul's words. So in the main body of this verse Paul names quite a number of differences that we observe in members of God's family. None of this warrant distinction. Advantages or disadvantages assigned by culture have no bearing on the creative work God is bringing about. Having given this list of some of the classic labels, and likely even stereotypes of the day, Paul adds a powerful statement of the common experience of the person of Christ that cuts across all such lines. This person Jesus, whom Paul has presented as the Creator and Sustainer of all that is, for whose pleasure all things exist, this one who IS all, is IN all who are believers. All of who He is, is within the being of all who believe. There has been on His part no holding back of Himself to anyone. To all who come, the whole of Him He gives. The full experience of the renewal of the inner being is made freely available to all. The justice of God allows Him to do it no other way.

Now none of this means that all diversity within the body of Christ will disappear. There is great diversity in terms of function, which the metaphor of the body clearly teaches. There are teachers, and there are students. There are leaders, and there are those who are to submit to them. There are those whose speech provides the words of God and there are those whose deeds provide the acts of God (1 Peter 4:10-11). In this diversity there is no inequality. We must embrace that. There must be no arrogance on the part of those who from a fleshly point of view are “gifted,” and there must be no covetousness or clamoring for attention on the part of those who are called to quietly serve. There is no distinction in value and worth and no distinction in

the degree to which each experiences Christ and reveals Christ to others. All such distinction we feel or impose is a result of our fallenness.

This equality with distinct difference in function is modeled within the persons of the Godhead. There is the sovereign authority of the Father and the submission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is the invisibility of the Father and the Spirit and the visible glory and charisma of the Son. All are equally God, but there is a constant deferring to the roles of each other, specific boundaries that govern their ability, and even the degree of worship they receive.

Though there is the absolute equality that this verse teaches in the love and presence of Christ that is undeniable, what do we make of the difference we observe in the experience of Christ? How is it that some become quite mature and seasoned in Christ while others make very little progress? Some within Christianity seek to explain this as the result of God's sovereign acts. Their thought is that God wills it thus, and extends different measures of grace to all based on His own plan and desire. While this is certainly within His power and right, it is not taught in the Scripture. Such discrepancies in experience are always explained in Scripture by disobedience, and a lapse in stewardship (2 Peter 1:3-11; 1 Timothy 4:15-16; 2 Timothy 2:20-21; Titus 3:8). As stated earlier, differences in the experience of Christ can only be explained by the differences in faithfulness to the truth which comes about by the free choice of individuals.

3:12 “And so, as those who have been chosen by God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience;”

The new self involves the character of Christ and the character of Christ includes a number of inner qualities that shape one's relationships with others. This new self or new identity that we who believe have is a creation of God. Our former self was shaped by the mixture of evil and good in both ourselves and others. There were forces that shaped us that were cruel and heartless. The result of that pain is that several of our capacities and functions we have switched off in the interest of self-preservation.

Those who believe have been chosen by God to be lifted out of this entropy and living death. They are holy, meaning set apart for a special use, no longer ordinary. God wishes to demonstrate in their beings His love and goodness. And so He joins Himself to their innermost being, their spirit, and begins to initiate within them actions that are starkly different from what they have been caught up in.

It is important for believers to respond to the impulses of God's Spirit from within them. And so we often see lists in Scripture like this one in this verse that describe impulses that are of the Spirit. We also see in other places list of impulses that are not of the Spirit. We are use to following inner impulses. The key now is to discern these that are of God and deny those that are of the old self. This is what Paul is referring to when he commands us to put on a “heart” of certain things. The verb he uses is “to clothe.” The word that the NASB renders “heart” is the word for one's internal organs or entrails, the source in the ancient's mind of our emotions. Our colloquial expression would be “heart” as in many English versions. Where we have had the inclination to live “heartlessly” regarding others, thinking only of ourselves, we are now being led of God to be tender-hearted. The words that describe this new inner self capture this.

Where we have been indifferent, we are being called to be compassionate. The word means pity or mercy. It is used both of legal mercy and of this kind of relational mercy. Rather than a “they got what they deserved” mentality we are to be people who feel mercy even as we have experienced it from God. Ours should be a heightened awareness of God’s mercy and we should pray for it in behalf of others and dispense it where we have capacity.

We are to have a heart of kindness. This word comes from a word that means employed or useful, as opposed to that which was useless or someone that was idle. It came to be used of those who did deeds that were of practical use to others, which met a specific need. We are to foster those leadings in us that urge us to be engaged with others to the point of acting to meet real needs.

The word often used in Scripture for humility is depressed. It is to be understood not in its common present-day sense of being depressed emotionally, but in its socio-economic sense. It is a figurative expression for that mentality that is devoid of arrogance, loftiness, and any sense of status or entitlement. Now in our era these do not necessarily come with poverty, and I suspect that has always been true. But the word took on this meaning of what we call humility by way of its more literal use as a term for the under-privileged. The Spirit gives us impulses that relate to our poverty of character apart from Christ. Our eyes are opened through His work in us to the depth of our need. The longer we walk in the Spirit the more pronounced our self-awareness and less our self-centeredness. This is the humility God desires us to be clothed with and we cloth ourselves with it as we look at the truth about us through the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It draws us to a deeper mode of servant-hood.

There are several different Greek words that are rendered by the English word “gentle” in New Testament translations. This word means mild. It refers to the ancient concept of meekness that ability to function in the golden mean. It is having the right emotion and just the right amount of it. It is to have overcome our more natural tendency to be reactionary or to suppress emotion entirely. The Spirit of God is not making us less emotional. But He is seeking to impart to us the capability to act with the emotion of a particular situation, and not import to it other emotion. He builds in us skill at expressing emotion so that it has spiritual impact. This is the journey involved in clothing ourselves with what is called in the NASB “gentleness.”

The spirit is also leading us in the way of patience. The word means long-suffering. It refers to one who can endure pain and discomfort for a long time. Patient people can delay for a long while their own gratification. They don’t need immediate, tangible results. They can endure a process and can live with uncertainty. To be truly used of God one must be able to endure misunderstanding, criticism, periods of little movement, even times of backward movement. It is a shallow understanding of Scripture, of Christian history, of the spiritual realm, and of God that expects otherwise. But to expect all to go well and to equate blessing with forward movement is instinctive in us. We must clothe ourselves with patience and this comes through the more precise understanding imparted by the Holy Spirit and actual Christian experience. It is a fleshly man who must have progress to continue in the life and work of God.

These things we are to wear like clothes. We are to put them on as intentionally as we clothe ourselves each morning. We are to check their condition as we do that of our clothes. We are to consult the mirror of Scripture and the opinion of others rather than just assuming their presence and condition.

3:13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

This verse describes behavior that grows out of the attitudes that we are to clothe ourselves with. Paul gives this example of how the inner work of the Holy Spirit, if we are fostering it in our lives, demonstrates itself in the Church. That he feels the need to prescribe this clothing of ourselves and the accompanying actions show that we have a role and responsibility in this matter. We cannot expect this transformation to happen against our will or apart from some practical choices on our part.

To bear with someone is to have a realistic expectation of them, and then to allow extra margin. It is to remember that they are fallen human beings. It is to remember that they are in process in their personal journey toward completeness. In the close relationships that characterize the Church, we will see each other's incompleteness. Paul gives instruction as to how we are to respond when we do see it. It is Paul's expectation that legitimate complaints will arise.

The word for “bearing with” is composed of the word “to have” combined with the word for again. It suggests repetition. Relationships are not supposed to be terminated on the basis of a single failure. There are other passages that deal with how failures are to be addressed. But here the idea is that we should not allow such things to destroy our fellowship by leading us to withdraw, to become bitter or disillusioned. Reconciliation should trump separation. There should be in the right sense an expectation of shortfall a multiple chance mentality. Such extension of grace toward each other is captured in the word Paul uses that is rendered “forgive.” It is formed from the word for grace and we could understand it simply as an exhortation to extend grace. It means to deal generously with, to release, to cancel a debt (Luke 7:42-43). So the extension of grace toward each other is to mark our fellowship.

As always, God's forgiveness of us should inspire forgiveness on our part toward others. No matter what the offense, we will be able to find in ourselves the germ that leads to such behavior if we are honest. The germ of vileness is in each of us. Such things in us motivated God to extend grace not withhold it. Forgiveness was the way He chose to address our fallenness and addressing it He is through the blood of Christ and the ensuing union of our spirits with His. The one who does not extend forgiveness is either not forgiven or has not really come to an understanding of the scope of God's forgiveness of them. Forgiveness is the unmistakable mark of those who are experiencing the forgiveness of God (Matthew 18:35; Matthew 6:14; Mark 11:26; James 2:13). So in Christian fellowship we will find numerous opportunities to justly be hurt, to be offended, and to withdraw. There is no ideal laid down in Scripture that warrants any other expectation. When we experience that which gives rise to complaint, we should be thankful that God's love drives Him to satisfy out of his own resources the demands of His justice. We should walk in His steps.

3:14 “And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”

Paul continues to use the metaphor introduced in verse 12 of putting on clothes. Believers are represented as embracing certain behaviors just as one puts on certain clothes. These “clothes” become who they are and like a uniform identify them as being a part of God's new creation. In that imagery love is represented here as the outer garment, the thing which goes on over everything else which then binds them all together. The word “beyond” could be rendered “over,” which fits the metaphor of the context more precisely. Love becomes like the outer garment, the thing seen that

makes the first impression. It remains the thing seen and impresses itself on the memory and appears in the mental image others carry of us when we are not present. It is the consistent message of the New Testament is that we should be known for love (John 13:34; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 Peter 4:8; 1 John 3:18-20; 4:7-8, 20-21).

Love is said to be the “bond of completeness” here. The word rendered bond is formed from the preposition “together with” and the word for wrap. Again, in the imagery of the outer garment it is what finishes the process of getting dressed. Apart from this one is not completely clothed. Until others see us love, we have not completely shown them Christ and our faith.

To twenty first century Americans, we wait to display love and the other qualities mentioned in this context until we feel them. They tend to come and go, ebb and flow in us. The language of Paul conveys something we initiate very intentionally. It is not a feeling but a course of actions and behavior that we deliberately engage ourselves in.

3:15 “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

The Shalom of Yahweh can be understood as a principle by which we are to govern and judge our lives. It is a product first of belief. We are called to believe that His covenant with us demonstrates His unwavering, unconditional love for us. It demonstrates that He is continually and forever watching over us for good (Gen. 15; Exodus 2:23-25). We can rest and know for certain that our ultimate good is assured. Faith is this activity of assuring and composing our inner beings against the feeling that all they have is what they have (2 Kings 6:15-19). So the shalom of Yahweh is second of all a product of this intentional recalling/worshipping of who He is, and in particular how He has chosen to relate Himself in covenant to us (1 Samuel 17:26). It is taking what faith has led us to believe and viewing the present moment in light of it. Third it is taking appropriate action in that situation. It is seizing that moment and shaping it as God wants it shaped (1 Samuel 17:45-49). The shalom of Yahweh does not lead to inactivity a kind of resignation that simply watches to see IF He does something. It leads to action that He blesses and multiplies.

The activity of ruling our hearts in this way is very important in the mind and heart of God. The cause of Israel's wanderings and a generation's loss of the experience of entering the promised land was the failure to let the peace of God as described above, rule their hearts (Exodus 14:10-15; 15:22-26; 16:1-12, 17-21, 25-28; 17:1-7; 32:1-14; Numbers 11:1-15; 12:1-15; 14:1-12, 22). Their judgment was clearly pronounced and specified as springing from this repeated offense in Numbers 14:20-35. The writer to the Hebrews would articulate this failure to view wilderness situations through the lens of revelation and so to respond in faith action (Hebrews 3:14-4:2). It is a failure of faith to follow in their steps and doubt God's watching over us for good.

For us to say that the peace of Christ rules our hearts, we must be able to see that real life situations are being transformed for us. The paralysis of emotions like anxiety, intimidation, or just discomfort must be over-ruled by a belief in God's unwavering goodness that sees the thing differently and motivates action that is aligned with His purpose. That is evidence that we are letting Yahweh's shalom rule our hearts.

There is something that either comes about in one's life or is entirely missed based on obedience to this idea. It is illustrated in the history of Israel at the giving of the Law. In the initial phases of this revelation at Mt. Sinai, the people were kept from the

presence of Yahweh (Exodus 19:1-25). This was done no doubt to impress upon them his holiness, Moses' privileged status, and that of the Levites as well. It also showed that there was a prescribed way sinful humanity could relate to God, but it had to be known and followed precisely. It appears however, that this latter understanding never was embraced by the masses of Israel, ever. The thunder and lightning thoroughly frightened them, but they never embraced the entire context of the occasion, that Yahweh wanted to meet with them and embrace them as His own. And so they actually did not want to personally speak with God, but wanted Moses to handle that and report to them (Exodus 10:18-20; Deuteronomy 5:5). Some suggest this may be THE transgression that brought about the giving of the Law with its intermediary nature (Galatians 3:19). They suggest that in this act Israel demonstrated the great depravity of humanity—a lack of ability, aptitude, willingness and faith to accept the love of God and to desire to relate to such a One.

This may be an accurate assessment and interpretation of the testimony of Scripture. This much is certain from Israel's example. We must arrive at a point where we absolutely trust God's goodness. This is the distinguishing mark of all the great people of faith in the Scripture (2 Samuel 12:15-23; 24:10-17). We are told to be thankful. That is great advice in light of all that is being commanded in the first part of the verse. Grumbling and complaining is the symptom that tells us the peace of God is not ruling our hearts. When we feel complaint arising thanksgiving is the anecdote, as it is for anxiety (Philippians 4:6-7). It is the practical activity we can engage in that will help us rule over our inner being and keep ourselves from falling away from God's will in the moment. If we find ourselves not experiencing God's peace, we will be able to trace it to a moment or season we did not give thanks.

3:16 “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thanksgiving in your hearts to God.”

Christ was the Word of God incarnate in human flesh. His words, actions, and attitudes were always the perfect manifestation of God, because He was God (John 14:9-11). The word of Christ here means the message as the apostles were delivering it about Christ, including His teachings, the message of the Scriptures about Him and His work in behalf of the salvation of humanity.

We are to make a home within ourselves for this message of Christ. The word dwell is formed from the preposition “in,” and the noun “house.” All the thought that would be given to making a house suitable and serviceable for one's family should be given to making a place within us for the message of truth to reside. That figure allows much for contemplation. An adverb is added that gives it even more profound meaning, the adverb “richly.” The provision we make for the truth in us is not to be marginalized. To put it on colloquial terms, truth is not to be made to live in a cardboard box when other things reside in affluence and luxury. It is to be given the most desirable of conditions, marked by power and influence. To not give truth a home in us is to live like fools. When enough individuals marginalize this place of truth, the Church is no longer a place of wisdom.

Christ is so complete that to grasp Him is to have all wisdom. That wisdom then becomes the basis for all that happens between members of the local church. Those relationships become the source by which spiritual growth is leveraged and compounded. Paul describes such an environment in the last half of this verse.

With all the wisdom gained through the presence of Christ in us we are to teach and admonish each other. Every Christian needs to be taught. Truth assumes information, cognitive facts that we need to know and understand. Perspectives shared with each other on truth open the door of our minds to more truth. There is formal teaching that occurs from “upfront” in a church, then there is the practical instructions we gain from reciting truth with each other. The latter is what Paul is addressing here, as we will see from the media he speaks of.

Every Christian needs to be admonished as well. The word admonish is formed by combining the word for “mind” with the word for “to put” or “to place.” In the process of living life it is easy to forget the message of Christ or to fail to see its application in some practical situation, or to ignore it. And so we must be admonished. We must have an openness to truth as we speak of it together with the implications of the truth in our lives. By speaking the truth of Christ together with open hearts decisions are forced upon us, and that is good. We are kept from deceiving ourselves or being deceived. Many Christians prefer the formal classroom, or the electronic church, where they observe. Less participation means admonishment is not specific to them. Accountability is the last thing to be part of an environment where we are being taught and admonished in all wisdom.

The media Paul mentions here are surprising. They are Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We might expect small groups and discussion or one-on-one conversations. The early Church embraced the value of corporate activity, of listening to the single voice and message of the congregation as they spoke of truth. It is a powerful media if attended to with an open heart. It can become meaningless routine, done on “automatic pilot.” It can be done with individual fulfillment and pleasure in mind. To approach worship as God speaking to us corporately through the voices of one another is a whole different experience.

Psalms were, we believe, songs recorded in the Old Testament that relate to common life experiences the truth about Yahweh. Hymns, we believe, were songs of a more contemporary nature that were shared by churches of the day. We believe there are some examples of these quoted in the New Testament (1 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; Ephesians 5:14). The term “spiritual songs” is a little more difficult to explain. It could be a reference to special songs that tended to spring up inside individual churches. It could be that the term “spiritual” means that there were non-musical expressions that were songs to the Lord as He heard them. There is no end to the speculation that this term can drive. Its precise meaning, clear to the readers, is lost to us. All of these media were to be characterized by a singing to one another. It was not a singing to oneself whereby one receives pleasure and enjoyment. There was ministry through the corporate voice.

Yet at the same time there is the individual activity mentioned here and going on simultaneously. There is this singing in your hearts with thanksgiving, or with grace to the Lord. The word order of the phrase in the Greek text is this, “with grace singing in your hearts to the Lord.” So Paul wants our hearts engaged during our singing. So often corporate worship becomes about the singing. Paul wants us to be singing out of hearts that feel what we sing. A heart of gratitude gives our worship meaning to those who watch from heaven. There may also be in these words the idea of a constant singing within to God through the course of any day. Since Paul clearly spoke of addressing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to one another earlier in the verse, that is the primary way in which we should see these verses. But the activity he calls for flows from hearts in which there is this lifestyle of inner praise. Our songs to each other flow out of lives filled with songs.

3:17 “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”

Too often the Christian life becomes a series of things we do that occupy a slot in our schedule. It is almost like we keep them in a silo where we enter and practice them and then leave until our next scheduled time in the silo. There is little felt by us or seen by others outside that silo. It is not Christianity we are practicing as we do this. Christianity is life lived according to the moment-by-moment leadings and urgings of the Holy Spirit. To confine it to certain compartments of our lives smothers it. Our faith is meant to be invasive. And so Paul says “Whatever you do in word or deed.” He is saying that this faith is to always shape us. In all the various activities imposed on us or chosen by us there is to be this grander purpose that is fulfilled in them and we are to see to that.

This grander purpose will be seen to be the same as the grand purpose of all that God has planned. It is the end to which all He has made and orchestrated points and will arrive. To embrace it is to be in absolute harmony with His movement. It is stated here as doing all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. Now, what does it mean to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus? It must be more than a formal pronouncement before, after, or during the activity. How does one go about obeying and implementing this?

We know that to God names were very important. They stated something about His plan for a person (Matthew 1:21), for a situation or era (Hosea 1:2-9), for the person’s nature or character (Genesis 32:28). When He chose a name for Himself He chose one that would state His uniqueness (Exodus 3:13-14). This practice of God was embraced by parents who chose names that made statements about the times (1 Samuel 4:21), about circumstances in the birth (1 Samuel 1:20), and about what they thought they might know about the nature of the child (Genesis 25:25-26). Doing something in the name of the Lord Jesus then likely includes doing it in a way that is consistent with His character and His heart. It is doing it in a way that is representative of who He is. Doing something in the name of someone also carries with it the idea of representing their will and mind. It is consistent with the idea that we are the body of Christ, the visible entity in this world that speaks to the world about who He is. So to do something in His name is to do it in His way rather than ours. It is to view ourselves as on a mission of representation and diplomacy in which we have no personal voice, but must represent accurately and clearly the intent and will of the One we represent.

In some cases, including this one, doing something in someone’s name means carrying out their authority. There is a spiritual authority that we are to exercise in behalf of Christ. It is exercised in behalf of His children and against the evil one and those that serve his purposes. This idea is conveyed to Peter in the well-known statement of Jesus that the gates of Hell would not prevail against the community of those who embraced Peter’s confession of Christ (Matthew 16:18).

So this statement to do everything in the name of Christ means to do it in a Christ-like manner, to represent His will and heart in doing it, and to see it through against all authority that opposes it. As we look at this we see it is the equivalent of doing all things for God’s glory, the ultimate end toward which He is taking all that is (Psalm 46:10; Isaiah 45:4-5, 20-25; Habakkuk 2:13-14; 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 3:10). It is the grand theme of the ages (See commentary on Philippians 4:20).

We are to give thanks through Christ to God as we do all things. Thankfulness is to pervade all that we do. Grateful people are healthy people and people of impact. There is no higher motivation for thanksgiving imaginable than an understanding of the blessings of Yahweh that come to His covenant people. We must approach thanksgiving as a discipline, and if we do we will easily be caught up in it. It will very quickly become the more emotional, spontaneous offering we think it should be. The act of giving thanks has enormous power to change one's outlook and emotional deportment. It not only changes moods, it strengthens faith and so transforms life goals and ambitions.

3:18 "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."

Having commanded us to represent Christ in all that we do, Paul gives some practical examples of how this is realized in the normal relationships of life. When one thinks of the character of Christ a dominant element of it was and is submission. And so what follows this call to Christ-likeness is a string of commands that involve submission. One's ability to voluntarily submit will largely determine the degree to which they are a fragrance of Christ to God (2 Corinthians 2:15).

The phrase "as is fitting in the Lord" in this command to wives is congruent with the idea of doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. Etymologically, the word fitting means to be present again. It is easy to see how it came to speak of what is repeatedly done. It conveys the expectation, the norm, what is both proper and appropriate. The idea is that in wives who are united in spirit to Christ, this attitude of submission is the thing expected to be seen. Submission to one's husband is a byproduct of union with Christ.

This command is repeated throughout the New Testament (Ephesians 5:22; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1). In Paul's thought the headship of the husband was rooted in creation and was a matter of God's design not a consequence of the fall (1 Timothy 2:13). There is diverse thought on this subject within the body of Christ. There are those who believe that this was a consequence of the fall and that all such boundaries are removed in Christ. Galatians 3:28 does speak to the fact that in Christ there is no male or female. But such a radical interpretation of that verse doesn't harmonize with the simple statement here that such submission is appropriate, or fitting "in the Lord."

This command to wives for submissiveness must always be viewed in the context of the overall marriage model being commanded. Strictly speaking, that model allows no potential for abuse, or indignity, because of what husbands are commanded to do. The command to wives cannot be taken in isolation. It must be seen as part of the delicate balance that two Spirit-filled people pursue. Apart from the element of Spirit inspired holiness it will, without question, degenerate into an unholy mess. There is no way to successfully impose holiness on unholy people. The problem that has emerged in nearly every culture has been that physically stronger men thinking independent of God's Spirit, have imposed this portion of God's directive on their wives, while ignoring the portion of the model that is directed at them. Women have understandably resisted and fought this injustice. This degeneration in God's order was predicted by God in His words to Eve after the fall (Genesis 3:16). To preach submission of the wife alone is to provide fertile ground for injustice, though it must be added that submission is advised to wives in Scripture as a means of bringing their husbands to faith (1 Peter 3:1-2).

This command is addressed to wives who are to submit themselves to their husbands. There is never the idea taught in Scripture that husbands are to subject their wives. It is not going to accomplish what it is supposed to unless it is a voluntary submission, and this is why the command is given to the wives.

The expression of this submission has varied always from culture to culture and in different eras of history. In some cultures, it has been radical, so that women are denied education and legal rights. It has likely never really been right. Again, it should be a free voluntary mindset, as it is within the Godhead. It should not involve what infers inferiority or marginalizes worth. It should not involve whimsical, arbitrary action to gratify male ego. Here is why. Christ should cleanse us as people from all the abusive and relationally destructive things that sin produces. This fragrance of Christ should be evident first and foremost in the marriage relationship. There should be evidence of the beauty of the new creation demonstrated by Christian marriage, and this beauty will be most evident if there is a safe trust between husband and wife. Their affection and respect toward each other should remove the arbitrary and abrupt tone a relationship involving headship and submission can take on. Again, the kind of submission being called for is practiced within the Trinity (John 5:19; 13:49; Philippians 2:5-11).

The fact that the precise outworking of this command is seldom present does not make the command irrelevant. We have clear responsibility to God in this matter. Within Christianity in every era is the responsibility for us to strengthen one another so that orderly homes and healthy marriages are the rule.

Now, if we return in our minds to the beginning of it all, what exactly is it that God has asked men to “head up?” The grand task God envisioned enabling men to do was to rule over His creation on the earth (Genesis 1:26). The actual creation of humanity was to create a partnership between the Creator and this species which was distinct from the rest of the creatures He had created. The detailed account of the creation of humanity in Genesis 2 reveals that the man was created first, and his first task was the cultivation and care of the gigantic garden God had planted. We don’t know what exactly that task involved, either its literal implication or the metaphorical implication that may be involved in it. The sheer immensity of the task of ruling creation necessitated reproduction of humanity. There had to be more humans to bring about what God wanted on this earth. The second major task we see Adam undertake before Eve is created is the task of naming all the animals. God, the account says, formed these creatures and brought them to Adam for naming. God delegated this job to Adam, and whatever Adam called them, that became their name (Genesis 2:19). It is in doing this simple job that it became apparent that each animal had its uniqueness, and each had its mate, but none of these creatures could assist Adam in this task of ruling creation. While there could be a level of companionship in the company of many animals, and likely even the possibility of harnessing their power, among them all there was not a being that could help the actual leadership and rule that was Adam’s role. And no reproduction could happen, something the envisioned role God had given man necessitated. It was at this point that God made woman. Genetically she was the same, yet different. She was the same species, so that there was great similarity. But she was different at the same time in every way. Adam recognized the similarity when God brought her before him as He had the rest of the creatures He had created. She was like him. She was, by God’s design “suitable.” That word means that she “corresponded” to Him, meaning she was similar but different in a complimentary way. She was like a missing piece of the whole. Together they bore the image of God.

It is together they were seen by God as humanity, who would rule over His creation. This is the purpose of humanity that every male was to be occupied with. It is not that women are observers in this. They are essential to the process. The role of helper does not mean that their task is non-essential. It is not that man could do it, it would just take a little more of his time and effort. And it is not just a matter of reproduction, though that is a factor in the will of God for the planet and obviously cannot be ignored. Woman would contribute a perspective, an equally essential and valuable one, to that of the male so that balance could be achieved in the rule as God inspired them together.

The image of God would be visible in couples all over the world, each a little different. There was likely not intended to be a stereotypical male and female. Each would be different and so each couple would be different, and the headship and submission roles would be worked out a little different. But the headship role was shouldered by man who reflected the role of God the Father in the relationships of the Godhead. The woman was to become the helper, reflecting the role of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead. So together they bore the image of God, in that there was this headship and submission among persons of like essence.

At this point, before evil, it was likely not an “authority” issue any more than it is within the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It just was. It all happened very naturally, and it all happened very safely in the beginning. Obviously there never came to be other couples who experienced marriage like this or relationship with God like Adam and Eve. Evil entered the human stream and the marriage relationship must now be lived with an entirely different set of circumstances and challenges. The concept of submission in general raises many fear and goes against many instincts. Like virtually all of what God desires us to do and be, this has become problematic.

At the practical level of the actual marriage relationship, what does God have in mind when He speaks of the headship of a husband and the submission of the wife? It seems that first and foremost He desires men to know and understand His grand vision and destination for their lives. By know we are not suggesting a perfect knowledge, but a direction to head in, a path. God desires to impart to husbands a sense of calling and purpose regarding their niche in the plan of God. So Adam existed for a time before Eve and exercised God’s rule over creation without her, and likely learned his need for her in that relatively short period of time. After the fall of humanity men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Isaiah all developed with God a sense of calling and purpose that they had to set out and pursue. In joining herself to a husband this is the first thing a wife is to submit to. She is to embrace his understanding of the call of God in his life. God will use her to help him know and refine that mission. But in the end submission involves the all-out embrace of the mission God has put in the heart of the husband.

A second thing involved in submission would be for a wife to dedicate her own abilities to advance that mission. This is where the submission of wives can take on very diverse looks. The activity or tasks of the wife are irrelevant to submission. It can mean everything from being a CEO of the family business to running errands. What she does relates to who she is by temperament and by giftedness. Submission is the dedication of one’s strengths, whatever they are, to the advance of the mission God has called the husband to. Too often we have seen submission as certain kinds of activity. And so at times it has been thought that women should not manage the family’s financial affairs or make the decisions on the house they should buy. The reality is that a wife may be more anointed and empowered of God in all of these areas and may have been put in the husband’s life because his gifting gave him no

capacity for these things. The key thing in the actual activity engaged in by both husband and wife is how God has made them. Infinite combinations are possible.

We must understand that the role of the wife is not to be defined as submission. It is to be defined as being a suitable or appropriate and complimentary helper to the husband in the task of ruling the creation of God. They carry out that rule together. Submission is commanded by Paul because it facilitates this mission, not because it IS the mission. It is “fitting in the Lord.” It jells with what He is doing. That is true of virtually every command given in Scripture. The end that is in view in each case is the grand purpose of God.

We are seeing several cases where the Spirit seems to be energizing wives for a more public and visible role than their husbands. There need not be any contradiction in this with the concept of male headship in the home. It is certain that there can be. But that is true of any model or situation. It takes a special man and a special woman, but it is a road that can be traveled without contradiction. Headship and submission should be worked out in each individual marriage, and they will look a little different in each, depending on how God has designed both people.

3:19 “Husbands love your wives, and do not be embittered against them.”

The headship of the husband in the home is to be founded on love, ruled by love, evaluated by the standard of love, and is authenticated when it produces an atmosphere of love. That is not an overstatement of the testimony of Scripture. Paul makes that clear by his statement in Ephesians 5:25 where he writes that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the Church. In theory, this removes all the practical pitfalls of male headship, because it removes any excuse or basis for self-centeredness on the part of husbands. But this also brings into focus the problem historically in male headship and explains why it has resulted in widespread abuse and injustice. Apart from Christ-likeness in the husband, submission will degenerate into servitude for wives.

In virtually every passage in the New Testament that speaks to a man’s role as a husband, there is the charge to love. Headship and love are inseparably linked. Love is a verb. It calls husbands to actions of a certain kind. It demands more than expressions of love on certain occasions, more than cards, gifts, and more than normal provision of necessities and niceties.

Love means dying to self. If a man wishes to succeed at the command to love his wife he must constantly work at needing less for himself of affirmation, of status, of comfort, of things. Jesus modeled this death to self in Gethsemane before His physical death. Once He died to Himself in that garden and won the final internal battle to pursue God’s will not His own, He ran toward the cross without a word. In that He modeled the journey that every husband is to take. Gethsemanes, many of them, are what makes a man the head of his home, what makes a home Christian in the true sense, and what makes a home strong, good, healthy, and all of the things we tend to envy. It is this simple in terms of formula, and this complex in terms of its outworking.

Pursuing love in this way, in dying to one’s own self as Christ did, is what makes a person safe as a leader. It makes husbands safe as heads of households. It requires diligence in all spiritual matters, from learning to discern the leading of the Spirit to simple Church attendance. It involves more than leading prayers or Bible readings in

one's home. These are religious activities. They require nothing more from us than scheduling. They are good but are not the essence of the matter.

Spiritual headship involves being Spirit-led in the moment in touch with what God's heart is in a matter. It is not a matter of rhetoric and procedure as much as it is hard-core training in the off moments so as to be able to operate instinctively in the more critical moments. A man who is spiritual in this sense demonstrates a wide range of emotions all expressed in a moderate way and stimulates activity in others around him. That is why it is not terribly important who prays, or who reads, or who initiates a matter, or who pays the bills or cuts the lawn. All these things will be done a little differently depending on how God has designed the husband and wife. But an order will emerge that is harmonious and that brings order to the home. It all starts and proceeds because of a very private, intimate journey a husband goes on with the Lord.

Paul states that husbands are not to be embittered against their wives. This relates directly to the matter of dying to self that Paul captures with the command to love. Whenever we love in a selfless way, we become very vulnerable. We can be taken advantage of and abused when we no longer defend ourselves. In demanding less from others we will find that they may well give us less. It is in fact quite likely that this will occur. It is at this point that we can slip back into self-centeredness and become bitter toward the person we placed ahead of ourselves. Becoming bitter happens when we reflect on how we were treated and begin to allow emotion to build about what should have been. It is a reaction to hurt. We can stop it by identifying how we have done the same thing to Christ, and how we have been forgiven. It is always possible to establish such a relationship between behavior of others toward us and our behavior toward God, if we face the truth. But it is a conversation with ourselves that demands that we die to ourselves. There can be no desire to justify oneself or to gain vindication once such a conversation has ended, or we can be certain it has not really occurred. In moments when our death to self does not elicit from our wives a selfless response we cannot become bitter. If we do we will become self-centered, then self-absorbed and we will be disobedient to God. We will quench the Spirit and no longer be exercising headship in our homes as Christ does the Church. At that point all can be lost.

If our wives response to our selflessness is self-serving, we must dwell with them "as with a weaker vessel" (1 Peter 3:7). The idea in that passage is likely that of being weaker from a point of view of physical strength. But the central principle would be that of deferring to the needs of such a one and that has wider application particularly in the matter of initiating love and setting one's expectations. A husband must not quit loving because of a moment when that love is not returned. If a man only loves in hope of returned love, he has not really loved at all. He must remember how desperate his own straights would be if God's love were extended to him in that way.

3:20 "Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord."

The charge to children in the Bible is always this, to honor their fathers and mothers. Part of honoring them is to obey them, as Paul states here. Elsewhere Paul speaks of this being the first commandment with a promise attached (Ephesians 6:1-3; Exodus 20:12). The promise is that "it will go well with them." The design of God in homes is that Godly parents pass their wisdom along to their children who are then wise themselves. They are saved the pain of having to learn life the hard way and the consequences of not learning at all.

This linkage between parental training and a good life was clearly propounded in the Old Covenant (Deuteronomy 6:7-14). Their prosperity in the promised land is explicitly tied to the spiritual education of children by the parents. Just as blessing is tied to the act of giving under the New Covenant (Philippians 4:17), in like manner honoring one's parents is presented as that which Yahweh continues to bless under the New Covenant. It is a timeless principle. Here Paul states simply that it is well-pleasing to the Lord. That is reason enough to engage in it. There is always the tendency in adolescence for children to seek to please many other than their parents. During this time, when they need to begin to develop healthy independence, they are wise to moderate their impulses and continue to subject themselves to their parents. It is the path of wisdom.

Now we all know that there are situations where children must not follow the example of their parents, but these must be approached very cautiously. Stable people of faith must rally around such children and guide them on such a perilous path. They are at great risk. They are coached well when they are still urged to bestow honor on their fathers and mothers in some way, even on the most undeserving of them. The wilderness generation of children had to be guided skillfully in this by Moses and Joshua, and there is much to be learned from that situation that is applicable to the more modern era.

3:21 "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart."

The word for exasperate means to stir up. It is used only one other time in the New Testament, and there it is used in the good sense of motivating another to a good deed (2 Corinthians 9:2). There are numerous ways in which a father can stir up his children. He should be the kind of leader who brings them a sense of peace and tranquility. He should be a settling and calming influence. He should be seen as one who is safe. Instead, fathers can stir their children up by being sharp tongued, controlling, demeaning, but also by being passive, or absent. A father must rise to being a living, affirming, voice of authority in the lives of his children. He must work hard at his own character to obey this verse. Unaddressed liabilities such as insecurity, stubbornness, moodiness, impatience with others, shape the emotional atmosphere of a home. It is a wise man who holds his weaknesses before the Lord in prayer and who is transparent about them in the home.

A father must choose battles well. He and his spouse must reach agreement on what is important in the day to day shaping of their children's lives. There is much that can and must be let go, or the home will be a war zone, and anger will become the primary emotion of the children. There are some things that cannot be let go or passed over. Knowing the difference is what takes conscious effort from fathers. No one should think of themselves as being a naturally good father. It requires intentionality and much death to self.

The penalty that is experienced by fathers who provoke their children is severe. The children lose heart. The word could be rendered passionless. They become unmotivated and uninspired. Ironically, this may be the polar opposite of the father. In fact, it usually is. By desiring to build drive and ambition into his children he can take it from them. He then goes through the vexation and pain of watching the listlessness, restlessness, and sloth of his children. He tears his hair and fumes about how such people could be his descendants. Our tone as fathers goes a long way in shaping the psyche of our children. It speaks so loud that what we say cannot be heard.

3:22 “Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.”

Paul continues to give practical examples of behavior that is done “in the name of the Lord” (verse 17). Having spoken of living out this command in the home, he now turns to its application in the workplace. He spends more time addressing this relationship likely because it had to have been a very thorny issue in the early church.

There was a great deal of variation in the experience of slavery in the Roman world. Being a slave could mean being chained to others and forced to do hard labor. It could also mean being the manager of the property of the wealthy. It could be a position of great dignity and recognition, or a position of unparalleled misery. Slavery was in a position of flux. The principles Paul laid down would tend to push slavery in the direction of the present relationship between employer and employee, though that transition would be very gradual.

Paul has already said that in Christ the boundaries between slaves and free men do not exist (verse 11). This could certainly have created a contradiction in the minds of many and could have led to great resentment on the part of slaves toward their masters. Christians have always lived with this kind of tension in several areas because they must live in an evil, fallen world. The result is that they know certain things are true in Christ but must live by different constraints in the world. Elsewhere, Paul handled the issue of obedience and subjection to civil authority. Though we answer to God and Christ is our King, we must be subject to earthly government (Romans 13). Though we are citizens of heaven we must pay taxes to earthly regimes (Mark 12:14-17). In the matter of slavery, though it is an evil institution that biblical principles would eventually undo in the western world, that was not the mind of the Spirit for the first century church. And so in the next four verses instructions are given to slaves to guide them in fulfilling their responsibilities in a way that honors the Lord and brings Him glory. The words have considerable application to the Christian in the workplace.

Paul calls slaves first to obedience. And so the idea of submitting oneself to the desires of another is once again the essence of the matter. It is a worthless employee who cannot be counted on to listen to orders and carry them out. Conversely, it is a valued one who can be counted on to follow through as directed. There is no dishonor in submission. There is no career advancement to one who has not learned to work under the authority and accountability of another. Such people will not even succeed in the faith. So Paul’s command here is astute for a number of reasons.

Paul then clarifies that this submission is to be genuine, not merely an act. It is to be done from the heart out of reverence for the Lord. Going through the motions of loyalty and obedience is easily and quickly recognizable to anyone in leadership and authority. People who just go through the motions of obedience will be quickly culled from an organization. On the other hand, those who are loyal, genuinely embracing the interests of those over them, become most valuable assets, and are viewed as critical to the mission. The chances are more than good that they will be well taken care of. More importantly, they will be blessed by the Lord.

3:23 “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than men;

Paul wants to make sure that the spirit that is to mark one who works for another is well understood and envisioned. With these words he links it very directly to the umbrella statement of verse 17 that is addressed to all Christians, instructing them to do all in the name of the Lord Jesus. The idea is that regardless of what we are doing, our performance should reflect the character of God and enhance it in the minds of others.

Here we are told to do our work heartily. The term in Greek is literally “out of soul.” The idea is that we are to throw our entire being into it. It is not to be done mindlessly, nor is it to be considered done when we intend to do it. It is to be completed and is to reflect our best effort.

To this idea of working “heartily” Paul adds the phrase “as for the Lord rather than men.” This is a very important idea that consistently appears as the defining characteristic of authentic spirituality. Authentic Spirituality grows from the Spirit of God within. He seeks to invade every compartment of our lives, and in a sense remove the walls between them by His presence. Then we will be shaped in all of the roles we function in by the same thing, His voice and influence. All contradiction is removed once this spirituality is brought to completion in us. The Lord is the prime mover, motivator, and inspector in all that we do. If this state of things exists in us, all slothfulness, sloppiness, dishonesty, irresponsibility, all that makes one a liability to an employee, will disappear. We should never allow our work to degenerate into what is acceptable merely in the eyes of our peers. When we do, it is a sure sign we are not listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Our spirituality has degenerated into legalism at that point.

Our work should reflect this idea: all that it involves, we do with all of our being, at all times fully engaged with the Holy Spirit. That means when an employer employs us, he is in a real sense getting the Lord’s wisdom, innovation, and energy. Ideally, there should be no better find among potential employees, than those indwelt by the Spirit of God.

3:24 “knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

We must be careful always to discern our own hearts so that we are aware of whom we are really serving in the moment. Whose interests are we really seeking to advance? Whose welfare are we really thinking of? The best of us can quickly and dramatically, in an instant, switch over to a self-serving mode ((Matthew 16:13-28). The ceiling in each of us that hinders our rise to true spirituality is the degree to which we are willing to die to ourselves. As we rule ourselves, serving the Lord’s interests instead of our own, we will find ourselves experiencing His power and His blessing. Paul wanted this life for all people, slaves included. The two names Paul uses for God here are appropriate. He uses the term Lord, a term of respect for one with authority and the equivalent of the proper name of God, Yahweh, in the Septuagint. He uses the term Christ, the equivalent of the term Messiah, the anointed One, God’s designated ruler over creation. These terms describe the essence, character, and the authority of the one we represent and serve.

To a large degree, what made someone a slave was the lack of an inheritance. Particularly in the ancient world, to inherit nothing was to have no power. To such people the hope of an inheritance was a potent idea. This is a reminder to those who are slaves that their eternal status is quite different. They will receive just payment for the services they have rendered from the Lord, the righteous judge. In reality He is the one they serve and in reality, their masters serve Him as well.

3:25 “For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong he has done, and that without partiality.”

The verb rendered “receive” originally meant to take care of or provide for. Then it came to mean to receive hospitably or to entertain. Then it was used of carrying away as a prize or as spoil. Paul uses it of receiving the awards of judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10; Ephesians 6:8). The idea is that of an expected, fair and just compensation. Paul says this will be the experience of the one who does wrong. Both slave and master will fall under the absolute standard of the justice of Yahweh. The words apply to all who do wrong, and they apply to all the matters of life.

This principle of judgment and personal responsibility applies to believers as well as unbelievers, with some important differences. It is spoken here to those who have been called to do all things in the name of the Lord. Paul is not suggesting that they will lose their citizenship in heaven if they behave wrongly as slaves or masters. He is saying that there are eternal consequences for their actions as believers. This accountability will be experienced by them when they give account of their actions as managers of God’s kingdom at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:10-17; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Colossians 4

4:1 “Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.”

It is statements like these in Scripture that led Christians to ponder the question of what is just and right in the matter of slavery. The word rendered justice is the word used for righteousness in the Scripture. God is summoning us to righteousness in all things, and this relationship of masters to slaves was no different. It is true today in the matter of the relationship between employer and employee. The word rendered fairness means equality and refers to what is equal in condition or proportion (2 Corinthians 8:14). This is a powerful word when brought to bear on the matter of slavery and provided the first stage in undoing the institution. If masters began to think in terms of justice and fairness, the relationship would have to move eventually toward employer and employee. The two words appear in the original before the verb rendered grant, so that there is emphasis on them. Providing justice and fairness to those who were slaves in the western world led to abolishing of slavery.

The word “grant” does not speak of tokenism. It is used of God giving us richly all things (1 Timothy 6:17), and of the fact that in all things we are to show ourselves as models of Christ (Titus 2:7). Paul was calling masters to view a slave different from property that they could simply use and discard. Slaves were people God loved. He would hold the masters accountable for the way in which they compensated their slaves.

4:2 “Devote yourself to prayer keeping alert in it, with an attitude of thanksgiving;”

The phrase “devote yourself to prayer” could be rendered be powerful or vigorous toward prayer. This word, which conveys strength, is used in other places as well with respect to prayer (Acts 1:14; 6:4; Romans 12:12). It summons us to intentionally approach prayer as we might any other skill so that we become strong or powerful in it. It involves time, but primarily to increase one’s effectiveness in prayer, not as the end in itself. The command is calling for us not just to pray a lot, but to pray powerfully to bring about change in hearts and situations. So increased vigor, praying about more things, with greater precision, to bring about more change is the aim of this statement.

It seems that effectiveness in prayer must be pursued even by righteous people (James 5:16). This effectiveness seems to be a matter of discerning precisely what God wishes to do in a situation to ask in line with His will (1 John 5:14-15). We know that the asking is essential (Matthew 7:7-12). We also know that the matter of motive is critical in our prayers (James 4:3). So power in prayer comes with knowing the heart of God in a matter. That is often found in interaction with Scripture, but often in the praying the Spirit making it known as the matter is held before God.

Effectiveness in prayer demands faith from us as well (Matthew 17:20; Mark 11:24; James 1:5-7). God loves faith and responds to it (Mark 2:5; Luke 7:8-10). It is not that we need great amounts of faith. We often speak in terms of quantity of faith. The disciple thought in such terms, but Jesus corrected them and used the mustard seed to describe the amount of faith needed to access the power of God in a matter (Luke 17:5-6). Praying with belief is what is desired, and it is best to leave the faith/prayer

discussion right there. We need not worry about how much faith need be present or how much doubt is tolerable. The presence of faith is what is required.

Being strong in prayer is the main idea of this verse. Two ideas are added that give further definition to this and clarify what Paul himself had in mind. The first of these is keeping alert in it, which could also be understood as keeping alert by means of it. The word alert means to be awake, which word came from a word meaning to gather. The idea is to be in full possession of one's senses and faculties. This is not the main verb in the sentence and so should be understood as part of being strong in prayer, and again one of the things Paul had in mind in telling us to be strong in prayer. Alertness is an idea that should influence how we conduct ourselves during prayer. It calls us to keep our minds focused. Much of effective asking involves simply completing one's thought with God and we are terribly vulnerable in the act of praying to wandering minds! Being alert involves being perceptive in prayer as well. It is discerning what really the essence of a matter is. It is being alert to the leadings of the Spirit in that moment regarding the matter. It is being alert to His summons to pray for things that might be out of mind completely. Alertness brings precision in prayer.

A second thing Paul adds that makes for growing strength in prayer is to offer it with thanksgiving. We know that God is touched by thankfulness (Luke 17:11-19). We know that from a practical point of view, thanksgiving is a faith building activity. One cannot reflect on things God has done for them without believing and trusting Him to do more. We also know that giving of thanks alters our own outlook. Our spirits are inevitably lifted when we take time to reflect on how we have been blessed by God. And so besides being right, thanksgiving is an important element of our spiritual and emotional health. It should be engaged in as a discipline, pondering in each need presented to God those things already accomplished by Him. It is absolutely life changing to be thankful as a matter of habit.

4:3 “praying at the same time for us as well that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have been imprisoned;”

Though it had landed him in prison, Paul knew his calling was to speak the message of Christ. There are two things we can learn from what Paul states here. First, the “word” as Paul calls it, needs an open door. Paul was always ready and was always bold. But he did not want to just randomly declare the message. He wanted to speak it at the direction of God in the place and at the time and to the people designated by God. He knew the experience of being forbidden by God to declare the word in a place (Acts 16:6-7). That is a peculiar experience that those less in tune with the Spirit simply plow through to the harm of the kingdom. So we find Paul seeking the Divine appointment. In this case he might also have been thinking of being freed from prison (see 4:18), but not necessarily. He did not regard his own imprisonment as necessarily impeding his ministry of the word (Philippians 1:13; 2 Timothy 2:9).

Second, he viewed the message of Christ as a mystery. This means that though it is rational, objective, and propositional, it is also spiritual discerned and perceived (1 Corinthians 2:13-14). Its presentation is not a matter of sales and marketing, nor is it merely an intellectual process. Both preaching and belief are spiritual activities, not separate from the mind, but not solely of the mind. In this sense they are mysterious. Paul also knew that the person of Christ is a mystery. Though revealed in flesh and blood to us, He is not fully comprehensible to us. To speak of Him and to explain Him

is precise terms is one of the great challenges of communication. This work must be approached prayerfully it is to be carried out in a way that has lasting value.

And so Paul asks for prayer to be directed towards a potential audience and for himself as a speaker. The perfect combination is when the mystery of Christ is made plain by a Spirit-directed speaker to hearers prepared by the Spirit.

4:4 “In order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.”

In his writings Paul alludes to the faith being a mystery (1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 3:4; 6:19; Timothy 3:16). Though God has revealed so much about Himself that we do well to comprehend it in a lifetime, there is still much about Him and His ways that we do not know. Even in terms of what we know and practice, there is a rather large element of mystery to it. That God’s Spirit is joined to us, where that takes us in any given moment and where it all leads us is a great mystery (John 3:5-8). That He became a man, died for our sins, was raised from the dead, remained God through it all, and why He did it all is mysterious. When we speak of the Gospel, we are passing along the results and implications of these and many other mysteries.

There is a great need for clarity when speaking of the gospel, the mystery of which we are stewards (1 Corinthians 4:1). Paul uses the word here “to make manifest,” the word Jesus used of His own mission to reveal the works of the Father (John 17:6). It is the word used of Jesus showing Himself to the disciples after His resurrection (John 21:1, 14). It comes from the word to shine, the word for light, and so the idea is to cause something to radiate light to make its detail clear and its nature known. The gospel is mysterious, yet it can be known with enough certainty that it has its intended effect.

That Paul sensed the difficulty of making the gospel clear shows that it is a normal thing to experience struggle in seeking to articulate the truth. That he asks for the prayers of others shows that the struggle is more than simply investing time in preparation and study. There is a spiritual element to its success, a work that must occur in the hearts of the hearers (Luke 8:11-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). It is this that Paul enlists the prayers of others to bring about. It is not made clear, until it becomes clear to the hearer, and part of the work of making it clear is to pray effectively for movement in the intellects and hearts of the hearers. To enlist the prayers of others in this process is to ask for Divine illumination in one’s own process of preparation, and it is to ask for illumination in the hearts of those who hear in the moment in time when the truth hits their ears.

4:5 “Conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.”

From addressing his own need for wisdom in speaking of Christ to others, Paul turns to charge the readers regarding their own relationships with outsiders. Wisdom is to govern these dealings, wisdom that discerns in each moment the potential for eternal impact. Some opportunities call for words, some for actions, some for both. A readiness should be present in us, a general preparedness to respond in the Spirit to those without faith.

There are also situations where we must deal with those hostile to the faith. Paul was not speaking to an audience of American listeners whose practice of the faith was protected by law. He himself was in prison for preaching the gospel. In such environments as Paul was in this need for wisdom would be even more pronounced.

There is a time to say nothing, as Jesus did in the moment of His trial. There are moments to confront as He often did during His ministry. Where there comes to be legal issues at stake one must deal shrewdly as Paul did, and one must manage public opinion to their advantage where that is possible without compromising the truth.

There is the great challenge of using the appropriate words and tone in any discussion of the faith. Nearly every combination has its appropriate time, but the challenge is to hear from the Spirit to adapt rightly and so convey the word of God for the moment. There is an opportunity in each moment that we want to seize. The thing we must know is what the appropriate response is.

Seizing opportunity for eternal business in relationships with others is the nature of kingdom business. This should shape our days. The term that literally could be rendered “redeeming the time” is what the NASB has rendered with the phrase “making the most of every opportunity.” The language creates the mental image of buying up an opportunity from the marketplace of normal life to use for eternal purposes. The idea of purchasing opportunity is mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (5:16). It is a critical idea. We are to proceed in life as one would when they go to a market, with an objective in mind and the intention of searching out and finding what is needed. We are to approach relationships with outsiders in this way. We are to engage them with specific opportunity in view opportunity to serve normal needs and opportunity to converse about matters important to them. If we find opportunity to do these, the subject of eternal things and the gospel will naturally come about. The key is to approach these relationships as one would approach shopping. Intentionally cultivate in relationships with others opportunity to dialog about the truth.

In the next verse Paul will give an additional thought on how to cultivate this kind of opportunity and so to have impact on those outside the faith.

4:6 “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, *as it were*, with salt, so that you may know how to respond to each person.”

Conversation is the heart of the matter when it comes to the rank-and-file drawing others to faith. Our words have the potential to be to the ears of others the words of God.

The principle that is to shape our words is that of grace. To speak with grace starts with politeness and courtesy. Opportunity is lost through being rude and pushy. Acceptance, cheerfulness, openness, concern, and many other attractive qualities are conveyed by our words and our tone. Paul likens this careful crafting of our words to seasoning our food with salt. It involves just the right touch. Too much or too little and potential is lost. In the same way extremes in conversation negatively shape perception. The subtle rule of socialization involves boundaries that vary with the emotional makeup of each person. We must sense the edges and speak with care.

To try to correct every untruth we hear in conversation with unbelievers is equivalent to over-salting food. It leaves a nasty taste in their mouths. Grace in our speech makes us unique. It is what made Jesus stand out to the multitudes (Luke 4:22). It will make our conversations with those outside the faith memorable in the right way to them. Our goals should be intentional but modest. We don’t have to “close the deal” immediately.

The natural man's view of God is the opposite of grace. Nearly every view of God that is errant is so because it is deficient in its view of God's grace. Now His wrath and justice are certainly real. But most people's view of God does not lack around His anger and displeasure with humanity. The basic posture of God as one who has meticulously planned and worked for the health and wholeness of man must be modeled and proclaimed by us. This is what Paul has in view always when he speaks of grace. Grace is the initiatives of God culminating in the sacrificial death of Christ brought to bear in each of us personally, all of which are aimed at restoring us to spiritual health and well-being. Our conversations are to reflect this grace in tone and in content. In Paul's words, we note that wisdom teaches us to respond differently to each person. Our approach to impacting others is not standardized, though the truth must not be altered or compromised. We must sense how to answer each person. Important questions to bear in mind are: Where does this person hurt? How has this person been shaped spiritually? Is this person a thinker or a feeler? What signals are they sending about themselves through the opinions they are expressing? There are a host of questions like these that help us speak with grace and know how to answer every person. This is how the Holy Spirit directs us to the precise opportunity of each moment.

4:7 “As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information.”

Tychicus is mentioned three other times in the writings of Paul (Ephesians 6:21; 2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12). He is also mentioned in Acts 20:4. We know little about him except that each statement about him shows him faithfully engaged in the work of the Church.

Paul makes three statements about Tychicus here. He calls him a beloved brother. This is a term that conveys a normal spiritual connection, but also one that was very personal. There was the deep friendship between these men that develops when serving the cause of the kingdom.

Paul also refers to him as a faithful servant, and this may be the highest compliment that could be given to anyone. To have this said of you in the pages of Scripture is a great legacy. Being a faithful servant is the thing that matters most in terms of eternity (Matthew 24:45-25:30; 1 Corinthians 4:2). To be found faithful is enough.

Paul calls him a fellow bondservant as well. Paul uses this term “fellow” frequently in describing others. It is just the preposition *sun*, meaning “with”, attached to an appropriate noun, and it conveys the idea of being joined together in a matter. Though he was a leader of leaders, Paul viewed many as his peers in the work of ministry and this was right in terms of the spirit Jesus had enjoined in the apostles (Luke 22:24-30).

Tychicus was with Paul and knew of his personal affairs. This likely included knowledge of his day-to-day activities, of the state of the legal issues he faced, and of his heart in the things of the kingdom. Tychicus' value to Paul was that he was an extension of his own heart and could be trusted to represent him well on these kinds of errands.

4:8 “For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about *our* circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts;”

Tychicus would personally carry this letter to the Colossians, and likely also do the same thing with a second letter addressed to Ephesus (Ephesians 6:21-22). Both letters were concerned with matters of greater importance than “newsy stuff”. The personal things were best communicated by a person, who could speak not only to the facts of Paul’s situation but to the emotion of it as well. This also served the Spirit of God well, since He Himself was crafting two important books of the New Testament in the case of these letters. For posterity, the spiritual matters were of far greater significance than pages on the personal issues surrounding Paul. Paul’s heart in this was in perfect harmony with what the Spirit was doing, and Tychicus would add in person the personal touch.

4:9 “and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother who is one of your number.

We believe that this Onesimus is the same person that is the subject of the book of Philemon. He was a former slave of Philemon who had deserted and likely stolen some property when he did (Philemon 18). He had apparently fled to Rome where somehow his path crossed with Paul and he came to faith and repentance under Paul’s ministry. His name means useful, and in the book of Philemon Paul makes quite a play on that idea (Philemon 11). It is believed that in this same journey the letter to Philemon regarding Onesimus would also be delivered, and that relationship would be in some way restored.

Onesimus is described here as “one of your own number.” That could mean he was from Colossae or from the surrounding area that they would influence, perhaps even Laodicea or Hierapolis. This could also mean that Onesimus came to faith through the church in Colossae, perhaps fell into a season of disobedience that led him to wrong Philemon and to flee. Then he may have been renewed to faith through the ministry of Paul. It is impossible to state dogmatically which of these scenarios is accurate. That Paul refers him as being one of the Colossian’s own certainly indicates that he is from their area.

In Philemon Paul calls Onesimus his child who he has begotten in his imprisonment (Philemon 10). This seems to be strong evidence that Paul himself led Onesimus to faith not simply repentance. Other statements made to Philemon seem to support that he was not a believer at the time he wronged Philemon (Philemon 15).

Whatever is true of Onesimus’ past, he is now considered by Paul not only to be a brother, but a faithful one. That is testimony to the power of the gospel.

4:10 “Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings, and also Barnabas’ cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him);”

Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica is mentioned four other times in the New Testament (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Philemon 24). He is called here Paul’s fellow-prisoner, and so it must be that he had been imprisoned for some of the same charges as Paul. It appears that Epaphras was also imprisoned with Paul at this time (Philemon 23). Aristarchus had been seized along with Paul and Gaius in Ephesus by the mob in an earlier, unrelated incident (Acts 19:29). When Paul was taken to Rome by the

centurion Julius, we find Aristarchus with him, but it is not specifically said at that point that he was a prisoner (Acts 27:2). And so we know little about this person, only that he was one who worked alongside Paul in his ministry.

We believe that this man Mark, said here to be the cousin of Barnabas, is mentioned seven other times in the New Testament (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37, 39; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13). Many believe he was the young man present at the arrest of Jesus (Mark 14:51-52). He is the one who wrote the second gospel. We know that early in Paul's ministry, Mark had disappointed him (Acts 15:37-39). At that point Paul thought he had been irresponsible, and he did not trust him. At some point that changed however, because we find Paul asking Timothy specifically to bring Mark to Rome because he was "useful" to him (2 Timothy 4:11). It appears Mark was very close to Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and we see Mark's gospel account as being the account of Peter.

Perhaps Paul's parenthetical instructions here about Mark represent some residual impression that may have remained in Colossae from Paul's earlier experience with Mark. Paul feels it necessary to give this endorsement here. However, this all falls into the category of speculation since many years had by this time elapsed since their rift. We know Paul had not been in Colossae, so the instruction regarding Mark referred to here was not received directly from him unless it was by previous letter.

4:11 "an also Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision; and they have proved to be an encouragement to me."

This is the only time this man Jesus, or Justus, is mentioned in the New Testament. We know only what is said here, that he was a Jew, that he was deemed by Paul to be one who shared the burden of the work of the kingdom.

Justus and Mark were the only Jews Paul could personally point to as being in personal attendance to him, his companions in pushing the faith forward at that present time. It is difficult to determine the exact tone of this statement. On the one hand it was a remarkable thing that the movement had gone from a distinctly Jewish one to a movement in which very key leadership was given to it by Gentiles. It was quite an achievement by the apostles and other Jewish leaders. For the kingdom's future it was great news. It was also sad. For the most part these who were from the covenant nation from an ethnic point of view, were aligning themselves against the new shape the Kingdom of God was taking. The projections of Isaiah and other Prophets were coming to fruition in this, and we know that this gave Paul considerable sadness (Romans 9:1-5). So what was a great spiritual leadership story was also the story of spiritual tragedy, not an uncommon paradox in the history of God's movement among humanity.

Mark and Justus had proved themselves to be an encouragement to Paul. That is a great thing to have said about oneself. They were likely leaders, but in this case served under the umbrella of another and did so in a way that lifted his spirits and made him more effective. That is a role one must show themselves faithful in before they can be trusted to lead on their own.

4:12 “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bond slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

Strong viewed the name Epaphras as a contracted form of the name Epaphroditus. But it is almost certain that this individual is different from the Epaphroditus mentioned in the letter to the Philippians. That person was from Philippi, their messenger to Paul (Philippians 4:18). This man, Epaphras, is said to be from the Church in Colossae. While both could be true it seems more likely that they are two individuals with the same or similar names. The Epaphroditus of Philippi, Paul sends back to Philippi (Philippians 2:25). Epaphras is represented as sending only greetings back to Colossae and is referred to in Philemon as a fellow-prisoner of Paul (Philemon 23). Granted, he could have been imprisoned later, say after going to Philippi and returning to Rome. As in many cases involving names, we are not given enough detail to speak with absolute certainty.

Besides the fact that he was a bond slave of Jesus who sent his greetings, it is said that he labored earnestly always in prayer for the Colossians. That is an inspiring statement. To labor earnestly in prayer is elusive and is the mark of a disciplined man. The term “labor earnestly” is rendered elsewhere of one who physically fights (John 18:36). It is used of the training of an athlete for his event (1 Corinthians 9:25). It is used of the disciplined rhythms of the Christian life (1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7). So it involves things like sacrifice, routine, and even risk. It is a term that conveys zeal and passion. This was what marked Epaphras’ thought and prayer in behalf of the Colossians.

It is a great prayer to pray, this prayer of Epaphras. To complete all that is the will of God for oneself and to do so in a way that causes one’s local church to accomplish God’s will for it is the greatest use of one’s life.

4:13 “For I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.”

As stated earlier Epaphras was a leader who likely served an entire geographic area that included the churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. He was one who was building up those churches and, in the process, a great legacy. That is the beauty of giving oneself to the work of Christ’s Church. There is no greater investment that could be envisioned for one’s time and effort in terms of all that matter.

It is a great thing when it is said of you by a third party that they can see a deep concern in you for the people of a church, or in this case three churches. The heart of Epaphras simply beat ministry. This happens in a person because of time spent with the Lord. It is the mark of one whose habit is to be filled with the Spirit, not one who occasionally give themselves to His leadings. There has been in them the complete transformation of values and ambitions that only He can bring about. Such individuals have come to inherit the Life (John 1:4) the sort modeled by Christ, made available through the Holy Spirit, the fullest expression of human life possible since the fall of Adam. It is anything but free from trouble, but it is intensely satisfying, deeply fulfilling and more importantly it conforms to the will of our Creator. He will profoundly reward it.

4:14 “Luke the beloved physician sends you his greetings, and also Demas.”

Luke, who by sheer volume wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer, is mentioned only three times in the New Testament by name (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24). Beyond the fact that he was a physician and that he seemed an almost constant companion of Paul, we know very little about him.

Because of his well-known linkage to Paul his writings were viewed as authoritative in the early Church. But it remains true that little is known of his origin and his own spiritual journey.

We know by extrapolation slightly more of Demas’ spiritual journey. It is a sad one that illustrates the need for each Christian to watch themselves closely and not let their zeal lag. Here Demas is seen in Paul’s company. He is either known to the Colossians, or Paul thought it good that he be known to them by name, and so his greetings are conveyed in this statement. It does not require an intellectual stretch to see Demas as a fellow worker in the work of the kingdom at this point. However later it is said of him that he deserted Paul out of love for this present world and traveled to Thessalonica (2 Timothy 4:10). The present statement and the one in 2 Timothy remind us of the spiritual peril of the present life and the miserable reality that can become true of any Christian worker. Jesus warned us about an essential level of spiritual fitness that we must maintain, and His statement is recorded by Luke (Luke 9:61-62). Demas would stumble and eternity will tell us if he recovered, which there is always sufficient grace to do.

4:15 “Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the Church that is in her house.”

The believers in Colossae and Laodicea were linked together by their proximity and by a shared leader, Epaphras. Nothing is said elsewhere of Nympha except this, that a church was in her house. This was often how a church assembled in the early days, in the home of a willing person.

It seems likely that this house church was in the vicinity of Laodicea since the phrases on either side of it have to do with Laodicea. That the church met at her home may indicate that Nympha was its leader, but not necessarily. She was most certainly a person of influence and personally known by Paul. It would seem strange for Paul to greet the host of a church and not its leader, though this might be explained by his being personally acquainted with her. There is considerable doubt about the wording of this text that would need to be considered if these matters were to be explored deeper.

4:16 “And when this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.”

Paul orchestrates this letter exchange, and this shows that he saw value in his letters that reached beyond the value they held for those they are specifically addressed to. The letter to the Laodiceans is unknown to us. Such writings should not be regarded as lost books of Scripture. One of the criteria that gives the books of the New Testament their authority is the sovereign hand of God in their survival. Lost books if found, would have value, but the Spirit’s inspired book should not be considered incomplete due to their absence.

4:17 “And say to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received from the Lord, that you may fulfill it.”

The precise detail of this person’s identity, like so many of the people in Scripture, is unknown. He is mentioned in Philemon 2, as being a co-recipient of that letter along with Philemon and a female named Apphia. It has commonly been supposed that Apphia was the wife of Philemon and some have proposed that Archippus was their son. While the detail of his identity is unknown, it seems that he was a leader in either the Colossian church or perhaps in Laodicea.

The exhortation given to him here is aimed at inspiring him to follow through and steward the opportunity he had been given by God. The command, a rendering of the Greek word *βλεπω*, is often given where there is danger inherent (Philippians 3:2; Colossians 2:8; Hebrews 3:12; 12:25). It is also used where particular attention and care was to be given in the detail of a matter (1 Corinthians 16:10; Ephesians 5:15). The word means to see physically or to perceive with the mind. Whatever the ministry was, and it was likely oversight of some sort, Paul by this expression exhorts in a warning kind of way faithfulness. There is nothing more critical than that we follow through on matters God entrusts to our care. There is nothing more mission critical in any Church than the faithfulness of those charged with leadership.

The thing we must do is complete the work we have been entrusted with. Starting is exhilarating, and many commend you for it. Finishing demands more of us. It brings pain and requires greater sacrifice and struggle. The challenge in any work is to finish it and bring it to completion so that it meets standards. The work of God is never done, but it is done for individuals. We must know what we are charged with and be sure to bring it to completion.

4:18 “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.”

In the day when false documents could be spread around Paul likely had the habit of writing with his own hand a greeting at the end of letters that apparently were usually penned by others as he dictated. This letter may have been written by Tychicus or Onesimus, but more likely by Timothy, as it has been historically thought. Luke or others with Paul certainly could have done the writing as well. But Paul apparently affixed to the work of his designated writer a statement in his own handwriting, which bore some very recognizable pattern or mark that authenticated it as his (2 Thessalonians 3:17). We do not know what this was and are free to speculate on it.

Paul asks that his imprisonment be remembered. His plight was a difficult one for him emotionally that only is expressed occasionally in veiled statements like this (see also 2 Timothy 4:9-22). There were the pending legal matters, the undone work of the kingdom, the loneliness, and all that would go with incarceration. One of the things leaders see is that people move on. Where we impact deeply and profoundly touch whole communities, the people move on to other objectives and other leaders and we are forgotten. This is good. It assures that the kingdom will move forward. But because of our flesh there is a sadness to it, particularly in the advancing years and a different kind of loneliness. Paul likely had to deal with this and lead himself well through such emotional swamps. No Christian leader can ever escape this need to die to themselves. It is, in fact, particularly challenging where one has had impact. Under the disguise of building a legacy one can easily fall into the trap of trying to insure their own significance. It is a vain thing this sewing of fig leaves.

Paul ended his letters as he began them, with the idea of conveying on the readers a greater experience of God's grace. This is the heart of one who is theologically astute, ministry driven, and what we might call kingdom smart. It captures God's entire heart for humanity and humanity's deepest need for eternity and each moment. It is the commodity we would most covet if we could grasp its power. It precisely fit the place the Pauline writings have come to occupy in Christian thought and expressed the legacy the Spirit crafted through Paul's dedication and sacrifice.

Appendix 1

The influence of LXX on terms used by NT writers

(From Albert Barnes intro to Proverbs)

6. The Septuagint, or Greek Version of the Book of Proverbs, presents several points of interest. What was true of the Septuagint translation as a whole, that it seemed to bridge over the chasm that had divided the Jew from the Greek, holds good in a special degree of this part of it. In making that translation, the Jew would have to familiarize himself with the terminology of Greek ethical writers, and to note the precise equivalents for the attributes, moral and intellectual, of which the book treats so fully. In reading it, the Greek would find himself, far more than he would in reading law or psalm or prophet, on common ground on which he and the Jew could meet. The very words with which the Greek version of the book abounds, such as σοφία sophia, φρόνησις phronēsis, σύνεσις sunesis, δικαιοσύνη dikaiosunē, were those which were echoing in every lecture-room in Alexandria. Since the book itself, according to its traditional authorship, was the first fruits of that largeness of heart which admitted contact with other nations and familiarity with their modes of thought and speech, so the translation tended to give prominence to that side of Judaism in which it presented itself to people, not as prophetic, typical, ceremonial, but wholly or chiefly as a monotheistic system of pure ethics.

Hence, this book, almost alone of the books of the Old Testament, served as a model for the Hellenistic writers of the two centuries BC. The Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach or the son of Sirach (compare the prologue), probably also other lost books of the same kind, confessed in their very titles, yet more in their whole structure and tone, that the Proverbs of Solomon (especially Proverbs 8) had left their stamp upon them.

Philo's language, descriptive of the Logos, is a reflection of the Greek words in which Wisdom is personified. In the teaching of John, may be traced, in the highest aspects of Christian theology, the influence of the vivid portraiture of the personified Sophia of the Proverbs.

It lay in the nature of the case, both as to the thoughts of Philo, and yet more as to the higher teaching of John, that, so far as the Divine Wisdom was personified, the masculine, not the feminine, word should gain the ascendancy. A system in which σοφία sophia had been the dominant word might have led to an earlier development of that attractive power of the "ever-feminine," of which Mariolatry was a later growth; or might have become one in which, as in the rabbinic exegesis of Proverbs 8, Wisdom was identified with the Law given by Moses, and yet existing before the world was.

An instance, hardly less striking, of the influence exercised by the teaching of the Greek Version is seen in Luke 11:49. If our Lord was speaking of Himself as ἡ σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ hē sophia tou Theou that sent its prophets and Apostles into the world and sent them in vain, then we have a direct indication that He sought to lead His disciples to identify Him with the personal Wisdom of whom such great things are said in Proverbs 8, and who utters a like complaint Proverbs 1:20-33. If, however, the Wisdom of God be taken as the title of some lost book, the inference is that the teaching of the Book of Proverbs had impressed itself so deeply on the minds of the Jews of Palestine no less than on those of Alexandria as to give rise there also to a "Sapiential" literature in

which Wisdom appeared as the sender of those Apostles and prophets, on whom, as its foundation, the Church was to be built. If, further, we take in the thought that our Lord's representations of His work, as they were determined, on one side, by the Messianic language of Isaiah, were influenced, on another, by the teaching of Proverbs 8; 9; the invitation in Proverbs 9:5 may be the source from whence flowed the deeper parable of John 6 and of the Last Supper; the "house" which Wisdom built, with its *στῦλοι ἑπτὰ stuloi hepta* Proverbs 9:1, the starting-point of the thought that the Church is the "house of God" 1 Timothy 3:15, "built" upon the rock Matthew 16:18 of the Apostles as the *στῦλοι stuloi* of that house Galatians 2:9; 1 Timothy 3:15; and the feast which she prepared Proverbs 9:2-3 the origin of the parable of the Wedding Feast.

Thus, also, may be explained the stress which Paul lays on the fact that Christ Jesus *ἐγενήθη ἡμῖν σοφία ἀπὸ θεοῦ egenēthē hēmin sophia apo Theou* 1 Corinthians 1:30, that He is *θεοῦ σοφία Theou sophia* 1 Corinthians 1:24, that in Him are hid "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" Colossians 2:3. Its influence on Patristic theology is shown by the prominence given to Proverbs 8:22 (see the note) throughout the Arian controversy; and more remote after-growths of the Greek version of this book, may be noted in the Achamoth, or *Σοφία Sophia*, of the Gnostic systems of Basilides and Valentinus, in the church dedicated by Constantine to the Divine Wisdom, in the retention of that name by Justinian when he built the temple which, as the Mosque of Santa Sophia, still attracts the admiration of Christendom, and lastly, in the commonness of the personal name Sophia, the only one of its class that has become popular, while others, such as Irene, Agape, Pistis, Dikaiosyne, have fallen almost or altogether into oblivion.

The direct use of the Book of Proverbs in the New Testament presents some special features. Quotations from it are not very numerous, and are brought in, not with such words as *γέγραπται, ἡ γραφή λέγει gegraptai, hē graphē legei*, or as coupled with the name of Solomon, but as current and familiar sayings, as if the book had been used generally in education and its maxims impressed upon the memory. In almost all cases the quotations are from the Septuagint Version, in some instances even where it differs widely from the Hebrew. It will be worth while, as the circumstances just mentioned often hinder the quotations or allusive references from attracting the attention of the English reader, to refer to some, at least, of the more striking examples in parallel columns.

The familiarity of the New Testament writers with the Greek version of the book is, however, shown in other ways. Over and above their use of the same ethical terminology (*σοφία sophia, σύνεσις sunesis, φρόνησις phronēsis, ἐπίγνωσις θεοῦ epignōsis Theou, αἴσθησις aisthēsis*), its influence is to be traced in their choice of a word which occupies a prominent position in the vocabulary of Christendom. In Proverbs, prophetic stress is laid upon the *φόβος θεοῦ phobos Theou* as the *ἀρχὴ σοφίας archē sophias*, the groundwork of all virtues: the word occurs thirteen times, to say nothing of the parallel passages in Psalm 19:9; Psalm 34:11; Psalm 111:10. It might have been expected that it would be found not less prominent in the teaching of the New Testament. There, however, it is found but seldom Acts 9:31; 2 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:21. It is not difficult to see why the old phrase was felt to be no longer adequate.

In proportion as *Κύριος Kurios* came to be identified in men's minds with the Lord Jesus, and love in return for His love the one constraining motive, would there seem something harsh and jarring in a phrase which would come to them as equivalent to "the fear of Christ." Happily, the Septuagint version of the Book of Proverbs supplied

also the synonym that was needed. In Proverbs 1:7 there is an alternative rendering, standing in juxtaposition to the other, namely, εὐσέβεια eusebeia; εὐσέβεια εἰς θεὸν ἀρχὴ αἰσθήσεως eusebeia eis Theon archē aisthēseōs. The word occurs also in Proverbs 13:11, and in Isaiah 11:2, where also it stands together with an alternative rendering πνεῦμα φόβου θεοῦ pneuma phobou Theou. The substantive, and yet more the adjective εὐσεβής eusebeēs, occurs with greater frequency in the Apocryphal books, especially in Ecclesiasticus. The way was thus prepared for the prominence which the word gains, just as the necessity was beginning to be felt, in the latest Epistles of the New Testament. It occurs ten times in the Pastoral Epistles of Paul, and four times in Second Peter; Acts 3:12 (where the King James Version gives "holiness"), being the only other passage. The temper of devoutness, reverence, godliness, had thus taken the place in Christian terminology of the older "fear of the Lord."

For the most part, the choice of the Greek equivalents for the more prominent ethical or philosophical terms of the Proverbs is singularly felicitous. The history of the dominant word of the book (חכמה chokmāh), or more commonly in the plural, חכמות chokmōth, wisdom) is indeed almost an exact parallel to that of the σοφία sophia by which it was rendered. As used in the earlier books of the Old Testament Exodus 28:3; Exodus 35:10, Exodus 35:31, Exodus 35:35; Exodus 36:1 it, or its cognate adjective, is applied to the wisdom of those who had the skill or art which was required for the ornamentation of the tabernacle. We have traces of a higher application in Deuteronomy 4:6; Deuteronomy 34:9. As used of the wisdom of Solomon in 1 Kings, and throughout Job and the Psalms, as in the Proverbs, the higher prevails exclusively. So, in like manner, Aristotle describes the gradual elevation of the Greek σοφός sophos, how it was first applied to sculptors like Pheidias and Polycleitos, how σοφία sophia thus came to be known as ἀρετὴ τέχνης aretē technēs, then became equivalent to the highest accuracy in all things, and finally was thought of as οὐδεμίας γενέσεως oudemias geneseōs, separated altogether from the idea of art-production. So too, the use of φρόνησις phronēsis for a Hebrew word indicating the power which divides, discerns, distinguishes, is appropriate if the chief office of φρόνησις phronēsis be τὰ καθ' ἑκάστα γνωρίζειν ta kath' hekasta gnōrizein. The general choice of αἴσθησις aisthēsis rather than ἐπιστήμη epistēmē for the rendering of the equivalent Hebrew word showed that they recognized the essentially practical character of the knowledge of which the Proverbs spoke, as perceiving the right thing to be done, and the right word to be said, in each detail of life.

Lastly, may be noted here some salient features of this Greek Version.

(a) In not a few places it adds to the existing Hebrew; the addition sometimes having the character of an alternative rendering, sometimes consisting of entirely new matter.

(b) Sometimes the insertions or variations have the character of an exegetical gloss, toning down or making more explicit what might seem doubtful or misleading in the original.

The arrangement of the closing chapters in the Greek Version also presents striking peculiarities, the whole of Proverbs 30 and Proverbs 31:1-9 being inserted after Proverbs 24:22, as part of the same chapter, and the acrostic description of the true wife ending the book as Proverbs 29. The most probable explanation of the transposition is that it originated in some accidental dislocation in the manuscript from which the translation was made.