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Colossians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Alastair Roberts

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Transcript

The Book of Colossians is addressed to Christians in the city of Colossae in Phrygia, part of Asia Minor in modern-day Turkey, near to Laodicea and Hierapolis, both cities that Epaphras is said to have worked in alongside Colossae in Chapter 4. In that chapter, the Colossians were also instructed to pass on the letter to the church in Laodicea when it had been read by them. Colossians is classed among Paul's prison letters, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon, on account of the reference to imprisonment in

Chapter 4, verse 3. The epistle has the familiar form of introduction that one finds in most of Paul's letters. Paul introduces himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus and includes Timothy with him as his and their brother.

Timothy was Paul's closest co-worker, his son in the ministry in many ways. Timothy shared in Paul's apostolic authority as a plenipotentiary emissary on occasions, with authorization to act in Paul's name. Paul includes Timothy alongside himself as the sender of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and also Philemon.

He addresses the Colossian Christians as the saints and faithful brothers. They are saints, holy on account of God setting them apart by his grace. They have been steadfast and loyal in their commitment to Christ, and so he also describes them as faithful.

They are described as being in Christ. This is the primary location of all Christians who live in union with Christ, living out from his life. After his introductory greetings, Paul typically places an expression of thanksgiving to God for the addressees in the preamble to his letters.

Colossians is no exception in this regard. Paul does not seem to have known the Colossians first hand, although they were very clearly within the orbit of his missionary associates. Paul speaks of Epaphras who was with him at the time of writing this epistle as his fellow prisoner in Philemon 23.

Epaphras was likely the primary source of Paul's news about the Colossians, but in chapter 4 several people tying Paul with the Colossian church are mentioned. As we typically see in the New Testament, the world of the early church was a small one, with a lot of missionaries moving around, and a robust network in which news and ministry was constantly being circulated, and everyone was no more than one or two steps removed from everyone else. Paul expresses his thanksgiving for the reports that he had heard of the Colossians' faith, hope and love.

This triad of theological virtues is so frequently employed by Paul, that it seems clear that together faith, hope and love define Christian's posture within the world for him. The following are a few instances of Paul's use of this particular triad. 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 8 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 8 Galatians 5 verses 5-6 Galatians 5 verses 5-6 Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1-6 There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

Several other examples could be given. One thing that should be observed is that Paul seldom just lists faith, hope and love, without elaborating upon their interrelationship, the way that they are tied up with the character and work of God, and the way that they are functioning in practice. The same thing could be observed of the Trinitarian character

of so many of Paul's statements, where it becomes clear that undergirding Paul's understanding of salvation throughout is the reality and work of the Father, Son and Spirit.

That Trinitarian reality is also apparent here, as Paul refers to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, moves to speak of Christ Jesus, before concluding with a reference to their love in the Spirit. Father, Son, Spirit, like faith, hope, love, is part of the fundamental grammar of the Gospel for Paul. Paul here speaks of the Gospel as something that is at work within the world, acting in God's power, actively bearing fruit among the Colossians, as it is elsewhere.

We could perhaps connect the three theological virtues with the Trinitarian reality of salvation in this passage in some ways. Paul speaks of faith, hope and love in ways that ground them in the Triune God and his work. Their faith, in verse 4, is described as being faith not of Jesus Christ, as we see in places such as Romans and Galatians, or even towards Jesus Christ, as we see in Philemon verses 4 and 5, but in Christ Jesus.

It seems likely to me that Scott McKnight is correct in reading this as a reference not so much to the faith of the Colossians being directed towards Christ, but to their faith being sustained as they live in Christ. Our faith isn't just directed towards Christ as its object, but it is built and grounded upon him, so that we persevere in our faith as we abide in him, as we live out of his life. This is important to recognise because it makes clear that, as a theological virtue, faith is founded upon something firmer than the wavering ground of our own hearts.

Faith grows and flourishes in the soil of Christ's life. A similar point should be made about hope. Although Paul clearly thinks of hope as a subjectively exercised Christian virtue, here he highlights its objective correlate, the hope laid up for us in heaven by God the Father.

Our hope isn't just wishful thinking or optimism. It relates to the objective reality of the future that God has prepared for us as his people. Finally, love also has a grounding outside of ourselves, in the person and work of the Spirit.

Our love is love in the Spirit, who is the personal bond of love in which Father and Son dwell in unity, and by which Christ is bound to his people. As a theological virtue then, love isn't just a human affection, but is a manifestation of the Spirit's own work in God's people. Following his opening thanksgiving, Paul moves into a prayer, a prayer for the Colossians' growth to maturity in Christ, that they would bear the fruit of salvation that the Father intends for those in his Son.

This prayer follows from the opening thanksgiving. Because God has acted in the way that he has, in bringing the Colossians into a knowledge of Christ, Paul can confidently pray that they will rise to the full stature of faith. He desires for them to be filled with the

knowledge of his will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Although Paul does have a knowledge of God's moral will, God's desire for the ethical behaviour of human beings, in mind here, he has a great deal more in view too. He wants the Colossians to understand more fully how they fit into God's big picture. God's great saving purpose in Christ is about far more than making people moral and upstanding.

It's about consummating all of the cosmos in Christ, overcoming the works of the devil and reconciling the world to himself. As the Colossians grow in their understanding of all of this, he desires that they will also be strengthened and equipped for endurance and joyful patience. God has delivered his people from the kingdom of darkness, like Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt, and he has, by his grace in Christ, qualified us to share in a new inheritance, redeeming us for himself and freely forgiving us all of our sins.

Verses 15 to 20 are one of the most important passages in the entirety of Paul, and indeed the New Testament. They are a glorious hymn or poem concerning Christ, expressing his glory in the most startling and arresting of terms. N.T. Wright, developing an argument from C.F. Burney, suggests that the poem unpacks the various possible meanings of the Hebrew term Bereshit, the term with which the book of Genesis and the scripture as a whole begins, in the beginning.

This term enjoys added significance by virtue of the implied identification of Reshit with wisdom in Proverbs 8, verse 22, The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Wright summarizes the poem's development of its Bereshit theme as follows. First, he is the image, like wisdom herself, evoking Genesis 1, verse 26.

Second, he is the firstborn, like wisdom herself, the first meaning of Reshit. Third, he is supreme, the second meaning of Reshit. Fourth, he is the head, the third meaning of Reshit.

Fifth, he is the beginning, the fourth and climactic meaning of Reshit. And sixth, he is the firstborn, this time from the dead, like wisdom again but now firmly as a human being. So Paul takes this opening statement of the Bible, in the beginning, and he unpacks it, connecting the beginning with Christ as firstborn, as supreme, as the head and as the beginning.

And then he looks at the preposition, and it's explored in each of its principal aspects, in him, through him, to him, in verses 16 and 19 to 20. In its unpacking of the term Bereshit, in the beginning, its reference to the image of God, and in its expansive cosmic sweep, Colossians 1, verses 15 to 20, evokes the creation account and situates Jesus as the Son at the very heart of its meaning. Christ the Son is the firstborn, an archetypal image of God.

He's the one who represents and symbolizes God's rule in his world. He is the one in whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created. Whatever has been created, all things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, exist on account of him and for his sake.

He is supreme over all. He enjoys the prominence, the preeminence, and the priority of the head. He's the source and the first principle of all things.

Implicit in this poem is a re-reading of the opening chapters of Genesis. Veiled in the very language of Genesis chapter 1, Paul discovers the incomparable majesty of the risen Christ, the one who has always been there, yet only now in the fullness of time is disclosed. In this, he's doing something very similar to what the Gospel of John does in its first chapter.

Within this triumphant poem, one of the most fundamental and familiar scriptural passages of all, Genesis chapter 1, reveals a transfigured aspect, as from its words, the light of the glory of Christ shines forth. The prominence and glory of the firstborn son is revealed through his great act of reconciliation, with which the second half, verses 18 to 20 of the bipartite poem, is concerned. Christ's status as the firstborn in creation is reaffirmed and secured in his status in its redemption as the firstborn from the dead, whereby the once alienated creation is restored to its rightful ruler, its heir and its source.

The Christology of Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 to 20, is an incredibly high one. Christ is presented as integral to the origin, constitution and destiny of God's creation, in a manner that implies his divine identity in a striking and powerful manner. Christ isn't just part of the creation, he is the one through whom all was made.

He is the intermediary of the creation in both creation and redemption. Paul also brings creation and new creation into the very clearest of parallels. Indeed, the very weight placed upon prepositions, in, by, for, through, etc., in assigning the single act of creation to Christ, might hint at some sort of proto-Trinitarian account of inseparable operations and appropriation.

Christ's activity and place in creation is divine, in unity with the Father and the Spirit, and inseparable, yet it is personally distinct. The entirety of the unitary act of creation, both bringing it into and sustaining it within being, is related to his agency, yet in a particular way, one roughly hinted at in the specific prepositions that are employed. This is consistent with the assignation of the entire act to the Father in another respect.

The same creative action, the single action of creation, constantly arises from the origination of the Father, from the Father, the instrumentality, the establishing and the upholding of the Son, through, for, and by the Son, and the animation and perfecting of the Spirit, in the Spirit. Colossians 1, verses 15-20 is a stunning articulation of a

Christological monotheism. The one God, the Creator above all creation, is known in his Son.

The intensity of the Creator's authority is concentrated in him, and the cosmic scope of the poem corresponds to this. If Christ's role in the creation is as the poem describes it, there is nothing that falls outside of his authority. This is something that has direct implications for all rule and authority in the creation.

Verse 16 declares that all thrones or dominions or rulers or powers have been created through him and for him. Implied in verse 20 is the fact that all such authorities are reconciled to God by Christ in his cross. The Son is the firstborn of all creation.

He's supreme in all things. He sums all things up in himself. He's the head.

He's the beginning. He's the source. He's the purpose of everything.

He's the reconciler and the ruler of the cosmos. The Gospel declaration must provide the starting point for all Christian thought and reflection. Without such a starting point, our thinking would cease to be truly evangelical.

That is, it would abandon the authoritative Gospel proclamation that should provide its heart. Just as Paul argues in the verses following this poem in our passage, the heart of the Christian message is not some teaching that Christ taught, nor some moral example that he set. Important though both of those things are, but Christ himself and the unique work that he has done.

As Paul will say in verse 28, Him we proclaim. It is the uniqueness of Christ and his status within the creation that grounds the absolute authority of his message and example. Only with him as our starting point will everything else come into focus.

A question to consider. If you were to build a case for the deity of Christ from Colossians chapter 1, how would you go about it? Following on from the great hymn concerning Christ in verses 15 to 20, the end of Colossians chapter 1 moves on to unpack dimensions of its significance. Paul has praised the majesty of Christ, both in the original creation order and in the new creation.

The one by whom all things were created is the one by whom all things are reconciled to himself by the blood of his cross. The Colossians are part of this reconciliation. Paul contrasts their former state as pagans to that which they were brought into by God's grace.

Formerly they were alienated, hostile to God in their very thinking and evil in their actions. Mindset and action together were at odds with God and his holiness and truth. However, now they have been reconciled by the body of Christ's flesh in his death, so that they can now be presented before him as holy, blameless and above reproach.

The means of their reconciliation was Christ's body of flesh by his death. Christ, the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, assumed our flesh and not just flesh in general. Christ came as a representative man, a new Adam and the Messiah, and he bears in his body on the cross the full penalty of his people's sins.

As we are brought into his body, sin has been decisively dealt with and we can be restored and transformed into his image, being remade in the one who is the image of the invisible God. The purpose of our redemption is that we might be presented holy and blameless. Our setting apart by God in holiness is not merely an afterthought of our deliverance from the punishment of our sins, it's the point of it all.

As God's redeemed people, we are to be without blemish and without reproach, purified from the stain of sin and justified from its guilt. All of this requires that we continue in the faith, the work of the Spirit by which we endure in faith to the end is a necessary aspect of our salvation. It is by the work of the Spirit that we are brought from God's declaration that we are in good standing before him on account of Christ's work, to the reaffirmation of that declaration on the last day, when in a judgment of our entire lives and works, God declares us to be in good standing with him.

Paul speaks of the worldwide proclamation of the gospel, to every creature or in all creation under heaven. Paul is probably speaking in an anticipatory sense here, of the way that the gospel, the good news that the kingdom of God is established in the lordship of Jesus the Messiah, has been sent forth into the entire world, through the ministry of Paul and other messengers like him. The message hasn't yet reached everyone, but it has been sent out.

In the verses that follow, Paul presents the Colossians, who have yet to meet him, with a portrait of himself as a minister of the gospel. In the most surprising statement in this section, he claims that not only is he suffering for their sake, but that he is filling up in his flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, the church. Paul believes that Christians must enter into and participate in Christ's sufferings, as part of the passage into the new age of the resurrection.

Christ doesn't just suffer for his church, but also as an example for and representative of his church and bride, and his bride must join with him in his suffering. Paul's sufferings are not the redemptive sufferings of Christ, but the tribulation that Christ experienced and which he foretold would come upon his people. As we share the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, we join with him in tribulation.

These tribulations are the birth pangs of the new creation. Christ has entered into this new creation ahead of us, through the birth pangs of the cross and the rebirth of the resurrection. We follow in his footsteps.

Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, wishes to shelter those to whom he is ministering

from the worst of the tribulation that is coming upon the church, by taking as much as he can upon himself. Recognizing that his sufferings aren't meaningless, but indeed are part of the process by which a new creation is coming to birth, Paul can rejoice in them, knowing that they aren't futile or in vain. The work of the proclamation of the gospel still needs to be completed, and it is through the suffering and the labors of people like Paul that this work is taking place.

Paul was made a servant of the church, with a very special and particular mission. He was given stewardship of a great mystery of divine revelation, that now, in the fullness of time, must be announced. Paul isn't just one of many missionaries, he is someone with a special and unique calling in redemptive history.

The key import of the mystery is the salvation that is being made known in Christ, a salvation given to Gentiles as well as to Jews, as Christ wells in his people, assuring them of the fullness of salvation yet to be realized. Christ has reconciled God and man by the cross, and now the news is being sent out to all. Christ is what Paul is all about.

The entire intent of his mission is to bring people into the Messiah, and to bring them up to maturity in him, so that on the last day they might be presented holy, blameless, and without reproach before him. Paul works towards this end, laboring with a God-given drive and energy that is powerfully at work within him. Paul is warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, not a hidden wisdom for a few privileged enlightened persons, but a wisdom that is directed to and designed for everyone.

Even though Paul has yet to meet them, Paul wants the Colossians to know that he has been struggling for them, and for the church at Laodicea and other people that he has yet to meet. How is he doing this? Well, presumably, first of all, through prayer. He prays constantly for the churches.

This is an introductory theme in almost all of his letters. He is also building up the church in the wider regions. He's training, he's equipping, and sending missionaries and teachers to these various churches, even if he's not visiting himself, and he's writing letters to be circulated around them.

Paul is working to establish a larger church movement, a church movement that will strengthen every single individual church within it. As the apostle to the Gentiles, he feels an especial responsibility to seek the up-building of all the different churches within these networks. His desire is that they will be encouraged and united, so that they will achieve the full conviction of the knowledge of the mystery of God, which is Christ himself.

Everything is contained in Christ, all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He is the key to the whole thing. Paul, however, is concerned that they are not misled, that they never lose sight of all that they possess in Christ, no matter what clever arguments

people might put forward.

He may not be there with them in body, but he is with them in every other way that matters. He's very concerned for their growth, constantly praying for them, seeking to do what he can to build them up, even from prison, and he's encouraged by the progress that they are making. In the last chapter or so, he has presented the most dazzling portrait of Christ.

He is the one over all creation. He's the one through whom the new creation comes. He is the mystery hidden before all ages, and the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

They have received this Jesus, and they must walk in this Jesus. It is in him that they must put down their roots. It is from him that they must draw all of their sustenance and find their strength and their security.

A question to consider. The term Christ-centered is often overused as a sort of positive brand name to be attached to all sorts of different things. How might Paul's teaching to this point of Colossians help us to give a fuller and more substantial account of what being centered on Christ actually means? In the heart of Colossians chapter 2, Paul presents a series of warnings against false teachings and unhelpful practices.

In particular, he addresses the way that the Colossians and other Christians are in danger of lapsing back into a form of religion that remains thoroughly bound to this present age. A bondage that can take either a pagan or a Jewish form, and failing to enter into all the riches that are ours in Christ. In verse 8, he gives a summary statement.

There is a danger of being taken captive. The word translated, takes you captive, is not unlikely a pun upon the word for synagogue. It suggests that one of the great dangers here are Judaizing teachers who might want to capture them, to imprison the Colossians within Judaism and its human traditions, which stand opposed to the word of God and lay heavy burdens upon people.

What Paul means by the elementary principles of the world is a matter of some debate. They are also referred to in Galatians chapter 4. Some have argued that they are rudimentary principles, others that they are elemental spirits. However, it seems to me that the strongest case is that they refer to the physical elements.

The elementary principles are referring to the physical cosmos. Old Covenant religion was religion ruled by, ordered around and focused upon physical elements, upon times and seasons, upon matters of diet, upon various physical rites such as circumcision and various sacrifices. These things are not bad in themselves, and properly used, they can still have some place in worship and broader Christian practice in certain cases.

However, they represent a religion under the rule of the natural elements of the physical world, composed of sacrifice, principles of unclean and clean, calendrical feasts. In this respect, faithful Jewish religion had much in common with the religions of the pagans. This was religion in the flesh, religion under the guardianship of fleshly elements.

Israel had to relate to God in terms of physical sacrifices of specific animals, a physical building and its furniture, and other things like that. The system constructed of the elementary principles guarded and guided Israel in its childhood. However, in the New Covenant, there is a move from the shadowy elements to the substance, which is Christ.

We don't come under the rule of a physical temple, but we relate to the body of Christ. We don't have the same physical sacrifices. We perform spiritual sacrifices on the basis of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

Our worship still involves symbolic mediation, where physical elements can function as effective symbols of the spiritual acts that we're performing, but we no longer engage in spiritual intermediation, where physical elements stand in the place of the spiritual realities, so that we relate to the spiritual realities less directly. Paul's challenge to the Colossians is essentially, why settle for empty philosophy and human tradition when you have the fullness of God and his authority bodily present in Christ? Christ is the bodily substance of what the elementary principles foreshadowed. Christ is over all other powers.

They should not satisfy themselves with lower principles when they have Christ, who is above all. The fullness of deity dwells in him. Christ is God dwelling among us.

We have the full reality of God in him, and should not allow anyone to pawn off a lesser substitute to us. While the Judaizers might want to perform a physical circumcision upon the Colossians, Paul speaks of a circumcision made without hands, putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. What might he mean by this? Circumcision in the Old Testament was about the symbolic removal of the flesh, that flesh that called out for judgment.

As God comes near to judge, the flesh of his people is symbolically removed in a place where it has particular symbolic associations. It's associated with the generative principle of man. It's also associated with the phallic drive of man, the libido, and the desire to dominate and rule.

Circumcision then was about the symbolic removal of the flesh, protecting people from divine judgment and marking out the seed. The full reality of this, however, was performed in Christ's crucifixion, when he dealt decisively with the body of the flesh. Christ's death was a literal cutting off of the flesh.

And we enter into the fullness of this in baptism, which unites us with Christ's death and

his resurrection. This doesn't mean that we need baptism in order to be saved on the last day, that's not quite the point that Paul is making. Rather, there is something about the social body here that I think is in play.

The social body is part of what it means to be in the flesh. The flesh is not just my physical body, it's the larger social order that I'm part of. My body becomes part of the social order, where it is formed in a distinctive way of life and oriented towards reality.

As the social order addresses my body and subjects it to its formation, I'm guided into particular ways of perceiving, thinking and acting within the world. And this incorporation into a social body occurs through the social body's co-option of our physical bodies. And there is a claim with obvious and immediate relevance to the rite of baptism here.

Baptism is a rite performed upon bodies. It's a ritual connected with the fate of the body, death and resurrection in Christ. The social body of the church is forged, identified and characterised in large measure through the practice of baptism.

It makes and it represents a social reality that we become part of. The meaning of baptism is not just a meaning for me as an individual, it's a meaning for us as a group as we live out a new form of life as a new body, a body that is defined by the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism forms people in many ways from the outside in.

It forms us by making us part of a society. It embeds us within a social order and a world, rather than just treating us as detached thinking individuals. N.T. Wright comments upon this dimension in his treatment of verse 11.

As a result of their baptism into Christ, the Colossians now belong first and foremost to the family of God and not therefore to the human families and their local rulers to which they formerly belonged. Body can in fact easily carry the connotation of a group of people, needing further redefinition to make it clear which group is envisaged, as in body of Christ. In that context, flesh can easily provide the further requisite definition, since it can carry not only the meanings of sinful human nature, but also simultaneously the meanings of family solidarity.

The phrase can thus easily mean in the stripping off of the old human solidarities, the convert in stripping off his clothes for baptism, the baptismal reference in the next verse has coloured the language, leaves behind, as every adult candidate for baptism in say a Muslim or Hindu society knows, the solidarities of the old life, the network of family and society to which, until then, he or she has given his primary allegiance. Baptism then is an event of unplugging. We are taken out from the old solidarities of the flesh to which we belonged.

We are united with Christ, in his death, in which his body was cut off from the old solidarities. People often resist a strong account of baptism, believing that it gives the

impression that we need baptism in order to be saved, thinking by that that salvation means being saved on the last day. However, salvation is a broader term than that, and if we are to enter into the fullness of life in fellowship with God and his people here and now, baptism is most definitely a part of that.

Baptism is the means by which we leave old solidarities behind and are joined to a new one, in which we should live in newness of life. It is also a means by which we have an anticipatory seal of our being raised on the last day, so that we might persevere in the faith with greater confidence. A king who has acceded to the throne but never received a coronation is a king nonetheless, yet he fails to enter into the fullness of what that means.

Likewise with baptism. Baptism may not be absolutely necessary to be saved on the last day, but it is the means by which we enter into fellowship with God and his people here and now, and by which we most appropriately anticipate and are assured of the full salvation that is yet to come. Gentile Christians were formerly dead in their sins and outside of the covenant people of God, yet God made them alive together with Christ, forgiving them all of the sins that separated them from him.

He achieved this through the cross. We should consider the parallel passage in Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 to 16 here. Here, as in Ephesians chapter 2, there is a reference to the law.

Here it is the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. In Ephesians chapter 2, it is the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. The law was an obstacle in two distinct ways.

As Wright notes, it shut up the Jews and shut out the Gentiles. The impasse represented by the law is decisively dealt with as Jesus takes its burden upon himself in his cross. Not only does he deal with the law, he also deals with the principalities and powers, the angelic authorities that reigned over the old world order.

Christ may have been stripped naked on the cross, his enemies triumphing over him, but yet, Paul teaches, this is what Christ was doing to his enemies at the point of the cross. If only they knew! Christ was really stripping the ruler of this present age and his powers of their might, undermining the hold that they have. Once this has all been appreciated, the idea of going back to the old practices of the old age is unthinkable.

The substance that the elementary principles of the old covenant pointed towards has arrived in Christ. There will be various people trying to capture the Colossians, trying to bring them back to the observances of the old age. However, they must courageously stand against the temptation to retreat, whether to the old fleshly observances, or to a subservient preoccupation with the angelic rulers of the old creation, rather than Christ himself.

Clinging to the old practices and angelic rulers is not faithfulness. Rather, by rejecting the substance for the shadow and the rightful king for the temporary stewards, they would make themselves rebels. Christ is the substance of the shadows.

Christ is the ruler over all other rulers. Christ is also the source of all growth, the one in whom we must ground ourselves and from whom we must grow. The whole body, the whole church, finds its source and its life and its sustenance in him.

Our growth is found not in submitting to human traditions and these practices of the old age, but by looking to Christ and drawing upon God's strength that is active in him. A question to consider. What might have been some of the motives of those who wanted to retain or retreat to the practices of the old age? In Colossians chapter 2, Paul has been highlighting the futility of turning back to the elementary principles and powers of the old age of the flesh now that Christ has come with all the fullness of deity and the substance of what was once foreshadowed.

Now he drives home the point to the Colossians, underlining the practical import of this reality. Death releases us from the powers and the principles that once governed us in the realm where we formerly lived. However, even having been freed from these principles and powers, the Colossians were in danger of returning to live in terms of them, as if they were still governed by them.

Paul isn't necessarily accusing the Colossians of having done this, but he wants them to be exceedingly alert to the reality of the danger. The danger is that they will subject themselves to ascetic regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, as if these were what true religion is about. Such regulations were prominent features of the Judaism to which Judaizing missionaries might be tempting the Colossians.

However, all of these regulations are narrowly focused on material objects, and they arise from human traditions. While they may sound wise, like a true form of religion, they are really characteristic of a religion of human invention that imposes harsh treatment upon the body, but is ultimately futile in dealing with the true problem of the flesh and preventing its indulgence. It doesn't deal with the problem of the heart at the root of the fleshly condition.

We should recall Jesus' teaching from Mark 7, verses 18-23, with which Paul's teaching clearly has a very great deal in common. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. The form of the most likely Jewish ascetic religion that Paul is challenging in his teaching to the Colossians actually has much in common with pagan religion, with its shared preoccupation with the flesh, yet inability to tackle its underlying heart issue.

True and faithful religion has a rather different character to it, and Paul goes on to discuss what this alternative pattern of practice must look like. The truth at the heart of

a true pattern of Christian religion is the resurrection of Christ, and our participation in it by the Spirit. We belong to a different realm of existence, having undergone a translation into a new sphere of transformed life.

We must live in terms of the freedom that this affords us. The new pattern of religion is founded upon the achieved fact of our participation in the resurrection of Christ, not some attempt to achieve resurrection for ourselves. Our death and resurrection is a fact for Christians, a fact that must be the fundamental truth of our existence.

Our lives are now situated with Christ and God, and the full reality of our lives awaits us in the day of the revelation of Christ. Our current existence must be lived in anticipation of this, a living out of the reality-filled promise of what we will one day be. Behind all of this is the question of the real me.

Who am I really? Paul wants the Colossians, and us, to answer this by pointing to Christ and declaring that our lives are hidden in him. And there is a real hiddenness here. We do not generally appear righteous, whether to ourselves or to others.

We are all too aware of our own sinfulness and failings. Yet we have died, and will be raised with Christ. This is something that is sealed to us in our baptisms.

We must live by faith in this promise, constantly declaring to ourselves the deep truth of our existence, against all of the appearances. We must constantly return to God's word about our true existence, and live in terms of it. Our true life is part of the mystery of Christ, a mystery largely hidden from the world, but gloriously revealed to God's people.

God is like the sculptor standing in front of us as his blocks of marble, declaring that we are glorious images of his Son. To most eyes, of course, we simply look like great blocks of marble, bearing no clearly discernible form. However, the sculptor's word is an assurance that the reality of our existence is not defined by what we currently appear to be, but by what we are being fashioned into.

Paul wants us to think of ourselves in this way. We are not primarily the unhewn block, but that glorious image waiting to be revealed by the work of the master sculptor upon us. Thinking of ourselves in such a manner, we will identify and act very differently.

We will see a great deal in ourselves that doesn't belong to what we are to become. Rather, it is destined to become chippings and rubble, those parts that are to be removed from the marble block, to release the glorious sculpture now trapped by them within it. We may define ourselves, by certain of our sins, obstinately resistant to the chisel of the sculptor that would seek to strip us of them.

These things, however, are earthly. They are marked out for divine wrath. No matter how attached we may currently be to these things, they imprison us.

And if we will not be freed from them, they mark us out for destruction too. Paul especially foregrounds sexual immorality and the sinful desires, passions and lusts that underlie it. Such sexual sins and lusts are often particularly emphasised by Paul, perhaps because they most readily become defining of people's existence and identity.

Behind all such sins, however, lurks covetousness, the greed that so commonly drives us, and behind that, the monster of idolatry itself, by which we devote our lives to the service of something other than the true God, and fashion false masters in our own perverted image. Our lives were once defined by such sins and practices. Indeed, these were the air we breathed, the water we swam in, and the realm we inhabited.

They were our manner of life, the things that we set our minds upon, our preoccupation and our governing concerns. However, now we must shed them all like an old skin. If Paul's list of vices in verse 5 foregrounded sexual sins, in verse 8 he foregrounds sins of the mouth, which are often so prominently condemned in the scripture.

Again, we should recall our Lord's teaching concerning true impurity in Matthew 15, 17-18. Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled, but what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person? Christians must trace the problem back to the root, through the mouth and down into the heart. As N.T. Wright observes, the old form of religion went after symptoms, but the new form goes for the root.

The new humanity in Christ that Paul is speaking about is not an individualistic reality. It's a new body of people who are renewed, not merely as detached persons, but in a restored and transformed society. The old self of the flesh is the old forms of society that we were once embedded in.

Forms of society governed by vicious speech, by lies, and by the biting and devouring of each other that is characteristic of speech in such society and the flesh. We have left behind these old solidarities, again something symbolically manifest in our baptisms. The new humanity into which we are placed is being renovated and renewed in the image of its creator, made into what God always intended for humanity to be.

In the body of Christ, humanity is rising to its true and proper stature, no longer stunted and distorted by sin. We are being renewed into knowledge, brought to a true recognition of our creator, of what we are as his images, and of what everything else is in the light of his being, truth and glory. In this new humanity, the differences, oppositions, and antagonisms and tensions that characterize life in the flesh, the differences between the various families and social classes of humanity, are abolished, as all divisions are traversed by the unifying spirit of Christ that fills all, placing every human being, whatever their fleshly identity or background, upon the same firm footing of the broad sunlit uplands of God's glorious grace.

A question to consider. Here, as in related passages such as Ephesians chapter 4, Paul gives a special attention to the importance of a renewed way of speaking. What are some of the ways in which Christians should and can stand out from others by their manner of speaking, and their forms of conversation as a society? What are some specific ways that we can put off the old self, and put on the new self in this regard, in the situations within which we find ourselves? In Colossians chapter 3, Paul has been talking about the ways that we should regard ourselves in the light of our participation in Christ, and how we should put off the old self, condemning to death those aspects of ourselves that are earthly.

Now, in the second half of the chapter, he turns his attention more fully to the alternative patterns of life that we must adopt, patterns of life that are characteristic of the new self. These are the new garments, as it were, with which we must clothe ourselves. As God's chosen people, we must be marked and distinguished by particular graces.

Speaking of Gentile Christians as God's chosen people is to refer to them in ways previously reserved for Israel. In place of the vices that Paul has mentioned earlier, as things to be put off, we must positively clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. These are the sorts of behaviours that would have been perceived as weak and servile by the surrounding Greco-Roman culture, lacking in honour, spiritedness, power, dominance, and generally unmanly.

A real man stands up for his honour, avenges himself, he's proud and tough, and effectively asserts his dominance. While the Christian faith still has a substantive account of masculinity, which can also require defence from challenges of a rather different kind in the contemporary context, it is imperative that we appreciate how much of a revolutionary departure from cultural norms the vision of virtue in the teaching of Paul actually was, and that we resist the calls to return to such pagan norms, especially in the context of masculinity, that we hear from various quarters. Such traits of meekness, forbearance, and forgiveness will distinguish us as people of Christ, making us stand out from the people who are around us.

Paul's teaching here concerning forgiveness recalls that of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6, verses 14-15. For Paul, love is the quintessential Christian virtue. It's the virtue that holds everything together.

It runs throughout the whole. Love is the white light that is refracted into the various virtues that he speaks of here and elsewhere. Elsewhere, when Paul speaks of love, he speaks of it as the fulfilment of the law.

In Romans 13, verses 8-10. In Jesus' teaching also, love to God and one's neighbour summarises and unites the entirety of the commandments. Once you understand the

centrality of love, the unity of everything else becomes apparent.

Love is also that in which everything else reaches its glorious height. In 1 Corinthians 13, verses 1-3. Love is also that without which everything else is vain or empty.

1 Corinthians 13, verses 1-3. The peace of Christ should rule in the hearts of his people. Paul makes a similar point back in Philippians 4, verses 7. If the Colossians are to avoid the wrath, the envy, the malice and the anger that drives most people, they need peace to reign in their hearts.

When others around us are stirred up by anger, resentment, antagonisms, fear, anxiety and all these other things, how do we know the calm that enables us to think clearly and act wisely? It's God's peace that guards our hearts and minds in situations of conflict. On occasions when there is conflict without, if this peace reigns within, our hearts and minds will be protected from being caught up in it. We will be able to think and act with wisdom and grace when others are losing their composure, their wits or their clarity of mind.

We were called to such peace as one body. The peace isn't just to be internal to us as individuals, but characteristic of Christian community more generally, enabling us to exist at peace with each other, as one body, rather than as a fractious set of warring factions. The peace of Christ is a mark of his rule.

It's a mark of his assuaging the fears and subduing the passions and the antagonisms that assail us. The peace of Christ is the result of his conquest of our rebellious spirits, his stilling of the boisterous waves of our souls. And when such peace reigns within us, it should be expressed in the giving of thanks.

Paul calls for the word of Christ to dwell in us richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts to God. Paul's teaching at this juncture follows the pattern that we see in Ephesians 5, verses 18 following, where he moves from teaching about the word of Christ dwelling in us, to teaching a code of behaviour for the Christian household. Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In both of these places, Paul talks about the indwelling of Christ as something manifested and realised in the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. In scripture, the word of God is often given to us from outside. When we read the word of the law, it comes to us first and foremost as words from outside of us that we hear.

However, we are supposed to take the word of God into us, to make the word of God part of us through memorisation and also through song. Singing the psalms is a way in which the word of God becomes part of us. It conscripts our emotions, it arises from within us,

it is something that appeals to the loves, the desires, the affections, and it calls us forth in delight and love for God's truth.

In the singing of psalms, the word of God becomes richly part of us. They are not just words that we are sent to outside of ourselves, they are expressed in the first person. They are an expression of the heart that has been warmed by the truth of God and now declares that truth with transformed affections.

The word of God having been hidden in our hearts by memorisation and meditation and now springing forth in delightful song and worship. Everything that we do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, under his authority and for his glory. And we give thanks to God the Father through him, as creatures of God's handiwork and as tokens of his redemption.

Everything that we have and are is a gift that we have received from God's hand. And the purpose of our lives should be a rendering back of ourselves, in word and in action, to God in thanks. From this, Paul turns to the behaviour that should characterise the Christian household.

The Christian household in the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and their children, and between servants and their masters. Paul's teaching on these matters is not just a knee-jerk conservatism, a desire for social conformity and respectability from Christians that will avoid them becoming scandalous in their society. No, the practices that he advocates are related back to the Lord.

Wives are to submit to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord. This submission is a form of behaviour that is appropriate to the new realm of life into which we have been brought by God's grace in Christ. The relationship between husbands and wives is not a symmetrical one.

Wives are instructed to relate to their husbands in a way that differs from the way that husbands are instructed to relate to their wives. This is the same in other parts of the New Testament, both in the teaching of Paul and in the teaching of Peter. However, it should be noted that Paul does not say, husbands, you have authority over your wives, and wives, you must submit to that authority.

Paul's teaching is not founded upon a male prerogative. Rather, both husbands and wives are instructed to give priority to consideration of the other and their well-being. The asymmetry is important though.

In Paul's teaching elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 11, 3 and Ephesians 5, 23, he speaks about the man as the head of his wife. As such, the man should be given an especial honour. The nature of headship is not primarily seen in the face-to-face relationship between the husband and the wife, but more particularly in the way that the husband

leads the way out into the world.

The husband stands for his wife and family in the wider society, and he is particularly responsible for setting the tone and maintaining the foundations and boundaries of his household. As his wife submits to him, she is not acting as a doormat, but rather making this task joyful and pleasant for him, one in which the weight of the responsibility that he bears is not experienced as one subjecting him to constant blame, but rather as one that honours him with a particular and important task, his wife acting as his counsellor and encourager and supporter, not his constant critic. For his part, he is called to love his wife, especially seen in not being harsh with her.

He has to be gentle, kind, meek, forgiving, and forbearing with his wife. His position in the family is not one that is given to him for self-aggrandisement, but rather for the building up of the entire household in a way that glorifies God. This is particularly important when he is raising his kids.

A father who is overbearing, a father who tries to dominate his household, can be a great cause of frustration and discouragement for his children. The Christian father, by contrast, should be one that encourages and builds up his children. He must use his own strength in a way that builds up the weaker people around him.

In a way that enables them to rise to their own full stature. Rather than provoking his children, he should be kind and gentle, encouraging them in their growth by his careful instruction. Many Christians would find themselves in a position of slavery.

Slavery was a common position for people in the ancient world, and it could feel alienating as if they had no agency whatsoever. But even for the bond-servant, there is a way in which they can find dignity in their labours. They can work as to the Lord.

Not just for the eyes of their masters and for what they see, but for what the Lord, their true master, sees. In recognizing that their true master is the Lord, and not primarily their earthly master, the mindset that they take to their labours can be one governed by the dignity that they find in work that is ordered towards the approval of Christ. From him they will receive not meagre payment, but a rich inheritance, one belonging to the sons of God.

Knowing the justice of their true master, they can also act with patience and fortitude in situations of oppression. They know that the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong that he has done. Oppressive earthly slave-owners will one day be judged by the Lord, whereas those who have faithfully sought the Lord's approval will be rewarded.

A question to consider, how, looking at Paul's teaching concerning the proper behaviour of Christians, can we see that Christ is absolutely integral and indispensable to the entirety of it? Paul continues his instructions concerning proper household order at the

beginning of chapter 4, before concluding his epistle with requests and greetings. A well-ordered household is a matter that is addressed on several occasions in the New Testament. The church itself is a household, and its members have their own households.

Especially in this stage of the church's history, much of its life would have occurred within the realm of households, with wealthier members hosting a congregation within their house and supporting its ministers and ministries as patrons. Nympha, in this very chapter, is an example of a woman who hosts a church within her house. When we think of the household, we may think of a domestic realm of retreat from the world of work, study and public life, where we recharge ourselves and enjoy the company of our immediate family.

It's a realm primarily of recreation. However, in the world within which Paul is writing, the household was a very great deal more than that. Our own society is more of a historical outlier in this respect.

The household was far more integral to society, a centre of labour, business and government. The household was its own economy and productive entity, within which its members needed to depend upon good order and collaborative labour in order to survive and thrive. It wasn't the case that the man typically went out to work, while the woman stayed at home as the housewife.

Households weren't narrowly focused on the young nuclear family, but were more extended and intergenerational in their character. Much that occurred in many households would be more analogous to the operations of a medium-sized company today. At points, God's government is understood after the analogy of the management of a household.

God is a father, and his fatherhood in the wider cosmos is analogous to the place of the father within his earthly household. All of this is important to bear in mind when we are reading these household codes, which have a fair amount in common with some other household codes in the ancient world. Aristotle or Xenophon's teaching on the household, and concerning men and women within it, have many points of similarity with the New Testaments.

And we should beware of overstating the differences. Even though there most definitely are some differences, in many respects Paul is nearer to that world than he is to ours. When we read about wives submitting to their husbands, for instance, we should keep the form of the household in mind.

Within the ancient household, the free man bore a weighty set of responsibilities of provision, protection and judgment, in overseeing the labour and relations of his household. The submission of his wife is not primarily about giving him the deciding vote

in matters of dispute, as some understand it today, but in honouring, upholding and counselling him as she works alongside him in the labour of forming a well-ordered and just household that impacts the wider society. The ideal is that, as she supports him, his realm of influence and weight in the wider society will increase, and as his wise and supportive second-in-command, she will enjoy a growing field for her own labours and level of honour within her community.

A wife who is constantly undercutting the authority of her husband in his household, or bringing dishonour to him in their community, is not a good wife. On the other hand, and this is perhaps where the distinctive emphases of the Christian teaching are most pronounced, a man who does not exercise his authority within his household in a way governed by love, building up and encouraging those within it, is failing in his calling. The formation of the household is a collaborative effort and the primary locus of both the man and the woman's labour, which is a rather different situation from the modern situation where men and women typically both leave their homes and sell the best part of their labour and its fruits to unrelated persons in order to serve the business enterprises of third parties rather than labouring in their own households before returning home to consume some of the money that they have earned at the end of the day and over the weekend.

While it may be strange of us to think of it in such a manner, certain aspects of our situation are more analogous to that of high-status slaves, and there are analogies to be drawn between the modern business owner and the master of slaves, both of whom might exert considerable power over those who work under them. Paul does not condemn the owning of slaves. While a slave-owning society is none ideal, much as a society that imprisons people, it is not presented as necessarily sinful within the Old or New Testaments.

In both Testaments there are a number of righteous slave-owners. In neither Testament is there any straightforward condemnation of slavery. The institution of slavery in the ancient world more generally, and in classical antiquity more particularly, was brutal and oppressive in its general character, although the conditions of slave could vary markedly, and many would have enjoyed materially better conditions than those of poor free persons.

Manumission would not have been a step up in the world for many slaves. For all of its common abuses, it was also more morally complex than the chattel slavery characteristic of the American antebellum South, which was a form of slavery generally ordered around race and man-stealing. That form of slavery, which is very clearly condemned categorically within Scripture, tends to serve as our paradigm for thinking about slavery more generally.

It should not do so. When, as here in verse 1, Paul addresses slave-owners, his concern

is not to abolish the institution, but to leaven it by love. Slave-owners need to treat their servants with fairness and with justice.

In Ephesians 6, verse 9, masters are charged to stop threatening their servants. Masters must recognize that they too have a master in heaven. By this reminder, Paul is leavening the institution of slavery by the golden rule.

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets, and by Christ's principle of judgment. For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Masters, you have a master in heaven.

Treat your servants accordingly. Servants are instructed to act towards their earthly masters as those working heartily for the Lord, promised a great inheritance as sons. The truth of Christian freedom and of sonship must guide them.

For masters, it is the principle of Christian service that is most pronounced. They must act towards their servants as those who are themselves bond servants of Christ, accountable to him, and answerable for how they treat other persons made in God's image. For as Paul reminds the Ephesians, there is no partiality with God.

The status of the slave owner does not exalt him over others in God's sight, or give him some greater dignity, or allow him to treat others with impunity. Paul charges the Colossians to continue steadfastly in prayer. Watchfulness and thanksgiving are the order of the day.

Watchfulness to the signs of God's work and the needs of the times, and thankfulness for the manifold blessings of God. Prayer is a constant work of the Church and for Christians, a sustained communication with God in our labors and lives. Paul is especially concerned for the success and the progress of the gospel mission.

He requests their prayer for an open door for the word. The word here is almost personified, as if it were someone seeking to gain access to certain closed realms. The word must be spread and avenues must be opened for it.

However, intercession is an essential part of how such avenues will be opened. How hearts will be made receptive, how opportunities will be presented, how possibilities will arise. This is all for the sake of declaring the mystery of Christ, of which Paul spoke earlier in the epistle.

Paul is imprisoned on account of this, but as he argues in 2 Timothy 2, verse 9, the word of God is not bound. In Philippians, for instance, Paul speaks of ways in which his imprisonment actually opened unexpected doors for the gospel. The doors that God will open for his word may not be the ones that we expect.

Paul is a herald of the mystery, and it is his task to reveal it, to make it clear. He asked the Colossians to pray also for this, that he might fulfill his calling in this crucial respect. The Colossians are to be mindful and wise in the ways that they act in the sight of their society.

The quality of their lives will be foundational for the success of their witness. This requires goodness and moral courage, but it also requires wisdom and creativity, as there will be pitfalls and traps and difficult decisions to be made. Faithfulness often requires wisdom, the ability to perceive the best courses of action, to take the right stance, and to perceive subtle errors.

The Colossians must be especially considerate of how they use their time and how they use their speech. The verb translated, making the best use of, here, is the same as that which is used in Ephesians 5, verse 16. In both places, I think that the sense of the verb that some translations capture with the translation, redeeming, is present, although it is clearer in Ephesians chapter 5, where we are told that they are supposed to do this as the days are evil.

In times dominated by wickedness, Christians must not simply maximize the Christian activities within their day planners, but they must resist the ways of thinking of and employing time that surround them, and must establish different patterns and habits and practices. They must relate their time to the coming day of the Lord with watchfulness. They must punctuate their time with rest and thanksgiving.

They must more fully root themselves in God's works in the past, and look with renewed hope to further horizons in the future. They must, in ages of decadence, sacrifice for that future. They must, in ages of revolution, honour their fathers and mothers.

In such ways, they will redeem the time in evil days. Their speech must likewise exhibit wisdom and grace. It must have the savour of salt, being lively with truth.

In a world of insipid error, Christians must bring words that have salience and power, words that stand out. This requires us to learn how to communicate words of truth with eloquence, passion, and integrity. In societies where words are light, the words of Christians must be weighty.

Knowing how to answer each person is a challenge, and we need to grow in wisdom in this area. The words that we speak must vary according to the persons and context that we address. The wise person must speak considered and measured words in season, not speaking rashly or carelessly.

The conclusion of the epistle contains elements familiar from others of Paul's epistles. Travel plans, greetings from various persons, final instructions, personal notes, and a benediction. James Dunne, following Roy Yates, remarks upon the great social mix of the

people represented in this chapter.

Large householders, nympha, a doctor, Luke, people with sufficient financial freedom or support to travel in the work of the gospel, Tychicus, Mark, and Epaphras, and slaves, Aeneas. There are also various descriptions such as fellow worker, minister, brother, fellow servant, and fellow prisoner. Tychicus is bearing the epistle, and he will also bring news of Paul to the Colossians.

Paul commends him to them with the intent that he will not only communicate how Paul and the others are doing, but that he will be able to minister to them. Tychicus is accompanied by Onesimus. This is likely the occasion of the sending of the epistle to Philemon, and all save the names of Philemon and Appia in the epistle to Philemon are also mentioned here.

Onesimus is one of them, he's a Colossian, but now he is one of them in a deeper way, as a Christian. Tychicus, who is privy to more of the details, can explain anything that needs further explanation about Onesimus' situation, and of what transpired. Paul sends greetings from six of his fellow workers, three Jews, Aristarchus, Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, and Jesus called Justus, and three Gentiles, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas.

Aristarchus is described as Paul's fellow prisoner, most likely literally. Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, was formerly a cause of division between Paul and Barnabas, in Acts 15, verses 37-40, Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.

Barnabas took Mark with him, and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. Mark's mother owned a large house in the city of Jerusalem, and this is the first time that we hear of his relationship with Barnabas, although it makes a lot more sense of the details of their connection elsewhere. Now it seems Paul has been reconciled to Mark, and recognises his value.

It isn't clear whether Mark is the author of the second epistle, but the belief that he was has been very widely held throughout church history. Epaphras is the one who has worked among the Colossians, and in the surrounding region of Hierapolis and Laodicea. Paul might not yet have met the Colossians, but Epaphras has told him all about them, and is in constant prayer for them.

Paul also has Luke and Demas with him. If the Mark mentioned here is the author of the second gospel, then we have reference to two gospel writers being in the same place as Paul, the author of the vast majority of the epistles of the New Testament. Almost 60% of the New Testament was written by these three men.

We also learn that Luke was a physician. Sadly, in 2 Timothy 4, verse 10, we learn the tragic news that Demas later forsook Paul, in love with this present world. Paul wants the Colossians to pass on these greetings to the Christians in Laodicea too, and to Nympha and the church meeting in her house.

There is quite a lot of debate over whether Nympha was a woman, or whether the person Paul is speaking of is Nymphas, a man, as the manuscript tradition has both forms within it. Not much depends upon this point, however. Possibly Paul has yet to visit Laodicea, which is why he can single out Nympha and the church at her house without fear of privileging her over others in the congregation.

Laodicea is of course one of the seven churches addressed in the book of Revelation. They are instructed to pass on the epistle to the Laodiceans, from whom it would presumably circulate more widely. They were also to read the letter that the Laodiceans had received, presumably from Paul, which a number of scholars believe is the epistle to the Ephesians.

These epistles would be read publicly to the congregations of the churches, and then they would be circulated further, presumably becoming gathered in small volumes quite early on. They expressed Paul's apostolic authority, and they also knit the young church more closely together, by encouraging lots of movement between congregations with these circulating letters. At this time then, it is likely that the Colossians would have received the epistle to the Ephesians, the epistle to the Colossians, and the epistle to Philemon.

One was directly addressed to them as a church, one was addressed to a particular member of the Colossian church, and the other was passed on from another church nearby. Archippus, who is also mentioned in the epistle of Philemon, is charged to fulfil the ministry that he has received. We don't know what this was, but perhaps it was some particular role in the church that met at Philemon's house.

Paul signs off the letter with his own hand, having presumably used an amanuensis to this point. He calls upon them to remember his chains. His imprisonment was a mark of his apostolic ministry, and his union with Christ in his sufferings in serving the church.

They also highlighted his need for prayer. He concludes by wishing them God's grace. A question to consider.

How might Paul's instructions concerning the use of time and speech remind us of the wisdom books of the Old Testament?