

Roman law dictates that my master can punish me in any way he chooses if I'm captured and returned to him. Forgive me if I seem a bit distracted. I may be dead in a few days. Or at least have a foot cut-off. Or an eye removed. It is all disconcerting.

While a runaway, I became a Christian, and I became very devoted to Paul. When Paul found out my secret, that I was a runaway slave, owned by a Christian, Paul had no choice but to send me back.

Paul recently wrote letters to the Christians at Ephesus and Colossae, and is having them carried by Tychicus. He is also carrying a letter from Paul to my master, Philemon, who lives in Colossae. Although Paul wrote an effective letter, Philemon may still choose to punish me severely as a runaway slave. The suspense of what he will choose to do is crushing me.

I imagine slavery is abhorrent to you now. I hope so. But for us it's how things are, how they've always been in the Roman Empire. Captured in battle, kidnapped, born to a slave. Doesn't matter. What I think doesn't matter.

But it mattered to Paul. I know Paul is pleading for me in the letter, and I know Tychicus is the perfect person to encourage Philemon to be kind. I'm sure you can understand the anxiety I have about that letter.

Now, let me tell you about a different letter Paul wrote... to the Christians at Colossae, the letter you know as the book in the Bible named *Colossians*. I hope I convey to you that this is the most underrated of all of Paul's letters, and it has huge implications for your life.

Colossae is a small town in my time. It is only a way station about ten miles away from Laodicea, and 120 miles due east of Ephesus. In previous centuries it was an important city, but its current low stature will be diminished even further in a few years because of a devastating earthquake.

The church at Colossae was established at the same time as many others when Paul lived in Ephesus for nearly three years, and was training young men to scour the countryside looking for people to share the Gospel with. Epaphras was one of those young men that knew the people of Colossae well. Paul has not yet been to Colossae, and has no friends there, but he has heard that they are being subjected to false teachings. He wants to get them back on the right track.

Paul adds Timothy's name to the letter's greeting because the people in Colossae love Timothy and will want to know that he approves of the things Paul says in the letter. Paul soon adds Epaphras to the greeting because he is well known by the Colossians since he had lived there.

Paul tells them how much he gives thanks for them and prays for them because of their faith in Jesus. He reminds them that their faith comes from hearing the Gospel, the same Gospel that is growing throughout the whole world. He also reminds them that they heard the Gospel from Epaphras. I overheard Paul talk about his motives, I know that his long introduction is subtle support for what is next.

This most underrated of Paul's letters has huge implications for your life. This is why: from the beginning, Christianity had been attacked from outside forces, now it is beginning to be attacked from the inside, this attack is from false teachers in our midst. And, these attacks will continue until the end of time.

There is a movement that has been growing in the ranks of the Christians. It is called Gnosticism. Gnosticism as a philosophy is not yet fully developed, but it has its roots in Greek thought. It is based on the idea that matter is evil and cannot come into contact with God. If that is true, the work of Christ and the sufficiency of his saving sacrifice will be nullified. There are other types of false teachings, too.

From reading *Colossians*, you can see that Paul attacks certain features of the false teachers. They seek to diminish the role of Christ, and increase the role of human action. They seek to rely on human traditions and philosophies, not on the Gospel. They seek to rely on human speculation, not revelation from God. The false teachers want people to attain righteousness through deprivation, and their teachings lead to the worship of angels.

However, Paul's main strategy of dealing with false teaching is this: Be very careful about the qualifications and traits of your teachers of the Gospel. They should teach the true Gospel of Jesus. Anything different is not from God.

This strategy will serve Christians well from my time until the end of time. It has one weak point though. It demands that listeners understand the Bible on their own so they can discern what is from God and what is not. Without this understanding, countless people through the ages will succumb to false teachings and false teachers. Look around you. It is still happening in your world. Hopefully it is not happening to you. And, you have it easier than we did since you have the New Testament as a sure guide.

With that strategy in mind, Paul reminds the Colossians that Jesus is the exact representation of the invisible God, but that we are reconciled to God by the death of Jesus' physical body if we continue in faith and do not move from the hope held out in the Gospel. With those declarations, Paul unites the importance of the physical and spiritual natures of Jesus.

Paul reminds them that he is a servant by God's commission to present the Gospel. He says that he strenuously contends with all the energy he has because of Christ working through him. His goal is that all people have the full riches of complete understanding of Christ. After establishing his credentials and the Gospel he teaches, Paul delivers a telling blow to false teachers.

In one sentence Paul sums up his argument against false teachers. He implores the Colossians to, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than Christ."<sup>1</sup>

With that pronouncement, Paul has no trouble moving from the divinity of Christ and his forgiveness of sins, to reminding them that there is not reason to worry about human restrictions on worship or the futility of worshiping angels. These things have the appearance of wisdom, but truly have no value.

Maybe you're like me, you like to use your mind more than your heart when it comes to Scriptural things. Listen to this order of Paul's thoughts: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."<sup>2</sup> Did you get that? Heart first, head second.

Although Paul denies that forced abstinence has value, that doesn't mean he wants people to live undisciplined or unrighteous lives. To that end, Paul says to put death on any unwholesome physical activities, such as: sexual immorality, greed, anger, and lying. These sinful activities should be replaced with compassion, kindness, humility, and forgiveness. Over all of these virtues, put on love...which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Christians today often see these commands of Paul as comprehensive, lists of things to do or not do. A better way to think of them is: be like this, don't be like that; do these sorts of things, don't do those sorts of things. Remember that Paul is changing their entire world view.

To the Colossians who live in a sinful society, these commands must sound strange. But Paul follows up with things that they will cherish. Paul says to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts and be thankful. Rather than give a long, long list of rules, Paul finishes this part of his letter by saying, "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."<sup>3</sup>

Paul gives the Colossians about the same instructions for Christian households as he gives the Ephesians, which isn't odd since he wrote their letters at about the same time. I believe he does

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<sup>1</sup> Col. 2:8 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Col. 3:1-2

<sup>3</sup> Col. 3:17

this in the case of the Colossians to make sure that the false teachers are not burdening families unduly.

Paul ends his letter by reminding the Colossians to devote themselves to prayer and to be watchful. It is kind of a last swipe at the false teachers. He also asks that they pray for him to proclaim the Gospel as clearly as possible. Where the false teachers shroud their teachings in mystery, Paul wants to be crystal clear.

Paul asks the Colossians to share this letter with the Laodiceans who live about ten miles away...and that the Laodiceans share their letter. It is a shame, but I understand that no copy of that letter to Laodicea has survived to modern times.

Since scroll space is precious, Paul lets the Colossians know that they can ask Tychicus and me about him. He lets them know that we are precious to him...even though I am a slave. An escaped slave.

Okay, that's it, I've finished telling you about the letter known as *Colossians*, I need to rejoin Tychicus and keep traveling. It is only a few more days until we reach my master, Philemon, and I find out my fate. What will he do to me? What would you do to me?