**Colossians Commentary**

**Colossians Chapter 1**

Col 1:1

**“Timothy, our brother.”** In this context, the word “brother” does not so much indicate a fellow Christian, because Timothy was obviously a Christian, as it does a “helper” or “co-worker.”[[1]](#footnote-30872)

Col 1:2

**“the holy and faithful brothers and sisters.”** These are not two different groups—one group of “the holy” and another group of faithful brothers. Rather this salutation is directed at the one and same group of Christians at Colossae. This is an example of when the Greek *kai* (and), can act like “even,” making the construction read something such as, “holy ones, even faithful brothers and sisters.” For more on why the Christian is called a “holy one,” see commentary on Philippians 1:1.

**“from God our Father.”** This greeting is unique to Colossians and the reason for leaving out “and the Lord Jesus Christ” which appears in other greetings (cf. Eph. 1:2) is not specifically stated. However, James R. Dunn gives a very logical reason that Jesus Christ would have been omitted here. Dunn says, “It cannot be that Paul and Timothy did not want to associate Christ as an equal source of the grace and peace. …That would hardly accord with the high status ascribed to Christ elsewhere in the letter (Col. 1:15-20; 2:9), and in the very next breath they speak of God as “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Col. 1:3). Nevertheless, it may be deliberate that before embarking on the exposition of Christ’s full significance, the ultimate supremacy of the one God and Father is thus given prominence. The likelihood is strengthened by the formulation used in the thanksgiving in Col. 1:3.”[[2]](#footnote-23162) Colossians spends a lot of time extolling the work of Jesus Christ, which is certainly appropriate, but it is just as important, as Dunn says, to recognize the ultimate supremacy of the one true God, the Father, Yahweh. Jesus Christ is the Son of God and not equal to God.

There are some Greek texts that have the phrase “and the Lord Jesus Christ” in Colossians 1:2, but scholars see that as a later addition. There would have been pressure on scribes and copyists to make this greeting similar to other greetings, something textual scholars refer to as “harmonization,. The new enlarged greeting found its way into some English Bibles such as the King James Version and Young’s Literal Translation. Nevertheless, the shorter greeting from God the Father is original, and its very uniqueness, as well as the antiquity and diversity of the texts that contain it, testify to its being the original reading.

[For more on harmonization and the effect it has on translation, see commentary on Luke 11:2, “Father.” For more on Jesus Christ not being equal to God, see Appendix 6: “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son”]

Col 1:3

**“We always give thanks…when we pray for you.”** Although there is no corresponding word for “when” in this verse, its sense comes from the present participle “praying,” *proseuchomai* (#4336 προσεύχομαι). This is the temporal use of the participle, answering the question, *when?* The main action of this sentence is “we give thanks” and the present participle elaborates both the time when and manner by which thanks is given—“we give thanks when we pray.” This is because “the *present* participle is normally *contemporaneous* in time to the action of the main verb. This is especially so when it is related to a present-tense main verb,” as it is here, since the verb for “we give thanks” is also in the present tense.[[3]](#footnote-18788) In other words, the action of giving thanks occurs simultaneous to the action of praying. This fact is missed in translations that do not read “when we pray,” (e.g., KJV, ASV, NASB). The reading, “we give thanks to God…praying always for you,” does not necessarily communicate that the actions of giving thanks and praying are contemporaneous. Better are translations such as the REV, ESV, NIV, NET, and HCSB, which accurately translate the participle in its temporal sense by employing the word “when.”

Col 1:4

**“since.”** This is coming from the causal sense of the participle.[[4]](#footnote-16493) Although there is no actual word for “since” in the Greek text, it is implied in the use of the participle. The hearing of the Colossians’ trust and love marks the causal grounds for Paul’s giving thanks in Col. 1:3.

**“of your trust… of the love.”** In the Greek these are not genitive phrases, even though they are translated with the “of” formula. Rather, the words “trust” and “love” are simply the direct objects (in the accusative case) of the verb “heard.” The Greeks were comfortable saying “We heard your trust and love,” but in English we say, “We heard *of* your trust and love.”

Col 1:5

**“hope.”** The Greek noun is *elpis* (#1680 ἐλπίς), and it means “hope,” “that which is expected.” In Greek, the noun “hope” (*elpis*) is easily distinguishable from the verb “hope” (*elpizō*), but since English uses “hope” for both the noun and verb it is important to be aware of which it is. The verb “hope” refers to our expectation, while the noun “hope” usually refers to the content of the hope—the things we will receive in the future. Thus, new bodies and everlasting life with Christ on a new earth are part of our “hope” (noun), and what we hope (verb) for in the future. (See commentary on 2 Cor. 1:10).

**“is being stored up.”** This is the present participle of *apokeimai* (#606 ἀπόκειμαι), thus the “is being.” Our hope is presently in the process of being “stored up,” “put away as safekeeping,” “reserve[d] as reward or recompense.”[[5]](#footnote-12172) This agrees with the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 6:20, “store up [*thēsaurizō* (#2343 θησαυρίζω)] for yourselves treasures in heaven.” Because we are continuously earning rewards, our hope is continually being stored up. The theology of most translators is that, once we die, going to heaven is our reward, and since that hope is the same for all Christians, it makes no sense to speak of storing up more hope. This is perhaps why a majority of versions read, “the hope laid up for you in heaven,” expressing a one-time action, rather than acknowledging the continual process of the storing up. But salvation is not a same-hope-for-everyone-ticket-to-heaven; rather, some are storing up for themselves a greater hope by the actions of obedience in this life, a hope that will be delivered when the Lord pays back what is due for the things done in the body (2 Cor. 5:10). If Christianity were without the concept of rewards, with the equal payment of simply eternal life for all regardless of who strove to put off the flesh and who just “got in,” then we should expect this verse to have the aorist participle, reflecting a one-time salvation-only hope. But it is present, not aorist, meaning we are still continuously in the process of storing up our hope now. This fact is in contrast to the unrepentant, whose deeds are storing up wrath for themselves (cf. Rom. 2:5).

**“in heaven.”** A powerful truth, added for comfort. The good that we do is recorded by God and no human can take it away from us. It is safely in good hands. Jesus told us not to store up treasures on earth where it can be taken from us, but to store up treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21). It is important to realize that the treasure is only said to be stored up in heaven because we have no way to access it now. It is in God’s keeping. This verse is not saying that when we die, we will be in heaven, but just that the treasure is in the hands of God now (see commentary on Matt. 5:12).

**“message of truth—the good news.”** This same idea about the message of truth is found in Ephesians 1:13. The Greek reads, “the word (*logos*) of the truth of the good news.” In this context and time period, the logos (word) did not refer to the Bible but to the message itself, which can be unclear in the phrase, “the word of truth.” The phrase “of the good news” is the genitive of apposition, which is when the word in the genitive is equated with the same thing to which it stands in relation to.[[6]](#footnote-30225) In this case the good news is related to the word of truth, and the word of truth *is* the good news.

Col 1:6

**“for what it truly is.”** The believers heard the truth about the grace of God in the message of truth (Col. 1:5), and understood the grace of God for what it truly is. Paul wrote that the Colossians understood the grace of God “in truth” (Greek: *en alētheia*; ἐν ἀληθείᾳ).

Although the meaning of the Greek phrase is debated by scholars and some contend the meaning is “truly understood the grace of God,” that does not seem to be Paul’s meaning (although it must be admitted that the differences in proposed meanings can be quite subtle).

The REV translation and commentary agree with the many scholars who assert that the meaning of the Greek text is not that they “truly, really did understand” the grace of God, but rather that their knowledge of the grace of God was true knowledge.[[7]](#footnote-31069) R. C. H. Lenski writes: “We do not make “in truth” adverbial: ‘to hear and realize truly [the grace of God],’ for the doubling of the verbs already expresses this, as does also the strong verb *epegnōte* [“to know, understand”], which implies complete knowing and realization.”[[8]](#footnote-12783) Thus Lenski concludes, as the REV translation supports, that “in truth” refers to knowing the true character of the grace of God; what it truly is.

It is important to grasp why Paul would write that the believers in Colossae “understood the grace of God in truth” and not simply “understood the grace of God.” The Greco-Roman background of the people of the Roman world, and thus Colossae as part of that world, gave them a jilted understanding of any grace that was offered by the gods. The pagan gods were fickle and although they sometimes showed “favor,” *charis* (“grace”), it was usually only after they had been properly appeased with sacrifices, offerings, rituals, games, and an occasional temple being built in their honor, and even all those things were sometimes not enough to please them so they poured out their wrath on mankind.

How different is the grace of God from the “grace” of the pagan gods! God so loved that He gave. God moved and loved first. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Over time the believers in Colossae came to know the true nature of the grace of God, and Paul gives thanks to God for that. A knowledge of the true nature of the grace of God is empowering and inspiring.

Col 1:7

**“You learned *it* from Epaphras.”** It is very likely that Epaphras started the church at Colossae. He was from Colossae and labored for the people there (Col. 4:12). At the very least he was certainly an important teacher and point of influence in the church.

**“Epaphras.”** This is a shortened form of Epaphroditus, a very common Greek name of the time.[[9]](#footnote-23302) It is related to the goddess Aphrodite. Epaphras is mentioned here, in Col. 4:12, and in Philemon 23. He may be the same person as in Philippians 2:25 and 4:18, but due to the commonness of the name, there is no way to conclude that with certainty.

**“your.”** On whose behalf was Epaphras a minister? Our text reads, “On your behalf,” that is, Epaphras serves as a minister on behalf of the Colossians (cf. ESV, NRSV, HCSB, NAB). There is a variant, however, that reads “our” behalf, as though he were sent from Paul and company as a minister on Paul’s behalf (cf. NIV, NASB, NET, ASV). But the reading “your” is more likely. The translation “on behalf of” comes from *huper* (#5228 ὑπέρ), which means “for your sake,” “for your advantage.” Paul is saying Epaphras was a minister for the Colossians’ advantage, his ministry was for their sake.

Col 1:8

**“who also told us about your love.”** This is a way of Paul introducing what he knew about the church at Colossae in a very nice way. Epaphras obviously told Paul a lot of things about the Church in Colossae; how they were being influenced by many different teachings. Colossians was one of the two epistles Paul wrote to a place he had never been, which are Rome and Colossae. In the Epistle to the Colossians, there is evidence of pressure to follow some Jewish practices, some pagan practices, and even some Gnostic (or early Gnostic) practices. The Colossians loved the Lord, but they were being drawn away from him by the other belief systems.

**“in *connection with* the spirit.”** This refers to the holy spirit that is the gift of God. The Greek text in Romans 15:16 is the same, but the context is different so the translation is different.

While the article (“the”) is absent in the Greek text, it is appropriately supplied because the preposition *en* can make the noun *pneuma* (“spirit”) definite without the article. The preposition *en* is before the phrase, which means it can be understood as if the article was actually present. In Greek, if a preposition governs a noun, it is the context that determines whether the noun is definite or not, and therefore whether there should be a “the” or not in the English translation. Daniel Wallace writes: “There is no need for the article to be used to make the object of a preposition definite.”[[10]](#footnote-20476) A. T. Robertson writes: “...the article is not the only means of showing that a word is definite. ...The context and history of the phrase in question must decide. ...[As for prepositional phrases], these were also considered definite enough without the article.” Robertson then cites some examples that use *ek*.[[11]](#footnote-27434)

The Greek has the phrase *en pneuma* (#4151 πνεῦμα), and the preposition *en* only takes the dative case. The most likely meaning of the dative is to show the association between love and spirit: love “in connection with” the spirit. God’s gift of holy spirit works within us in many ways to the end that we are loving. For one thing, God can energize our love via the spirit. God is always working in us so that we want to do, and do, His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). Also, there is the fruit of the spirit that is love (Gal. 5:22), which is different from our “natural” or “human” love and flows out of the new spiritual nature that is born within us (Gal. 5:17). And there is love and joy that we have because we know that due to the New Birth and being permanently sealed with the gift of holy spirit, we are guaranteed everlasting life. So the phrase “love in the spirit” needs to be understood as “love that comes from our connection with the spirit.”

Col 1:9

**“Because of this.”** In this case, the “because of this” refers to all of “this” going back to the start of Colossians. Paul had many reasons for praying for the Colossians.

**“*about you*.”** The Greek simply has the verb “heard” and does not supply an object to the verb, which sometimes happens in Greek if the subject is considered to be clearly understood, which it surely was when Paul penned the epistle some 2,000 years ago. However, now there is confusion about whether Paul is referring to hearing about the love they had (Col. 1:8), or their faith and love (Col. 1:4). Given the possible confusion, some translations, like the REV, simply say “about you,” which helps the English (cf. TEV, NIV, CEV, NET, NLT).

Col 1:10

**“walk.”** Because the people in biblical times walked almost everywhere, “walk” became used idiomatically for living life. A paraphrased English Version might have, “so that you live your lives in a manner worthy of the Lord.” In this case, the word “walk” has become a part of modern Christian vocabulary, so most versions leave “walk” in the text.

**“fully pleasing.”** The Greek is literally, “unto all pleasing,” that is, to the point of being fully pleasing, and so it has been translated as “fully pleasing” (cf. HCSB, ESV, NRSV) with the supplied object of “to him.” To walk worthy of the Lord is to walk in a way that we are pleasing to him.

**“knowledge.”** The Greek is *epignōsis* (#1922 ἐπίγνωσις), which is composed of the Greek word for “knowledge” with the prefix *epi* as an intensifier—*full and clear knowledge*. Cf. Hendriksen’s translation, “clear knowledge.”[[12]](#footnote-28765) Louw-Nida defines the term as, “To possess more or less definite information about, possibly with a degree of thoroughness or competence—‘to know about, to know definitely about.’”[[13]](#footnote-17396) The Colossians already have knowledge of God, Paul only prays that such knowledge would be ever increasing in its fullness and clarity, that they would know “definitely” about Him.

Col 1:11

**“by means of.”** The Greek preposition is *kata* (#2596 κατά). *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* correctly notes that in this context, it indicates that the power we have proceeds from His glorious might. Thus, our power comes “by means of” His might, we do not have it in and of ourselves.

**“glorious might.”** The Greek reads, “might of his glory.” It is the attributive genitive, which is when the word in the genitive case (“glory”) acts as an adjective describing the head noun (“might”). So “might of his glory” becomes “his glorious might.” It is beneficial to translate the genitive phrase as what it means rather than to retain the reading “might of his glory” because the English reader can easily misunderstand the literal reading. Can glory have might? The phrase as it stands literally puts *glory* as the thing which we are strengthened by, rather than by God’s strength, i.e., His might.

**“so that you will have.”** The Greek preposition *eis* (#1519 εἰς) includes both purpose (thus, “to” or “for”) and the fact that the power goes to and touches its object, the point here being that one of the reasons to have the power of God in our lives is so we can be patient and endure (cf. NIV: “so that you may have;” see also *The Source NT*, “This will lead you to”).

God empowers us with His power, by way of the gift of holy spirit (cf. Eph. 3:16), so that we are able to endure whatever circumstances we are in and be patient in the circumstances we find ourselves in. Nevertheless, the power of God does not automatically work in us, but we must make an effort to utilize it and allow it to work in our lives. Every Christian has holy spirit and thus the empowerment of God, but not every Christian endures trials and is patient.

**“endurance.”** This Greek word *hupomonē* (#5281 ὑπομονή) is often translated “patience,” and although that is often a part of the meaning of that word, generally in the New Testament “endurance” is a better translation. See commentary on Galatians 5:22.

Col 1:12

**“giving thanks with joy.”** The REV sides with the phrase “with joy” best going with “giving thanks” rather than with “patience” in Col. 1:11. Grammatically, it could go with either, so why then is our rendering to be preferred? The answer lies in considering the parallel structure of participles beginning in Col. 1:10. In the Greek the words “bearing fruit,” “growing,” and “being strengthened” are all participles that have their modifiers preceding them in the text: “in every good deed, bearing fruit and growing; “in all power, being strengthened,” and likewise here in verse 12, “with joy, giving thanks.”[[14]](#footnote-23168)

**“qualified.”** The word for “qualified” is *hikanoō* (#2427 ἱκανόω), which the versions translate as either “qualified” or “enabled, made fit.” The word really means both. It points to a making sufficient and fitting out so that one is hence qualified.

**“you.”** There is a textual variant that reads “us” rather than “you” (cf. KJV, ASV, NASB). The word “you” is the best reading, however. It is much more likely the reading “us” arose as a scribal assimilation to match the “us” in Col. 1:13, than for a change from “us” to “you.”[[15]](#footnote-23113)

**“share.”** The Greek word is *meris* (#3310 μερίς), which can mean a “part” or a “share.” While either translation is quite good, the word “share” usually indicates ownership in part, such as when children have to “share” a toy. In the Millennial Kingdom that is coming in the future, the earth will be divided up to those who deserve an inheritance, and each person will get a “part” or a “share” according to what they deserve. Thus, for example, “Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree” (Mic. 4:4).

**“inheritance.”** The Greek is *klēros* (#2819 κλῆρος, pronounced 'clay-ros). Originally the word *klēros* was used of an object that was used in casting or drawing lots; usually a pebble, a potsherd (broken piece of pottery), or a piece of wood. Then it came to be used for what was won or obtained by lot, i.e., an allotted portion. The Messianic Kingdom will cover the earth (Dan. 2:35, 44), and there will be portions allotted to different tribes and people (Ezek. 45:1-8; 47:13-48:29). Meyer writes, “This *klēros*, of which the Christians are possessors ideally before the Parousia and thereafter really, is the theocratic designation of the property of the Messianic kingdom, and the *meris tou klērou* [“part of the allotment”] is the share of individuals in the same.”[[16]](#footnote-26730)

**“the *kingdom of* light.”** This phrase goes with the preceding phrase about the part of the allotment, and points to the realm of light, i.e., the Age to Come, the Millennial Kingdom of Christ. O’Brien writes, “...the inheritance for which the all powerful Father had fitted them was in the realm of the light of the age to come.”[[17]](#footnote-23222) Lightfoot writes: “The portion of the saints is situated in the kingdom of light.”[[18]](#footnote-18808)

Some commentators refer to the light being what we have now, inclusive of the blessings and knowledge of God, but that does not make sense in this context. The blessings we have from God right now are not an “inheritance,” and not an allotted portion, because we all have access fully to the knowledge and blessings of God. The only true “allotment” for Christians will occur in the future Messianic Kingdom on earth, and although we are all qualified to receive a share, different people will receive different allotments based on what they have done for Christ in their lives. Some people who have faithfully served Christ will receive a rich welcome (2 Pet. 1:11), while others will be ashamed (1 John 2:28). The future Messianic Kingdom is portrayed as a very bright place (Isa. 30:26). and it will be physically light and spiritually light as well because there will be no wickedness there.

Col 1:13

**“authority.”** The Greek word is *exousia* (#1849 ἐξουσία), and means “authority,” not “power” which would be *dunamis* (#1411 δύναμις) or perhaps *kratos* (#2904 κράτος). Each Christian has been bought by the blood of Jesus Christ, and now legally belongs to God. We are not our own (1 Cor. 6:19), and we have been redeemed (bought back) from sin and death, and transferred to the Kingdom of the Son. Since we are not under the authority of darkness (the Devil), he cannot legally afflict us. Nevertheless, Christians are regularly mistreated and even killed by the “power” of darkness that controls this world. The Devil is a liar and murderer, and he does not recognize God’s legal authority. However, even though we are not under the legal “authority” of darkness, because we live on earth, we are still greatly affected by the powers of evil.

**“his beloved Son.”** The Greek text is literally, “the son of his love.”

Col 1:14

**“redemption, the forgiveness of *our* sins.”** This verse in the KJV and YLT follows a textual variant that adds the words “through his blood.” This addition was most likely an interpolation from Ephesians 1:7. It probably originated as a marginal note added for clarification by a scribe, which subsequently got copied into the text. If the reading with “through his blood” were original, there would be no reason for scribes to omit the phrase.[[19]](#footnote-18866)

**“redemption.”** This is the idiom prophetic perfect—speaking of a future event as past to emphasize the certainty of its occurrence. Although through Christ’s atoning work we have been presently redeemed, the fullness of our redemption is yet future, as there are other verses that speak of our redemption as a future act (Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:14; 4:30). See commentary on Ephesians 2:6 for more on the prophetic perfect.[[20]](#footnote-16470)

Col 1:15

**“image.”** The Greek word is *eikōn* (#1504 εἰκών), and it means “image.” Jesus was the image of God in the sense in which he said that if we had seen him, we had seen the Father. Trinitarians claim that this verse shows that Jesus is God, but that cannot be the case, because it speaks of Christ being “the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God.” If Christ were “God,” then the verse would simply say so, rather than that he was the “image” of God. The Father is plainly called “God” in dozens of places, and this would have been a good place to say that Jesus was God. Instead, we are told that Christ is the *image* of God. If one thing is the “image” of another thing, then the “image” and the “original” are not the same thing. The Father *is* God, and that is why there is no verse that calls the Father the image of God. Calling Jesus the image of God is very good evidence he is not God. There are Trinitarian theologians who assert that the word *eikon* (from which we get the English word “icon,” meaning “image,” or “representation”) means “manifestation” here in Colossians, and that Christ is the manifestation of God. We believe that conclusion is unwarranted. The word *eikon* occurs 23 times in the New Testament, and it is clearly used as “image” in the common sense of the word. It is used of the image of Caesar on a coin, of idols that are man-made images of gods, of Old Testament things that were only an image of the reality we have today. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says that Christians are changed into the “image” of the Lord as we reflect his glory. All these verses use “image” in the common sense of the word, *i.e.,* a representation separate from the original. 1 Corinthians 11:7 says, “A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the *image* and glory of God.” Just as Christ is called the image of God, so men are called the image of God. We are not as exact an image as Christ is because we are marred by sin, but nevertheless, the Bible does call us the “image” of God. Thus, the wording about being the image of God is the same for us as it is for Christ. The words in the Word must be read and understood in their common and ordinary meaning unless good reason can be given to alter that meaning. In this case, the common meaning of “image” is “likeness” or “resemblance,” and it is used that way every time in the New Testament. Surely if the word “image” took on a new meaning when it referred to Christ, the Bible would let us know that. Since it does not, we assert that the use of “image” is the same whether it refers to an image on a coin, an image of a god, or for both Christ and Christians as the image of God. Jesus is not God, but he so closely resembled God in how he lived and acted that he is called the image of God.

[For more on the image of God, see commentary on Gen. 1:27.]

**“the firstborn of all creation.”** This phrase refers to Christ being the firstfruits of those raised from the dead (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20). The Greek is “the firstborn of all creation” (or “the firstborn of every creature,” since there is no article before “creation”), but the exact significance of the genitive is debated. One natural reading of the genitive case is the partitive genitive, which would be saying that Jesus is the firstborn one of the rest of creation, which is true and makes sense, since Jesus was indeed the first person ever to be raised from the dead in a new, everlasting body. However that interpretation is rejected by Trinitarians, not because of grammar, but because they claim that Jesus was not in fact part of the creation at all, but is actually the eternal God.

The genitive can also be a genitive of relation, which would mean that Jesus was the firstborn in relation to other creations, that is, that Jesus was “firstborn,” i.e., raised from the dead, before anyone else. Although that is also a natural reading of the genitive case in this context, and is certainly true, that explanation is also sometimes rejected by Trinitarians because it does not inherently recognize the Trinitarian doctrine that Jesus is God in the flesh.

Some Trinitarians prefer the genitive of comparison,[[21]](#footnote-23348) because that would make the verse say that Christ was inherently better than the others who were raised from the dead. But while Christ is no doubt better than the other saved people who will be raised from the dead, that use of the genitive is not usual in a context like this, and thus is not the most natural reading of the genitive in this verse. The genitive in the verse is not naturally supportive of the doctrine of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the idea of the comparative genitive combined with the doctrine of the Trinity is why some versions translate the verse into English as “the firstborn over all creation,” which is an interpretation of what the Greek means, rather than a translation of the Greek.

God likely used the genitive in this verse because it can be understood in multiple ways, all of which are true, which is the beauty of the genitive case: it can emphasize several things at one time. As a partitive genitive, it shows Jesus is part of God’s creation, which he is; as a genitive of relation it shows that Jesus was the first person raised from the dead to everlasting life, which he was; and as a comparative genitive, it shows that God has given rank and privileges to Jesus Christ, which He did. In biblical society, being the firstborn had privileges associated with it that Jesus Christ, as the firstborn, certainly receives.

Col 1:16

**“in *connection with* him.”** The Greek reads *en autō* (ἐν αὐτῷ, “in him”) meaning “in Christ.” God was the creator, and He created “in Christ,” or as it can be better understood, “in connection with Christ.” The exact connection in the creation has to be defined by the scope of Scripture, and we can see from the subjects here in Colossians 1 and the specific vocabulary that is used that this “creation” is the new creation and new order that occurred after Jesus ascended into heaven. Also, to fully understand what this section of Scripture is saying, we need to know that the phrase “in him” is a common Greek expression in Paul’s writings and is especially common in the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians where Paul regularly uses it to describe God’s actions as being brought about “in him” or “in Christ,” meaning “in union with Christ” or “in connection with Christ.”

Eric Chang writes, “The [Greek] term *en Christō* (in Christ) occurs 73 times in Paul. The similar term, *en autō* (in him), occurs 24 times in Paul, of which 19 refer to Christ (8 times in Colossians, including Col. 1:16). In Paul’s letters, *en tō Iēsou* (in Jesus) occurs only in Eph. 4:21. Every verse was individually checked and verified. Adding the 73 instances of “in Christ,” plus the 19 instances of “in him” referring to Christ, plus the sole instance of “in Jesus,” we have a total of 93 instances of “in Christ” (or variations) in Paul’s writings so far. …Here is a critical fact: In none of these 93 instances is it linguistically necessary to translate the term as “by Christ” or “by him”! In Colossians 1:16, many Bibles correctly have “in him” but others have quote “by him” for doctrinal reasons. NASB and ESV have “by him” in Colossians 1:16, but “in him” everywhere else in Paul’s letters!”[[22]](#footnote-30559)

Many of the times “in Christ” is used, the sense of the Greek preposition *en* (meaning “in”) is locative and it refers to the sphere in which God has accomplished certain things. The concept of “in” referring to a sphere of relationship or influence can be strange to English speakers because we are used to people being “in” a place like a room, but are not used to being “in” a person like Jesus, nevertheless, being “in Christ” is common in the Church Epistles. Examples of this sense of *en* are: the believer is chosen “in him [Christ]” (Eph. 1:4), the sacred secret that God planned beforehand is “in him (Christ)” (Eph. 1:9), and God’s creation of “one new man” composed of Jew and Gentile is “in him (Christ)” (Eph. 2:15).

Some of the locative occurrences can be understood better as meaning “in union with” such as how believers have received all spiritual blessings “in Christ” (Eph. 1:3), both Jews and Gentiles are equal heirs of God’s covenant promises “in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:6), or how believers have received the fullness of God by being “in him (Christ)” (Col. 2:10).

However, another sense of the locative use of *en* can mean “in connection with,” as is the case here in Colossians 1:16. This is different than being “in union with” Christ because the object stands in a certain “connection with” or “relationship with” Christ rather than being “united with” Christ. Examples of this second locative sense are God’s calling that is “in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14), the freedom believers have “in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 2:4), and the will of God for the holy ones that is “in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18).

Here in Colossians 1:16, Paul is stating that Christ is the “sphere” within which God has performed the work of creation.[[23]](#footnote-19730) This “creation” is not referring to Genesis 1 but rather the work of creation that is described in the following clause of the verse (i.e., thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities). The sphere within which these things have been created “in Christ” is that they have been created “in connection with” who Christ is, the plan of redemption that culminated in Christ’s death and resurrection, the realities of new creation, the Body of Christ, of which he is the head, and in relation to Christ himself as the firstborn from the dead. All of God’s secret will, counsels, and activities in creating thrones and dominions and positions of rule and authority are all centered on and have their basis in Jesus, the Christ. His lordship as the risen Anointed One is the framework within which all these realities have been created. Nothing in the world that God is restoring has been created apart from who Christ is as the king and head over all things.

Here in Colossians 1:16, as in many other places in Paul, the Greek phrase *en autō* (ἐν αὐτῷ) means “in him,” “in connection with him,” and is not using the *en* as an instrumental dative to mean “by him.” The things were created “through him and for him,” so he cannot both be the creator and have the creation made “through him.” Besides that, the Greek verb translated by the phrase “were created” early in the verse is a passive verb, whereas if Christ was the creator and the creation was made “by him,” the verb would be active. God is the creator, and he created “in connection with” His Son, Jesus Christ.[[24]](#footnote-21358)

**“all things were created.”** The Greek verb translated “created” is *ktizō* (#2936 κτίζω), and it means to create. But this verse is not referring to God creating the world in the beginning. It is referring to His creating the positions of authority that are needed to run the Church, which started on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The Bible describes both the physical and spiritual realities that God created by the phrase, “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.”

Many people think that because Colossians 1:16 says, “For by him all things were created” (KJV), the verse is speaking of the original creation of the universe but that is not the case. To discover what this verse is saying, we must read the entire verse with an understanding of the usage of the words in the verse and also any figures of speech involved. The study of legitimate figures of speech is quite demanding and academically rigorous, and the best work we know of was done in 1898 by E. W. Bullinger, titled *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*.

When the word “all” (or “every” or “everything”) is used, it is often used in a limited sense. For example, when Absalom was holding a council against his father, David, 2 Samuel 17:14 says that “all the men of Israel” agreed on advice that was given. “All” the men of Israel were not there and did not all agree, but the verse uses “all” in its limited sense, meaning, “all” who were there, and that limited group all agreed. Another example is Jeremiah 26:8, which says that “all the people” seized Jeremiah to put him to death, but the context makes it very clear that “all the people” were not even present. Again, “all” is being used in a limited sense. The point is that whenever we read the word “all,” we must determine whether it is being used in the wide sense of “all in the universe,” or in the narrow sense of “all in a certain context.” When Colossians 1:16 says “all things were created,” we know from both the context and the scope of Scripture that “all” is being used in a limited sense.

Another thing we must understand in order to correctly interpret Colossians 1:16 is the figure of speech called “encircling.” Bullinger says that the Greeks called this figure of speech epanadiplosis, while the Romans labeled it inclusio, and he gives several pages of biblical examples of this figure.[[25]](#footnote-26347) To understand the “encircling,” we must note that the phrase “all things were created” occurs at both the beginning and end of the verse, encircling the list of created things. The things that God created as per this verse are not rocks, trees, birds, and animals, but are “thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities,” and these are the authorities and positions that were needed to run the Church. By surrounding the list of thrones, dominions, etc., with the word “create,” the figure of speech epanadiplosis (“encircling”) helps us to identify the proper context of “all things,” and shows us that it is the narrower sense of the word “all” that is being used in the verse.

There are strong parallels between Colossians 1:16 and Ephesians 1:21 which should enlighten our understanding of Paul’s words here in Colossians 1:16. We read, “that he worked in Christ when he raised him from among the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above every **ruler**, and **authority**, and **power**, and **dominion**, and every name that is named, not only in this age but **also in the one to come**; and he put all things in subjection under his feet and appointed him *as* the head over **all things** *related to* the **church**” (Eph. 1:20-22). There are a few things to point out in this closely related passage. First, these titles (likely of angelic beings) are used in a context of Jesus post-resurrection. Paul does not have in mind a Genesis creation, but a time when Jesus has been exalted as Lord. Secondly, Paul specifically mentions the age “to come” in conjunction with these angelic beings. Thus, again Paul has the new creation in mind. Lastly, like in Ephesians 1:22, Paul says that Jesus is the head over “all things *related to* the Church.” Again, in Paul’s mind, this is not “all things” in totality such as plants and animals, but all things with respect to the Church. Jesus is head over everything in the Church. So, we have even more reason to understand that the “all things” in Colossians 1:16 is a reference to the New Creation.

If Colossians 1:16 was referring to God creating the universe in the beginning of time, we should expect it to reflect something like the wording of Genesis 1:1, something like, “in him, the heavens and the earth were created,” or at least enumerate some of the common things that we associate with the Genesis creation, such as birds or land animals. Instead, Paul says, “in connection with him all things were created **in heaven** and **on earth**,” (Col. 1:16) and enumerates different types of angels (rulers, dominions) which are nowhere found in the Genesis creation account. In fact, Paul uses the exact language as Ephesians 1:10 which says, “with a view toward the administration *that occurs* at the fullness of the times, to unite under one head all things in Christ, the things **in the heavens** and the things **on the earth**.” This unification under Christ of “all things” in heaven and on earth happens at the fullness of times, not at the Genesis creation. Thus, the language “in heaven and on earth” is new creation language in Paul, not Genesis creation language. In the Genesis creation, the heavens and the earth were created; in the new creation, things *in* heaven and *on* the earth are created.

There is another reason why the “all things” being created in Colossians 1:16 is not all things in totality, but all things that are part of the new creation. Namely, these same “all things” are reconciled to God in Colossians 1:20. Since it is clear from other portions of Scripture that there will be many unreconciled people (Matt. 7:13-14, 23), this cannot mean “every person who has ever lived.” Some things, or people, will not be reconciled. However, all things in the new creation, and in the Church, will be reconciled to God.

In light of the above information, it is best to understand Colossians 1:16 as referring to the New Creation, not to the Genesis creation. When the Church started on Pentecost, it needed a structure to run in a godly fashion, and that structure consisted of spiritual beings and people in positions of authority, and God, “in connection with Christ” created those positions.

[For more on Col. 1:15-20 being a New Creation passage, see commentary on Col. 1:18.]

**“thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.”** These are some of the authorities in the spiritual world and physical world that God created in connection with Jesus in order to run his church.

[For more on the use of “rulers” and “authorities” in the New Testament, see the REV commentary on Eph. 6:12.]

**“thrones.”** The Greek is “thrones,” the plural of *thronos* (#2362 θρόνος). Lightfoot writes: In all systems alike these ‘thrones’ belong to the highest grade of angelic beings, whose place is in the presence of God.”[[26]](#footnote-10954) We agree with Lightfoot that these “thrones” (likely a metonymy for those beings who sit on the thrones) are a high order of angelic beings, and the position was created by Christ for his Church.

**“dominions.”** The Greek *kuriotēs* (#2963 κυριότης) is from the word *kurios* (“lord”), which is the same word for “lord” in the phrase, “the Lord Jesus Christ.” It refers to those who have a position that is above or over others. According to the meaning of the word and its close association with the preceding word “thrones,” it is likely that these “dominions” refer to very powerful spirit beings who have high positions in God’s kingdom.

**“rulers or authorities.”** The Greek is *archē* (#746 ἀρχή) and *exousia* (#1849 ἐξουσία). The word *archē* refers to one who is first, a leader or ruler, while *exousia* refers to “authority.” These two words appear together nine times in the New Testament (Luke 12:11; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; Titus 3:1). Sometimes they clearly refer to earthly powers (Luke 12:11; Titus 3:1); in others, they refer to spiritual powers (Eph. 6:12). Jesus created positions of authority in the Church in both the spiritual and physical realm. The apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers in the Church are part of the physical realm and the human authority structure. Although it could be argued that in this verse “rulers or authorities” only refer to angelic rulers and were created “in the beginning,” that is an interpretation. It could just as easily be argued that in this verse the meaning, or part of the meaning, of these words refers to the human authorities in the Church, and that absolutely precludes Jesus creating “in the beginning,” because Church authorities did not exist back then.

[For more on rulers and authorities, see commentary on Eph. 6:12.]

**“have been created.”** As was pointed out just above, the word “create,” *ktizō* (#2936 κτίζω), surrounds and thus defines the things that Jesus created to properly order his Body, the Church. It is noteworthy, however, that the use of *ktizō* at the beginning of the verse is in the aorist tense, indicating that there was a specific point in time when thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities were created. At the end of the verse, however, the verb *ktizō* occurs in the perfect tense, indicating that the things that were once created are still in existence. Thus we know that the positions of authority that bring order to the Body of Christ were created at a point in time (relatively shortly after his resurrection), and still continue to this day.

**“through him and for him.”** The Greek phrase is *dia autou kai eis auton* (δι᾽ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν) where the two Greek prepositions, *dia* (#1223 διά) and *eis* (#1519 εἰς), are joined by the coordinating conjunction *kai* (“and”). What is the connection with Christ? “Through him and for him” explicates the locative sense of the preposition *en* at the beginning of the verse.[[27]](#footnote-28389)

Col 1:17

**“above all things.”** The Greek word translated as *above* is the preposition *pro* (#4253 πρό). *Pro* can mean “before” in the sense of either time or priority. Doug Moo says, “...the preposition *pro* can designate either priority in time (e.g., Eph. 1:4, “before the foundation of the world”) or priority in rank (e.g., 1 Pet. 4:8, “above all”). But the latter usage is quite rare in the New Testament, while all of Paul’s uses of the word have a temporal sense.”[[28]](#footnote-14463) Although Moo is correct that the latter usage “priority in rank” is more rare, the context affects the translation of *pro* in each occurrence.

In English, if one were to say, “I left the park *before* Jim,” it is clear that the translation “above” would not work; one cannot leave a park better than Jim, or in first place. So, the surrounding verbs and context greatly influence how we understand *pro*. When there is no clear context of temporality, “above” seems to be the preferred translation of *pro* rather than “before.” More simply, if there is nothing in the context to suggest one thing happened before another thing, then “before” is not likely the meaning of *pro*.

Let us look at some examples. In 1 Corinthians 4:5 we read, “So then, do not pass judgments **before** the proper time.” This context is a temporal context, logically it is expressed, ‘Do not do X before Y time.’ The translation “above” simply does not work in this context. However, if the context is not temporal, “above” works well. In 1 Peter 4:8 we read, “**Above all**, be fervent in your love among yourselves, because **love covers a multitude of sins**.” The translation “before” does not fit in this context, because Peter would be saying, ‘before you do anything else, be fervent in love.’ This would be a strange command. Clearly, “above all” or “priority in rank” is Peter’s intended meaning. He is teaching that being fervent in love is most important. So, when there are no time indicators in the text (i.e. ‘X should happen before Y’), “before” is not a preferable translation.

Also, it is worth noting that in the only two other places that the exact phrase “*pro pantōn*” (“above all”) stands by itself (1 Pet. 4:8; James 5:12), which is how the phrase occurs here in Colossians 1:17, the clear intended meaning is “priority in rank” and does not have anything to do with time.

In extra-biblical Greek literature, the pattern seems to hold true as well. In Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 2.5.3 we read, “and (I would choose) another (friend) **above all** money.” Here is another use of *pro pantōn* without any time indicators in the context, which means “above” or “over” not “before.” Since one could not reasonably take this to mean that he would choose the friend and then choose money second, his intended meaning is that his friend has greater importance or priority in rank above “all money.” Simply, he would choose the friend over money. On the flip side, in Plato’s *Cratylus* 401d, *pro pantōn* does carry the idea of “before all” because it reads, “would naturally sacrifice to Hestia first of all (προ παντων) the gods,”[[29]](#footnote-18668) meaning that they would sacrifice to Hestia and then to other gods. However, there is a time indicator *prōtē* (πρώτῃ “first”) in the Greek text, which follows the pattern that has been established, namely, that if there is no time indicator in the text, then *pro pantōn* should be understood as, “above” or “of first importance.”

Although there are some decent reasons for taking *pro* in the sense of “before,” there are no time indicators in the text of Col. 1:17, so the more likely intended meaning is that of priority in rank, or “above all.” *Pro pantōn* in Colossians 1:17 is being used to communicate Jesus’ priority in rank above everything else in creation, not his priority in time before the rest of creation.

Christ is *above* all things in that he holds priority of rank above everything and everyone else.

**“in *connection with* him.”** This is the “in” in the sense of sphere and relation. In that light, it can be translated, “in connection with” or even sometimes, “in union with” (see commentaries on Rom. 6:3 and Eph. 1:3). The important meaning of *en* for the study of this verse is that it can mark a close association, or a limit. Thus, BDAG notes that in Colossians 1:16, “in him” means “in association with him.” BDAG notes:

“Especially in Paul or Johannine usage, to designate a close personal relation in which the referent of the ἐν-term is viewed as the controlling influence: *under the control of, under the influence of, in close association with...*In Paul the relation of the individual to Christ is very often expressed by such phrases as ἐν Χριστῷ [in Christ], ἐν κυρίῳ [in *the* Lord], etc.,...*in connection with, in intimate association with, keeping in mind.*”

This verse is saying that in connection or association with Christ, all these positions of authority in his Church, the thrones, lordships, rulerships, and authorities are ordered and maintained. The relation of these authorities, and the authority they have, is only there by virtue of their connection and association with Christ. No spiritual or earthly authority has any true position or power apart from Christ, and apart from Christ, they have no genuine or lasting relation with each other. Jesus said, “apart from me you are not able to do anything” (John 15:5), and that is true.

Although there are versions that translate the *en* in an instrumental sense, as “by him” (cf. HCSB; KJV), this is too strong in this context. The authority and authorities in the Church are ordered, maintained, and “held together” due to their association with him, not “by” him. The reason that “by” is attractive to some translators is that they interpret this verse from a Trinitarian perspective and misunderstand what it is saying. They believe that Jesus is God and the verse and context are referring to the whole universe being created by, then held together by, Jesus Christ. However, Jesus Christ is not God and this verse is not speaking of the whole created universe, but of the positions of authority that Christ created for his Church.

**“are held together.”** The Greek word is *sunistēmi* (#4921 συνίστημι). The verb is intransitive (having no object) and in the perfect tense, but it has the sense of a present tense verb (Lenski),[[30]](#footnote-32392) which is why the versions translate it as a present. This is a wonderful verb to express the complexity of the relationships that exist in the Church, and how Christ relates to the positions of authority he created (cf. Col. 1:16). The sad fact is that the English cannot easily express the multiplicity of relationships that are contained in this verb. As was pointed out above in the comment on “in him,” most commentators interpret this verse from a Trinitarian perspective and misunderstand what it is saying. This verse is speaking of the positions of authority that Christ created in the Christian Church, and how those authorities relate to Jesus and to each other. The verb has several meanings that are pertinent to how these authorities relate to each other. Moulton and Milligan state that *sunistēmi* “is very common in the papyri, and is used with a great variety of meanings.” They go on to say, “From its original meaning ‘set together,’ ‘combine,’ συνίστημι passes into the sense of ‘bring together as friends,’ ‘introduce,’ ‘recommend.’” Moulton and Milligan also list “appoint” as one of the uses, and also “establish, prove,” “stand with(by),” “acting with,” and “consist” (2 Pet. 3:5). With specific reference to Colossians 1:17, they point out the meaning “hold together” and “cohere.”[[31]](#footnote-18819)

Other lexicons add some depth of use to Moulton and Milligan, and some of the relevant meanings include “to bring together” “to establish,” “to put together (i.e., unite parts into one whole”).[[32]](#footnote-15572) Friberg’s lexicon adds “have existence, exist, continue.”[[33]](#footnote-15430) The Louw-Nida lexicon adds, “to bring together or hold together something in its proper or appropriate place or relationship.”[[34]](#footnote-31209) We should note that the verb is used 16 times in the New Testament, and the majority of them refer to commending or recommending one person to another (Rom. 16:1; 2 Cor. 3:1; 4:2; 5:12; 6:4; 7:11; 10:12, 18 (2x); 1 Cor. 12:11), however, that does not mean that that is the use here, although it seems to be a sub-meaning in the verse, as the authorities in the Church, and especially the human authorities that are constantly changing, are introduced and recommended to each other.

Having an understanding of the lexical range of the word *sunistēmi*, we are ready to see how it fits into this verse and its context. When the Christian Church started on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus determined what it would take to administer the Church, and then created the positions to get the job done. He then “brought together,” and “appointed” spirit beings and people to fill the positions. He “introduced” and recommended them to each other, and now the authorities in the Church continue to exist and are held together by, and in relation to, him; they are maintained by him. In the case of the humans he placed in authority, such as apostles, prophets, and teachers, he continues to fill those positions generation after generation, continuing to appoint and recommend them to each other. This verse does seem to have a dominant sense of the Church being “maintained” in connection with Christ. As the authorities in the Church stay intimately connected with Christ and as Christ acts as Lord and Head, the Church is ordered, maintained, held together, and moves forward. Christ is the “glue” without which the Church would fall apart. What is a body without its head? In the same way, the Church without Christ is misled, without a foundation (1 Cor. 3:11), falling apart (Col. 1:17), and powerless. We see in verses like Mark 16:17 that Christ’s name carries power, as disciples of Christ are to cast out demons in Jesus’ name.

Col 1:18

**“head of the body.”** Here in Colossians 1:18, Paul is discussing the Church, mainly how Christ is the head of the Church. In the Trinitarian understanding of Colossians 1:15-17, Paul has been talking about how Jesus created the material universe in the Genesis creation,[[35]](#footnote-11331) yet, all of a sudden Paul switches to talking about Christ’s role in the Church. However, this understanding misses the correlation between Colossians 1:17 and Colossians 1:18, and how Paul has been talking about Jesus’ supremacy over the New Creation and the Church the whole time (Col. 1:15-20).

There are a few reasons why we should understand that Paul’s whole discussion in Colossians 1:15-20 relates to the New Creation and the Church. First, Paul has just finished explaining that in Christ all things (in the New Creation, of which the Church is a part) hold together. One might not see the correlation between “all things” being held together and Paul’s metaphor of Christ as the “head” of the Church until we look at Paul’s usage of this metaphor elsewhere in his letters. In Ephesians 1:10 we read, “to **unite** under one **head all things** in Christ, the things **in the heavens** and the things **on the earth**, in him.” Thus, the concepts of unification (which is very close to the idea of ‘holding together’ in Col. 1:17) and “all things” are directly tied to Christ as the head of the Church, not to Christ as the head of the Genesis creation. Similarly, with Colossians 1:16, the things in the heavens and on the earth are the things united under Christ as the head. Again, the whole context of Ephesians 1 is discussing New Creation concepts such as the Church (Eph. 1:22), salvation (Eph. 1:7, 13), and Christ’s exaltation (Eph. 1:20-22), the Genesis creation is nowhere to be found in Ephesians 1, yet we find the same vocabulary that we have here in Colossians 1:15-20.

In Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15-16, we find even more evidence for understanding Colossians 1:15-20 to relate to the New Creation. In Colossians 2:19 we read, “and *who is* not holding fast to the **head**, from whom the whole body, which is supported and **held together** by the joints and ligaments, grows…” and likewise in Ephesians 4:15-16 we read, “But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the **head**, Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted together and **held together** by every supporting ligament...” Yet, again, we find that “being held together” has nothing to do with the material creation being held together, but rather the phrase deals with the Church being held together as one body with Christ as the head. Therefore, when we read that Christ holds all things together in Colossians 1:17, we should not interpret it to be referring to the Genesis creation in any way, but speaking of Christ’s unification of the Church as the Head of the Body.

Another reason why we should understand Paul’s whole discussion in Colossians 1:15-20 to relate to the New Creation and the Church, not just Colossians 1:18-20, is because of how Paul describes what things are created. He does not describe plants and animals being created through Christ in Colossians 1:16 but angelic and human positions, namely, Thrones, Dominions, Rulers, and Authorities, all of which are absent from the Genesis creation narrative.

Lastly, the same “all things” in Colossians 1:16 are reconciled to God in Colossians 1:20. Since it is clear from other portions of Scripture that there will be many unreconciled people (Matt. 7:13-14, 23), this cannot mean ‘every person who has ever lived.’ Some things, or people, will not be reconciled. However, all things in the new creation, and in the Church, will be reconciled to God. Thus, we should understand the “all things” in Colossians 1:16 and Colossians 1:17 not to be all things in the material universe, but all things in the New Creation.

[For more on Col. 1:16 as a New Creation passage see commentary on Col. 1:16; For more on the Body of Christ with Christ as the head, see commentary on Eph. 1:23.]

**“he is the beginning.”** The Greek word “beginning” is *archē* (#746 ἀρχή), which has several meanings, including, “beginning, origin, or first cause.” There are many events in the Bible that are referred to as the “beginning,” so what the word “beginning” refers to in any given verse depends on the context. Some translators say that Christ was the beginning of the Church before the world began (“the beginning…goes back to creation…”).[[36]](#footnote-32280) However, there is no reason to connect “beginning” with the creation here, because the context of the verse is speaking about the Christian Church, and his being the firstborn from the dead, which happened just prior to his starting the Church on Pentecost (Acts 2). We need to see “the beginning” here in more general terms. Jesus is the beginning of all that God planned to do to redeem creation. Jesus Christ is the “beginning” of God’s redemption story. Jesus’ resurrection is the foundation upon which our hope rests. Jesus is the beginning of those who will be raised from death to life; he is also the beginning of the age to come.

William Hendriksen gets it right when he writes: “By his triumphant resurrection…Christ laid the foundation for that sanctified life…. This resurrection is also the beginning, principle, or cause of their glorious physical resurrection.”[[37]](#footnote-12665)

**“the firstborn from among the dead.”** Jesus Christ is the first person to be raised from the dead to everlasting life. To fully understand this, it is necessary to understand that before the resurrection of Jesus Christ, no one received everlasting life.[[38]](#footnote-21146) The fact that the Bible calls him the “firstborn” guarantees that there will be others. All those who are saved will be raised from the dead and granted everlasting life.

**“from among the dead.”** The Greek reads, *ek tōn nekrōn* (ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν). Scripture teaches that when a person dies, he is dead and in the ground awaiting the resurrection, and since neither the Rapture nor any of the resurrections have occurred yet, everyone who has died is still in the ground awaiting being raised. Jesus, however, was raised, so he was raised “from among” (*ek*) “the dead *people*” (*tōn nekrōn*). For a much more complete explanation of the phrase “from among the dead,” see the commentary on Romans 4:24.

Col 1:19

**“fullness.”** The Greek is *plērōma* (#4138 πλήρωμα), and it is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament, generally referring to that which fills something up, or makes something full or complete; and it also can refer to that which is full of something. There is much scholarly discussion about this word. Some scholars take “fullness” as an epithet for God in this verse,[[39]](#footnote-29920) actually meaning “God in all His fullness.”[[40]](#footnote-14974) Others note that sometimes the Greeks left “God” out of a sentence when He was clearly understood to be the subject, and thus they add it into the text and say something like the HCSB: “For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him.” The two ways of handling the verse end up with the same conclusion: that it is the fullness of God that is now in Christ. However, as O’Brien points out, if the *plērōma* is seen to be the subject, the grammar can be explained easily, and there is no need to supply a subject in the sentence that is not actually stated, nor needed, for as we saw above the word *plērōma* can refer to God in all His fullness.

The use of “fullness” here ties this verse in with what God is doing in Christ and in us in Col. 2:9-10, and points out that the fullness of God, “His spirit, word, wisdom, and glory, are displayed” in Christ.[[41]](#footnote-18904) It also ties in the work and promises of God in the Old Testament, for OT verses such as Jeremiah 23:24 (“Do I not fill heaven and earth?) use either *plērōma* or related words. Colossians 1:19 is saying that this God who has filled heaven and earth is pleased to fill Christ.

Col 1:20

**“all things.”** See commentaries on Colossians 1:16 and 1:18 for why “all things” is a reference to all things in the New Creation.

**“his blood *that was* shed on the cross.”** The Greek literally reads, “the blood of his cross,” which is a genitive of relation (“the blood that is related to his cross”). This is the figure metalepsis where Jesus’ “blood” refers to the blood that was shed when he was nailed to the cross, which ultimately then refers to his death upon the cross.

Col 1:21

**“And you were once alienated *from God*.”** The Gentiles, “you” (Colossians), were alienated from God, being excluded from the covenants and promises (cf. Eph. 2:12; 4:18). But it also points to the alienation that was experienced by both Jews and Gentiles, because all had followed their own ways.

Col 1:22

**“physical body.”** In the Greek text the phrase is literally, “the body of his flesh,” and this is the only occurrence of this phrase in the Bible. The phrase emphasizes Christ’s physical nature. The opening of Colossians speaks of things that Jesus accomplished in his fleshly, human body before he was glorified, such as dying on the cross (Col. 1:20), and it also speaks of things he has done in his new, glorified body, such as be the head of the Body of Christ, the church (Col. 1:18). But when Jesus reconciled us to God by his death, he was in his “body of flesh,” and was subject to the same trials and tribulations that we are.

**“He has reconciled** ***you*** **by his physical body through *his* death to present you holy and without blemish and blameless in His presence—if indeed you continue in the faith**.**”** Colossians 1:22-23 are one sentence, and there are two aspects to it: salvation and rewards. But unfortunately in the English versions, the meaning of the verse is not as clear as it could be because the sentence has been broken into two verses, and worse, it has been broken at the wrong place. If the sentence was going to be broken at all, it should have been broken between “death,” and “to present you,” not between “presence” and “if” as the English versions do. The subject of the first part of the sentence is salvation that has already been accomplished for the Christian (“he has reconciled you”). The subject of the last part of the sentence is rewards in the future, and those rewards are based on behavior (“to present you...if indeed you continue”).

The whole sentence is, “But now, in his body of flesh, he has reconciled *you* by *his* death [SALVATION] to present you holy and without blemish and blameless in his presence [REWARDS], if indeed you continue in the faith, established and steadfast, and not shifting away from the hope of the good news that you heard, which was preached to all creation under heaven, *and* of which I, Paul, became a minister.”

The reconciliation we have with God is our salvation; when we are saved we are reconciled and we are not reconciled if we are not saved. But Christ did not die for us with the purpose of our living ungodly and disobedient lives, he died for us so we could live holy and godly lives and earn great rewards in the future, and that is what the last part of the sentence is saying. The whole sentence is saying in essence, “Jesus Christ reconciled you—saved you—by his death, and he did that so he could present you holy and without blemish and blameless in God’s presence (so you will be rewarded), and you will be blameless if you continue in the faith without shifting away from it.”

In Colossians 1:22-23, being “holy,” “without blemish,” and “blameless” before God are not gifts or spiritual attributes that God gives believers when they become saved; they are Christian characteristics based on behavior. In this context, “holy” refers to being holy by virtue of obeying God, not “holy” based on being saved (cf. 1 Pet. 1:15-16, “Be holy because I am holy”). In the Administration of Grace (Eph. 3:2), when a person gets born again, their salvation is permanent. Christians are guaranteed to be with Christ in the future. However, rewards given to believers in the future Kingdom of Christ are not guaranteed but are earned. The fact that being holy, without blemish, and blameless before God are attributes that we have by virtue of our godly behavior is why Colossians 1:23 says that we will be presented holy and blameless “if indeed you continue in the faith, established and steadfast, and not being moved away from the hope….”

The basic concepts of being “holy” and “blameless” occur together a number of times in the New Testament, although different Greek words for the idea of “holy” and “blameless” are used. Although sometimes the context shows that “holy and blameless” are used for the inherent spiritual holiness of the believer due to the work of Christ, more often the context is about the believer maintaining a holy and blameless walk in their Christian life.

For example, in Ephesians 1:4 the major emphasis in the text is the Christian being inherently holy and blameless because of the work of Christ. In contrast, in Philippians 2:14-15, which says the Christian is to be blameless and “pure” (*akeraios*; pure or unmixed), the context is clearly about Christian behavior: “Do all things without grumbling or arguing, so that you are blameless and pure, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.” That is the same with 1 Thessalonians 2:10, which says, “You are witnesses, and God also, how purely [*hosios*] and righteously and blamelessly we conducted ourselves among you.”

The context of Colossians 1:22 shows that “holy and blameless” is about the Christian walk, not about Christian salvation. The most important evidence is the sentence of Colossians 1:22-23 itself, which says that Christ reconciled us to God, “to present you holy and without blemish and blameless in his presence, if indeed you continue in the faith.” The straightforward reading of that text is that the Christian is holy and blameless “if” they continue in the faith, that is, continue their obedient Christian lifestyle. Furthermore, the sentence shows that Christ died for a greater purpose than believers just receiving everlasting life. While everlasting life itself is wonderful, Jesus did not die for that alone—he did not die just so people could live forever but behave any way they wanted. Jesus died to help fulfill God’s plan to have a family of wonderful children who loved and obeyed Him, and so Christ also died “to present you holy and without blemish and blameless,” which would depend on the believers living godly lives. A godly Christian lifestyle will result in great rewards in the future.

Colossians 1:22-23 is not about a Christian losing their salvation. Christians do not lose their salvation if they fail to “continue in the faith, established and steadfast, and not shifting away from the hope of the Good News.” No Christian has to hold steady on the hope of the Good News and remain “established” and “steadfast” in the Faith in order to be saved. In the 2,000 years since Christ lived, huge numbers of Christians started out strong in the Faith but were somehow deeply wounded in their life or gave in to the cares of life and stopped living the holy and blameless Christian walk. Those Christians were still saved, not because they were saved in the first place by being “established” and “steadfast” and having a firm grip on the hope, but because they were saved by grace by trusting Christ, and they do not lose their salvation by not being “steadfast” in their Christian walk.

Colossians 1:22-23 is also not about a Christian being inherently “holy and blameless,” that is, in their spiritual nature. Occasionally the Greek word *ei* (“if”), the first word in Colossians 1:23, can have the meaning “since,” and it has been suggested by some that it has that meaning here. In that case, the sentence would read, “since indeed you continue in the faith.” But the meaning “since” would not fit in the context or scope of Colossians, especially given what we know happened to the church at Colossae. When Paul penned Colossians, the church in Colossae was having some deep troubles. We know those troubles continued because by the time Paul wrote 2 Timothy, which was at most only five or six years after he wrote Colossians from prison, they had abandoned Paul and his teachings. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy, “This you know, that all who are in *the province of* Asia turned away from me” (2 Tim. 1:15), and Colossae was in Asia.

The troubles in the church at Colossae are reflected in Colossians. For example, Colossians 1:9-10 says Paul was praying for the church “so that you walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *to him*, bearing fruit.” Paul encouraged the church to walk in the Lord (Col. 2:6). Some of the church was in danger of losing rewards (the “prize”) by worshiping things like angels and not holding fast to the head, Jesus Christ (Col. 2:18-19). Some of the church was submitting to fleshly regulations (Col. 2:20-23). Paul encouraged the church to put away sinful things, saying, “now you too must put away all these things: anger, rage, malice, defaming speech, obscene language out of your mouth…” (Co. 3:5-9). In light of the straightforward reading of Colossians 1:22-23, and where the church at Colossae was in their walk, and since Paul spoke about rewards in the Epistle (cf. Col. 2:18; 3:24), the evidence shows that Colossians 1:22-23 is speaking about “holy and blameless” as behaviors, not spiritual attributes. Paul would not have written, “since indeed you continue in the Faith” because the Colossians were having trouble continuing in the Faith. Colossians 1:22-23 is saying that the Colossian Christians will be presented holy and blameless on Judgment Day “if” they continue in the Faith. Sadly, based on what Paul wrote to Timothy, the believers in Colossae did not overcome their problems, but were overcome by them and abandoned Paul.

God wants His people—those who have been reconciled to him by the death of Christ—to live blamelessly and receive a rich reward (2 Pet. 1:5-11). But at the Judgment people will be rewarded based on how they have “built” on the foundation of Christ, and if anyone’s work is totally burned up they will enter the Kingdom with nothing—but they themselves will still be saved (1 Cor. 3:11-15). Being a Christian but living an unholy and blameworthy life is certainly sinful and not what God wants for us, but sin does not cause a Christian to become unsaved; Christ’s death paid for human sin and reconciled us to God. Being a Christian and living a sinful life will cost a person rewards they could have had in the future Kingdom of Christ. Christians who are comfortable disobeying God in this life will see things clearly on the Day of Judgment and will be ashamed of how they have behaved, but they will still be saved (1 John 2:28; see commentary on 1 John 2:28).

[For more on the Administration of Grace see commentary on Eph. 3:2. For more on Christian salvation, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation,” and see the commentary on 1 Pet. 1:3. For more on rewards and punishments in the Millennial Kingdom, see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10. For more on the word “holy,” and how it can refer to either being spiritually holy in the sight of God or “holy” in one’s behavior, see commentary on Phil. 1:1, “holy.”]

**“without blemish.”** See commentary on Ephesians 1:4.

**“in His presence.”** The “His” is referring to God the Father, which can be seen by looking at the immediate context and how Paul uses this terminology in his other Epistles. In the context, unbelievers were once alienated *from God* (Col. 1:21), not from Jesus. That is the issue, humanity’s alienation from God. Thus, Jesus’ atonement which reconciles us, does not reconcile us back to Jesus but back to the Father, from whom we were alienated. So, it becomes evident that the goal is to get back to God. Therefore, when we arrive at Colossians 1:22 and Paul teaches that we have been reconciled and without blemish, the question is, to whom? In the context, we were alienated from God and therefore, that is also who we have been reconciled to, through the death of Jesus (Col. 1:22).

Very similar language is used in Ephesians 1:4 where God chose believers to be, “without blemish in his presence,” and the subject is clearly God (Eph. 1:3). Likewise, Jude 1:24-25 reads, “Now to him who is able to guard you from stumbling and cause you to stand in the presence of his glory without blemish… to the only God.” It is God’s presence that we will stand before without blemish, because we have been reconciled through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Col 1:23

**“if indeed you continue in the faith.”** Christian salvation is permanent; it is a gift and is not earned, and it is given to those who confess Christ as Lord and believe God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). In contrast to salvation, rewards are earned and given to those who have lived godly and obedient lives. Christ “reconciled us” (saved us; Col. 1:22) in order to be able to present us to God “holy, without blemish, and blameless.” If we are thankful for the salvation—the reconciliation that we have—and continue steadfastly in the faith without shifting from the Hope and live godly and obedient lives, then indeed Christ will be able to present us “holy and without blemish and blameless” as Colossians 1:22 says. But if we live ungodly and self-centered lives, then although our salvation is secure, Christ will not be able to present us holy and blameless to God.

[For more about rewards and loss of rewards in the future, see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10. For more about salvation, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation.”]

Col 1:24

**“Now I rejoice.”** This is an amazing statement. It reveals Paul’s attitude toward what he was suffering and shows that his ultimate mission was to please the Lord and love people. We must remember that when Paul penned Colossians, he had been unjustly accused and was under house arrest and chained to a Roman soldier. He had been a prisoner for at least three years and likely more, the first two being in Caesarea in Israel. His example reminds us that rejoicing is a matter of personal decision, not a matter of circumstances. Thus, Scripture commands us, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say *it*: rejoice! (Phil. 4:4).

**“my sufferings.”** The Greek text reads “the sufferings,” but Paul is referring to his own sufferings.

**“I am taking my turn to fill up what is lacking in regard to the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the church.”** Colossians 1:24 is about forgiveness and the debt caused by sin that forgiveness releases, or “pays for.” This verse has engendered much theological discussion—there are at least five different major theological opinions about what it is saying, and we will say something about them at the end of this commentary entry. However, one of them deserves mention now, and that is that a few theologians have taught that Colossians 1:24 is saying that we Christians participate in the saving and redeeming work of Jesus Christ. That is not the case. The “lacking” is not in the redemption and salvation Jesus accomplished; rather it refers to a “lack” in paying for the ongoing sin in the world, and we can help decrease the lack by paying for sins that people commit against us by lovingly forgiving them.

Colossians 1:24 is complex, so we must work to understand the entire verse and see how it fits within the scope of Scripture. As was stated briefly above, Paul is not saying that Christian suffering helps to pay for the redemption and salvation of others. Many places in the New Testament show that our salvation and redemption was fully paid for by Jesus Christ, including other verses in this very chapter of Colossians (cf. Col. 1:13-14, 22; Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:9; 2 Tim. 2:10; Heb. 5:9; 9:12). However, although Jesus Christ paid for our salvation, there is still sin in the world and that sin is still creating a debt and causing suffering.

An excellent question is, “How could there still be sin if Christ paid the price for sin?” To understand that, it helps us to understand the time gap between when the price is paid for something, and when the purchase is fully completed. When it comes to covenants, we understand that there is often a time gap between when a covenant is made and when the covenant promises are fulfilled. For example, God made a covenant with Abraham and said He would give him the Promised Land (Gen. 13:15), but although some 4,000 years have passed, that covenant has not yet been fulfilled. Nevertheless, it will be fulfilled when Jesus comes back and sets up his kingdom on earth.

In a similar way, there is a time gap between when Jesus paid for sin and the future age when suffering and death will be no more. During this time gap, there is still plenty of sin, and that sin still hurts people and needs to be paid for. Christians can help ease the suffering on earth by “paying for” the sins of others—not to get them saved, but to remove their sin from the world so that it won’t stay part of the sin cycle and thus hurt others.

The time gap between Jesus’ payment for sin and the complete end of sin and suffering is one reason the “prophetic perfect” idiom is used in the New Testament. The “prophetic perfect” is primarily an idiom that occurs in Semitic languages, but it also sometimes occurs in New Testament Greek. The prophetic perfect idiom occurs when a future event is written about as if it had already happened, and the purpose of the idiom is to emphasize the fact that the event will absolutely happen; it is not in doubt. For example, the prophetic perfect idiom explains why some verses in the New Testament say that “salvation,” “redemption,” “adoption” and “glorification” are accomplished realities, but other verses say those things are still future.

When it comes to things like our salvation and redemption, we must understand that they have been paid for by Christ, but have not been given to us in fullness yet. Our salvation and redemption resemble the presents for a child’s birthday party: the presents have already been bought and wrapped, but because the birthday has not come yet, the child is still waiting to receive them. We live in the time gap between when Christ paid for our “presents,” i.e., our salvation and redemption, and when they will be given to us in full. Similarly, we live in the time gap between when Jesus paid for sin and the future time when suffering, and death will be no more. Right now we still live in “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4), when the Devil is the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4) and there is an abundance of sin.

Jesus knew his own suffering and death would not stop sin and suffering. He tried to prepare his followers for the suffering that they would endure, and the New Testament shows that Christians will suffer (cf. Matt. 10:25; John 15:18; Acts 9:16; 14:22; Rom. 8:18; Gal. 6:17; 1 Thess. 3:3-4). So when we read the phrase, “what is lacking in regard to the afflictions of Christ” in Colossians 1:24, we need to realize that the “lack” is not referring to Christ’s finished work of paying for our redemption or salvation, but rather to the lack of payment for the sin and suffering that are still going on in the time gap between when Christ paid for the sins of the world and when suffering and death will be finally done away with. There is, still to this day, sin and suffering which immediately occur as the result of sin that Christ’s sacrifice did not take away. For example, when we are lied to, we are hurt by that sin, which is something Christ’s sacrifice did not take away.

One truth we must recognize in order to correctly understand Colossians 1:24 is that Jesus is still suffering; he suffers when his Body suffers—in fact when anyone suffers. Jesus’ suffering did not end when he died on the cross. There are quite a few verses that testify to his continued suffering. For example, when Paul was persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ himself, and Christ said to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Then, after Paul became a Christian and began to participate in the sufferings of Christ, he wrote to the Corinthians that the sufferings of Christ abundantly overflowed into his own life (2 Cor. 1:5). Later, Paul wrote that he wanted to share in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10), and Peter also wrote that we believers share in the suffering of Christ (1 Pet. 4:13). Jesus is so connected to his Body that he suffers and “groans” because of all the sin and evil on earth (Rom. 8:26; cf. Rom. 8:18, 22; and see commentary on Rom. 8:26).

Another truth we must recognize in order to correctly understand Colossians 1:24 is that when a person sins, it creates a debt that must be paid. It was during and after the Babylonian Captivity that the Jews began to commonly think of sin as creating a debt, and we see that in the New Testament. For example, the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:12 reads, “and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” but in Luke 11:4 it reads, “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” These verses are not teaching a different message; in the Aramaic language that the Jews began to speak during the Babylonian Captivity, and which was commonly spoken by many Jews at the time of Christ, the word for “sin” also meant “debt,” so sin was commonly thought of as being a debt. It is likely that Jesus was speaking Aramaic when he prayed the Lord’s Prayer, and Matthew, the most Jewish of the Four Gospels, translated the Aramaic word as “debt,” while Luke, which has a more Greek flavor, translated it as “sin.” We also see sin being equated with debt in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23-25).

When a person sins against another, from God’s viewpoint it is the person who has sinned who owes the debt. But in real life, often the sinner either cannot pay the cost of his sin or refuses to pay it. The financial cost of sin is the easy part to pay for, but even that is seldom completely paid for by the one who sinned. For example, if a woman’s purse is stolen and it costs her hundreds of dollars and dozens of hours to replace everything, who “pays” for that sin? If a man is falsely accused of murder and is put in prison and it takes him years to prove his innocence and rebuild his life, who pays for that sin? If a little girl crossing the road is hit by a drunk driver and is crippled for life, who pays for that sin? In real life, it is the people who are sinned against who regularly have to bear the mental, physical, emotional, and financial cost for the sin.

At the most fundamental level, sin is always paid for by forgiveness. When we were unsaved, we all were sinners and incurred the debt that our sin created, but Jesus paid for our sin by forgiving us and dying in our place. But in our day-to-day life, people sin against us, and when it comes to those sins we have the opportunity to be like Christ. When a person sins against us (and technically owes the debt of sin), we can pay the debt by forgiving them. Our paying the debt for someone else’s sin by forgiving them does not pay for their salvation, but it does keep their sin from causing us to sin by being angry, bitter, seeking revenge, etc., and thus adding more sin to the sin cycle.

We have all seen how the “sin cycle” works: One person sins against another, who then gets hurt and angry and sins against someone else, who sins against someone else, who sins against someone else, and the “sin cycle” goes on and on. A husband screams at his wife, who is then angry with the children, who then have a bad attitude and talk back to the teacher in school, who then punishes the whole class, so an angry student scratches a car in the parking lot—and the sin, affliction, and suffering goes on and on.

How can we stop the sin cycle? It stops when some godly person like Paul decides to “fill up what is lacking” and “pays” for the sin by forgiving it. In Paul’s case, he suffered a lot as a Roman prisoner and could have “passed that sin along” by being angry, bitter, and nasty to the people around him, rather than “paying” for it by forgiving it. When a person forgives, he is like Paul who said he was “taking my turn to complete in my flesh the things that are lacking of the afflictions of Christ.” It should go without saying that when it comes to absorbing and forgiving the sins of others, and thus “paying” for them, all the principles of forgiveness we learn from the rest of Scripture apply: we walk in wisdom and are not just “walked on” because we are Christians. In some circumstances we may even seek justice concerning those who sinned against us—but in the end, we will have to forgive from the heart to truly “pay” the price for sin and end our suffering (“affliction”) and the associated “afflictions” of Jesus Christ.

The idea of taking our turn to complete the afflictions of Christ may be new to many people since it is not often taught from that perspective, but the realization that we have to pay for the sins people commit against us is not at all new; everyone is aware of it. It is safe to say that every Christian has been sinned against and has had to “pay” for that sin, thus personally experiencing “the things that are lacking of the afflictions of Christ.” It is because of the huge amount of sin in the world, and the realization that those sins need to be forgiven in order for people to have joy and peace, that churches spend so much time teaching on forgiveness and the need to forgive others.

Sadly, however, many times people cannot bring themselves to forgive, or they say that they forgave someone but are actually still angry and bitter. We understand why: sin hurts, it is not fair, it creates a debt that must be paid, and sometimes the sinner seems to “get away with it” with no justice being done at all. Forgiveness often seems like just getting walked on and letting go of justice. But we must remember that we “walked on” Christ and yet were freely forgiven. Furthermore, we will be rewarded in the Future Kingdom when we obey God. The antidote to being angry and bitter when the world treats us badly is to be totally willing to be like Christ and to suffer for the sins of others so that the cycle of sin ends at our door.

Also, we must have the right heart to forgive and “pay for” the cost of someone else’s sin. We must not be smug and think that while we might be paying for someone else’s sin now, they will eventually pay dearly for it on Judgment Day. Our prayer must be that the sinner will repent and ask God to forgive them, at which time He absolutely will (1 John 1:9).

If we can genuinely love others and forgive, keeping in mind that we will be rewarded for forgiving the injustices done to us, then we can do what Jesus said to do and rejoice in our suffering. Jesus said, “Blessed are you when *people* reproach you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil *things* against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven (Matt. 5:11-12). “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, and reproach you, and reject your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap *for joy*, for look, your reward is great in heaven” (Luke 6:22-23).

Paul managed to do what Jesus said to do: he “rejoiced” in what he suffered, and said he wanted to share in the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24; Phil. 3:10). He did that by realizing that Jesus and many others were still suffering, and the only way to stop the affliction caused by sin was to willingly pay for it and let it go. Paul wanted to stop the suffering caused by sin because he loved his fellow Christians and did not want them to suffer. He wrote, “I do this for the sake of his Body, which is the Church” (Col. 1:24). He also did it because he knew that in the Future Kingdom, he would be rewarded for his obedience and sacrifice (1 Cor. 3:8, 14; 9:17; Col. 3:24; cf. Heb. 11:26 concerning Moses). Paul knew his suffering completed that which was lacking of the afflictions of Christ and stopped the sin cycle, so he wrote: “Bless those who persecute you—bless them, don’t curse them! (Rom. 12:14 CJB), and “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?” (1 Cor. 6:7), and also, “…as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col. 3:13 ESV).

Some good news about our suffering and completing the afflictions of Christ in our bodies is that it is mercifully short. Unlike Christ, who has been suffering along with his Body, the Church, for the last 2,000 years, we are only asked to sacrifice and suffer for a short time—our lifetime. Then, when we die, other godly men and women take their turn carrying the cross and sacrificially suffering and paying for the sin of others. Colossians 1:24 expresses this fact when it says we take our turn to complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. The Greek word that the REV translates as the phrase “am taking my turn to complete” is *antanaplēroō* (#466 ἀνταναπληρόω), a double compound verb (*anti-ana-plēroō*), and it only occurs here in the New Testament. It means, “to fill up in turn”;[[42]](#footnote-11820) “take one’s turn in filling up something; fill up on one’s part, supplement.”[[43]](#footnote-29245)

Scholars are divided as to whether *antanaplēroō* in this context means “to take one’s turn in filling up,” or simply “to supplement.” We feel the scope of Scripture and the fact that believers have been “passing the baton” of suffering from one generation to the next for millennia supports the lexical understanding of the verb as meaning “am taking my turn.” We believe that R. C. H. Lenski understands the meaning of the verse when he translates it, “filling up in my turn what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ”;[[44]](#footnote-30676) and see John Lightfoot’s defense of the idea of filling up one’s turn.[[45]](#footnote-30715)

Taking one’s own turn in filling up what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ is something that every believer is privileged to do. Christ suffered and is still suffering, but for the rest of us, we are born, have the opportunity to “take our turn” suffering, and then die, at which point other Christians have the opportunity to take their turns suffering and paying for sin and thus completing in themselves that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ.

We now turn our attention to the phrase “in my flesh.” Paul wrote that he was taking his turn to complete “in my flesh” the things that are lacking of the afflictions of Christ. Jesus suffered horribly “in the flesh” when he was here on earth and he is still suffering when people suffer. But today Jesus suffers in that he mentally and emotionally hurts for people who are hurt, he is not hurt “in the flesh” in the same way we are. No one can steal Jesus’ money or property, beat him up, rape him, or harm him “in the flesh.” But those kinds of horrible sins happen “in the flesh.” to God’s people every day. When we forgive and thus “pay for” the sins of others, we complete in “our flesh” the things that are lacking of the afflictions of Christ.

It is not easy or fun to be undeservingly sinned against, and it takes great love to be willing to suffer, absorb the cost of the sins of others, and forgive. But those people who make that commitment reap great rewards both in this life and the next. In this life, forgiveness is the only real way to deal with sin so that we don’t become angry, bitter, resentful, and harbor a desire for revenge. In the next life, we will reap rewards for our loving sacrifice (Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:23).

Historically, there have been some major ways that Colossians 1:24 has been explained. We have already covered one of them, which was that we Christians help accomplish the salvation and redemption of Christ. That has now been abandoned by almost everyone, and we have shown from Scripture why it cannot be correct. Another explanation, one that also has been largely abandoned, is that the phrase “the afflictions of Christ” is an objective genitive, meaning “for the sake of Christ.” This would make the verse say that Paul was suffering for the sake of Christ. While that explanation is appealing because our suffering for the sake of Christ is commonly understood, it does not effectively deal with the vocabulary in the verse and what the verse actually says. How was there any “lack” in people’s suffering for Christ, and how could Paul “fill” any such lack?

A third view, somewhat similar to the second, was that the phrase “afflictions of Christ” was a genitive of quality, and thus had the essence of “afflictions that were similar to Christ’s.” But that interpretation has the same problem as mentioned above: how was there any “lack” in people’s suffering for Christ, and how could Paul “fill” any such lack?

A fourth view is that Paul and Christ are inseparably joined in a spiritual way (cf. Rom. 6:3-6; Gal. 2:20) and that what Christ experienced, Paul experienced. But the verses that speak about being joined to Christ apply to the whole Church, not just to Paul, while Paul writes that what he was suffering was for the sake of the Church, not specifically for Christ. Furthermore, if Colossians 1:24 is speaking of the mystical union between Christ and Paul or Christ and the Church, what happened to one would happen to the other, so how could there be any “lack,” and again, how could Paul fill it?

A fifth view sees the vocabulary in this verse as being similar to Jewish apocalyptic literature and postulates that there is a set amount of afflictions that Christ and his Body will suffer between now and the Second Coming, and that there is lack in completing that affliction, and when it is complete then the Lord will return. Thus Paul’s suffering completed some of that lack. However, although the vocabulary in Colossians 1:24 is similar in some respects to Jewish apocalyptic literature, there is no indication in Scripture that the Lord’s return is based upon any set amount of suffering that has to be fulfilled.

To us, sin is abundant in the world, Christ and people are being afflicted by it, and there is a lack of payment for it, which is one reason the sin cycle is rampant all over the world. When Christians forgive, we help supply, or fill up, what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ, and our primary motivation to cover the cost of sin and forgive it is that we want to obey Christ; thus we love others and do this for their sake. Also, we know that we will be rewarded for our obedience and sacrifice just as Christ was rewarded for his (Phil. 2:7-8).

[For more on Christ’s kingdom on earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.” For more on sin being thought of as a debt, see commentary on 1 John 1:7, “sin.” For more on the prophetic perfect idiom, see commentaries on Eph. 2:6 and 2:8.]

**“for the sake of his body.”** When a person makes the decision to “pay for” the sins of another and forgive that person, it removes sin from the sin cycle on earth and blesses God and mankind. In Paul’s case, when he penned Colossians, he was a prisoner of Rome, chained to a Roman soldier, sinned against, and unjustly treated because of his testimony for Christ. He said he was “taking my turn to fill up what is lacking in regard to the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of his body, which is the Church.” So Paul was suffering for the sake of the Church.

Paul could have minimized his troubles by never speaking of Christ, but that would have been disobeying the Lord and nullifying his commission as an apostle. There is a lesson here for all of us. The Bible says that “all those who want to live a godly *life* in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). On an individual level, all of us can minimize the persecution we experience by not testifying to others—by words or actions—about Christ or godly living. However, the very nature of the world is to hate, and the “thief” (the Devil and his followers) only comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). If we don’t do our best to represent God, we may spare ourselves some trouble here on earth; but by not resisting evil we will actually be contributing to the sin and suffering in the world. Furthermore, we will lose out on the rewards we could have gained in the Future Kingdom if we had been better ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

Col 1:26

**“the sacred secret.”** The REV translates the Greek word *mustērion* (#3466 μυστήριον) as “sacred secret” because that is what *mustērion* actually refers to: a secret in the religious or sacred realm.

[For more information on the “Sacred Secret” and the Administration of Grace, see commentary on Eph. 3:9.]

Col 1:27

**“sacred secret.”** The REV translates the Greek word *mustērion* (#3466 μυστήριον) as “sacred secret” because that is what *mustērion* actually refers to: a secret in the religious or sacred realm.

**“Christ in you.”** See also Romans 8:10-11; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 4:19.

[For more information on the “Sacred Secret” and the Administration of Grace, see commentary on Eph. 3:9.]

Col 1:29

**“And I am laboring for that *goal*.”** The verse opens with the Greek phrase *eis ho*, “toward which,” that implies movement toward an end of some kind; toward a goal. Thus the NET version has, “Toward this goal,” a very clear translation. Although the Greek text has the opening phrase in the order, “For that goal I am laboring,” it seemed to read much better in English to say, “I am laboring for that goal.” The Moffatt Bible also follows that word order. Paul’s “goal” was to present every Christian mature in Christ (Col. 1:28). This shows that every Christian should want to be mature in Christ, not just “saved.” It is sometimes said in Christianity, “Isn’t salvation the important thing?” Salvation is important, and indeed, the foundation of the Christian life. However, we should never stop there. We should always press on to personal maturity in Christ, and help others get there also.

**“striving.”** The Greek is *agōnizomai* (#75 ἀγωνίζομαι, pronounced äg-ō-'need-zo-my), and it means to contend in the gymnastic games; to contend with adversaries, or “fight”; to contend or struggle with difficulties and dangers; to strive to obtain something. Paul uses it to refer to the great struggle he was in to move God’s causes forward in the world. Paul mentions this “struggle” a few times in Colossians 1:29 and 4:12 (*agōnizomai*); and in Col. 2:1 (*agōn*). Although many versions use “strive” or “fight,” and these are not bad translations, the spiritual fight we are in involves a struggle both externally and internally. We struggle with our flesh to continually and faithfully obey God, and we struggle against the world to accomplish God’s purposes.

**“with His strength.”** The full nuance of the meaning of the Greek text is hard to capture in a single English translation. There are two primary ways that Colossians 1:29 is translated in the English versions. One way is represented well by the CSB: “I labor for this, striving with his strength that works powerfully in me.” In this translation of the text, which is similar to the REV, the Greek word *energeia* (ἐνέργεια) is translated in a way that brings out the strength and energy that God provides the believer when they are doing the will of God, and “strength, energy, power” is a primary meaning of *energeia*. Paul was striving to do the will of God, and God was providing strength to help him accomplish the work.

The other way of translating *energeia* focuses on God’s “working” in believers. This translation of the text is represented in the LSB: “For this purpose I also labor, striving according to His working, which He works in me in power.” By translating *energeia* as “working,” the translators open the door to a much broader spectrum of help that God can provide than just “strength.” So, for example, when Paul says that he strives “according to His [God’s] working,” God’s “working” would include providing strength, providing guidance, and working in Paul’s circumstances to help Paul accomplish what God wanted Paul to do. This is similar to the idea in Philippians 2:13, where Paul wrote, “It is God who is working in you both to want *to do*, and to do, his good pleasure.” Paul did work in alignment with the way God was working, i.e., “according to His working.” But at the same time, while the translation “working” allows for a more general description of God’s activity, the translation “strength” focuses on the more immediate needs of Paul and how God was empowering him to carry out his mission of bringing the good news to the Gentiles.

**Colossians Chapter 2**

Col 2:1

**“Indeed.”** The Greek word is *gar* (#1063 γάρ), which is most often translated “for,” but it does not have to indicate cause or reason, and it does not here. It can also be a marker of clarification or even of inference. In this case, it continues and clarifies the subject of the struggling which Paul speaks of in Col. 1:29, and continues in Col. 2:1. Some versions, such as the NIV and William’s translation of the New Testament, do not even translate the *gar*, starting 2:1 with, “I want,” while Cassirer’s translation, *God’s New Covenant*, also has “And indeed.”

**“striving.”** The Greek noun is *agōn* (#73 ἀγων), and it means a contest or competition, or to struggle, fight, or contend in a competition. A very literal rendition of the Greek in this verse would be: “Indeed, I want you to know how great a striving I am having for you,” but that can be somewhat confusing, which is why versions such as the NIV and NRSV have, “I am struggling for you.” In Col. 1:29 Paul was struggling and striving to do the will of God, and in Col. 2:1 he was striving on behalf of the people of Colossae and Laodicea. This is an amazing statement in light of the fact that Paul was under arrest and chained to a Roman guard in a house in Rome because it shows how selfless Paul was and that even in that deplorable condition he was focused on how he could help others. He helped by laboring in prayer, by writing letters, and by encouraging and directing the people who came to see him.

**“*for that goal*.”** The phrase is supplied in order to help indicate to the reader that the context is being carried forward from Col. 1:28-29 (there were no chapters in the original text, the thought carried on from sentence to sentence). The goal, as expressed in Colossians 1:28, is “so that we can present everyone mature in Christ.” If believers are mature in Christ, not only will they live forever, but they will have rich rewards when Christ returns. Also, they will have the best life possible in this life in their given situation. For example, Paul wrote Colossians from a Roman prison, but while he was there—not a desirable situation at all—he wrote “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am *in*. I know what it is to have little, and I also know what it is to have an abundance. In any and every situation I have learned the secret *to being content*, whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I have strength for all situations in *union with* him who empowers me” (Phil. 4:11-13).

Col 2:2

**“so that their hearts will be encouraged.”** Paul was a prisoner in Rome, but he was very focused on how he could help other people (see commentary on Col. 2:1).

**“the riches of full assurance that comes from understanding.”** The Greek is “full assurance of understanding,” but the genitive “of” is a genitive of origin, and means that the full assurance originates from or comes from understanding. When we understand spiritual things, such as who God is, who Christ is, what they offer, how to be saved, and what our hope is, then we can have the riches of full assurance. Far too many believers don’t really understand spiritual realities. They may have been mistaught (there is certainly a lot of wrong teaching in Christianity today), or they may not have taken any time to study and learn, but in any case, they don’t understand spiritual truths and so they don’t have any true assurance about spiritual things, including their own future. With understanding come the riches of full assurance.

**“the sacred secret of God**—**Christ**.” The translation “sacred secret” is from the Greek word *mustērion* (#3466 μυστήριον) and is translated as “sacred secret” because the word *mustērion* refers to a secret in the religious or sacred realm. The Greeks had a word for a regular “secret,” which was *kruptos* (#2927 κρυπτός, cf. 1 Cor. 14:25), but they had a different word for a “secret” that pertained to the religious or sacred realm: *mustērion*.

Colossians 2:2 is occasionally used to show that “Christ” is a “mystery of God,” i.e., that Christ is part of a Trinity and both fully God and fully human, and thus a “mystery.” But the Greek word *mustērion* (#3466 μυστήριον) does not mean “mystery” in the sense of something that cannot be understood or comprehended by a person’s mind. In the Greek culture, a *mustērion* was a “secret” in the religious or sacred realm that was hidden but then revealed. When used in a Christian context, as Paul is doing, it refers to a “secret” that God did not reveal until He was ready for people to know and understand it. Once revealed, God’s “sacred secret” was known and understood. We can see this definition right in the context where Colossians 1:26-27 states that the “sacred secret” (*mustērion*) had been hidden in ages past but now was revealed by God to His “holy ones” (i.e., believers) because God wanted to “make known to them” what they had in Christ. Thus, translating *mustērion* as “mystery” would result in a misunderstanding of the verse, and then saying that Christ is a mystery just compounds the error.

In studying the ancient manuscripts, it becomes apparent that this verse was a subject of hot debate early in the Christian era as there is ample evidence from the Greek manuscripts that scribes changed the text to fit their theology. Bruce Metzger writes, “The close of Colossians 2:2 presents what is, at first, a bewildering variety of readings; the manuscripts present fifteen different conclusions of the phrase.”[[46]](#footnote-23833) Despite the many variant readings in this verse, there is wide agreement among modern scholars that the original Greek text read *tou mustēriou tou theou Christou—*but the exact translation and meaning of that phrase is still debated.

A good reason that we know verse 2 is not saying that Christ is a “mystery” in the sense of a mysterious God-man and the second person of a Trinity is that Colossians 1:26 says that the *mustērion* (“secret”) was at one time*“*hidden for ages and generations, but now has been revealed to his holy ones.” But according to Trinitarians, Christ is still a “mystery”—that is, who Christ is with two natures as a God-man remains an unexplainable mystery. But if God revealed the *mustērion*, then why should it still be considered a “mystery”?

The fact that the “sacred secret” in Colossians 2:2 was something previously hidden but is now revealed cannot be overemphasized if we are to correctly interpret the verse. The Trinity was and is a mystery. It is incomprehensible. In contrast, Christ, God’s chosen and anointed one, was not “hidden” in the Old Testament or the Gospels. However, the full impact and reality of what Christ would accomplish according to God’s will was not fully known. Paul makes this especially clear in 1 Corinthians 2:7-8, where he says, “But we speak God’s wisdom *that was kept* in a sacred secret, *and* that has been hidden, which God decided in advance before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew, for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” The wisdom of God’s plan in Christ was “hidden” in the past. Not even the “rulers of this age” knew about what God had planned with regard to Christ.

In contrast to the Trinity, there is a “secret” in the New Testament that is clearly set forth in the Church Epistles, the books written by Paul. The word “*mustērion*” is used to refer to the “administration of the grace of God” in which we are living now, and the secrets that were part of that grace. Ephesians 3:2-3 reads, “surely you have heard of the administration of the grace of God that was given to me for you, *and* that the sacred secret [*mustērion*] was made known to me by revelation, as I have already written *about* briefly.” When Colossians refers to “the sacred secret,” it is referring to the secrets that were part of the grace that was hidden before the foundation of the world but God has given and revealed to the Church today (cf. Eph. 3:2-9; Col. 1:27; 1 Cor. 2:9). Ephesians 3:6 says, “that in *union with* Christ Jesus *and* through the good news, the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise.” Those who are “in *union with* Christ Jesus” are part of his Body, the Body of Christ, which is the fullness of what Christ did in melding together Jews and Gentiles into one group. That was indeed a sacred secret. It was hidden for ages, but now has been revealed to and understood by the apostles (like Paul) who wrote these details so that we might know the richness of the secret that God planned long ago but has now come to pass. Christ and his accomplished work on the cross opened the door for Jew and Gentile to become one group and fellow heirs of God’s promises together with Christ.

[For more information about the translation “sacred secret,” see commentary on Eph. 3:9. For more information on Col. 2:2 not being a verse that supports the doctrine of the Trinity, see Mary S. B. Dana, *Letters Addressed to Relatives and Friends Chiefly in Reply to Arguments in Support of the Trinity* (Boston: Thurston, Torry, and Company, Boston, 1845). Also, see Frederick A. Farley, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (Boston: Walker, Wise & Co., Boston, 1860).]

Col 2:3

**“in whom.”** While the grammatical form of the relative pronoun “whom” (*hō*, ᾧ) is ambiguous—either dative singular masculine and referring to “Christ” (Χριστοῦ, *Christou*, masc), or dative singular neuter and referring to “secret” (μυστηρίου, *mustēriou*, neut)—the theological significance seems to more strongly favor the former relation. The question that must be answered is, “Where is Paul telling us that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden? Are they hidden in God’s “secret” (*mustērion*, cf. Eph. 3:4-6), that is, the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God along with the Jews, making them both equal heirs of all the promises that God made to Abraham? To some degree, the answer would be “yes.” But the more complete answer that can be found elsewhere in Paul’s writings is that all the riches of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in “Christ” (*Christos* , cf ), that is, they are only found in Christ’s accomplished work on the cross and the fullness of his messianic role in God’s grand plan of redemption.

Verse 3 “expresses beautifully and compactly the cutting-edge christological point that is Paul’s driving concern: Christ is the one in whom is to be found all that one needs in order to understand spiritual reality and to lead a life pleasing to God.”[[47]](#footnote-27303) The way that Paul expresses “treasure” and “knowledge” as being “‘hidden’ (*apokryphos*) in Christ is especially interesting as it “serves to highlight the fact that true knowledge is only available to those who recognize Christ; treasure is to be found only in him.”[[48]](#footnote-29558) Furthermore, Paul’s use of “in whom” (ἐν ᾧ, *en hō*) “prepares the reader for the constant use of ‘in whom’ and ‘in him’ throughout 2:6-15, where such phrases locate the divine blessings in Christ.”[[49]](#footnote-12615)

Col 2:5

**“in spirit.”** Paul, who was in prison in Rome, is not saying that he participates in astral projection or some other means of out-of-body travel. The Greek word “spirit” is commonly used of a person’s attitude and emotion in both the Old and New Testament (see Appendix 15: “Usages of ‘Spirit,’” point 13). Paul was saying that his thoughts and prayers were with the believers in Colossae.

A number of commentators, while rejecting that Paul is referring to some form of out-of-body travel, say that he is likely referring to being with the believers in some kind of spiritual manner; perhaps because he is part of the Body of Christ that his presence would somehow be with the believers in Colossae. We reject that for several reasons. One is that the use of “spirit” as attitude and emotion adequately and simply covers Paul’s saying he would be with the believers in spirit.

Another reason is that it is not at all clear, or ever explained in the Bible, how being part of the Body of Christ makes one person with another “in spirit.” Since every Christian is part of the Body of Christ, if Paul is with the Colossians in some spiritual way by virtue of being part of the Body of Christ, then every believer is always with every other believer because we are all members of the Body of Christ. In that case, there is nothing special about being with other believers “in spirit,” because we would always be with them “in spirit,” and in fact could never be separated from them “in spirit.” But it is clear in this context that Paul is referring to something special: he could not be with them “in the flesh” because he was in prison, but said he would be with them “in spirit.”

Also, that the phrase “in spirit” refers to Paul’s attitude and emotions fits with what he wrote four verses earlier in Colossians 2:1. In that verse, Paul wanted the believers in Colossae to know how hard he was struggling for them. That would in large part be struggling for them in prayer, thinking about them, and keeping them in his mind. Thus, struggling for the believers at Colossae and constantly keeping them in his thoughts and prayers is being with them “in spirit.”

Col 2:6

**“just as you received Christ Jesus.”** Paul could say that because it seems he personally taught Epaphras, who started the church at Colossae (see commentary on Col. 1:7). Today there are so many errors in traditional Christianity that one could not confidently say that because the church-goer was likely wrongly taught on a number of issues.

Col 2:8

**“empty, deceitful philosophy.”** The Greek literally reads, “through the philosophy and empty deceit,” but translating it literally is confusing to the English reader and misses the point the Greek text is making. This construction is the figure of speech hendiadys (two for one);[[50]](#footnote-29283) where two things are mentioned, “philosophy” and “empty deceit,” when only one thing is meant, which is, “empty, deceitful, philosophy.” In sentences, nouns always have more emphasis than adjectives, so it more strongly emphasizes the deceit of philosophy to say, “philosophy, even (*kai* can be “and” or “even”) empty deceit” than to say, “empty, deceitful, philosophy,” which is why the Greek is worded the way it is, but the former phrase can be confusing, which outweighs the shift in emphasis.

[See figure of speech “hendiadys.”]

**“elemental spirits of the world.”** The elemental spirits of the world are the demons that run much of the world. They influence things that happen on earth such as the weather and natural disasters, and also work through people to control societies through ungodly religions, traditions, beliefs, laws, etc. The Greek word can also refer to the elements of the world and the elementary principles of the world, and these are also clearly implied in the verse.

The phrase “elemental spirits” is the Greek word *stoicheion* (#4747 στοιχεῖον), and it has a number of meanings. Fundamentally, it means any first thing upon which the others belonging to some series or composite whole are built; thus, “an element” or “first principle.” For example, *stoicheion* was used of the letters of the alphabet because they are the elements or first principles upon which language is built. *Stoicheion* was also used to describe the elementary building blocks of life according to Greek philosophy: earth, fire, air, and water, as well as used to describe the basis of knowledge and learning, thus, “basic principles,” or “foundational principles,” and that use clearly appears in the Bible in Hebrews 5:12.

Another use of *stoicheion* was in reference to the planets and other heavenly bodies that appeared in the night sky, and this was tied to the ancient belief that the sun, moon, planets, and stars fundamentally influenced what happened to people on earth, much like in astrology today. *Stoicheion* was also used of the “transcendent powers that are in control over events in this world,”[[51]](#footnote-28977) thus the “elemental spirits,” “ruling spirits,” or spirits behind what happens on earth.

Theologians have debated for centuries about which of the meanings of *stoicheion* is correct in Paul’s epistles. The debate, and the wide division in opinion, is reflected in the various English translations. For example, here in Colossians 2:8, the versions can be seen to be very divided. Some follow the interpretation of “elementary principles” (ASV, KJV, NASB, NIV84, NJB), while others follow the interpretation of spiritual forces or spirits (CJB, ESV, NAB, NET, NIV2011, NLT, NRSV, The Source New Testament); some have what seems to be a more neutral approach such as “elemental forces” (HCSB, N. T. Wright), which seem to refer to spirits but could also refer to the forces that press upon people due to the doctrines of men.

There are lexical and contextual arguments on both sides, with no clear advantage to either side. To us it seems clear that one reason that no one side has a clear advantage over the other is that God is “killing two birds with one stone” by using the figure of speech amphibologia,[[52]](#footnote-25084) using *stoicheion* to refer to two things at once. There is no question that in the Greek, *stoicheion* can refer to the elementary principles of life (the elementary beliefs, upon which society is built), and also to the powerful demons that work behind the scenes to fundamentally influence what happens on earth, and that seems to be the case here.

Many theologians realize that if this verse is referring to the elementary principles, then demons are often behind them, and if it is referring to the demons who influence the earth, then the elementary principles and beliefs upon which society is built are the result of the activity of those demons. The REV has the translation that points to the “elemental spirits” behind what is happening on earth—the spirits that work through people and put empty deceitful philosophy in place that brings people captive.

Theologians also debate whether Paul uses *stoicheion* in the same way each time he uses it in his epistles. Although it seems likely that the same basic idea is behind the four times *stoicheion* occurs, there does seem to be a difference in which meaning is being emphasized. For example, here in Colossians, likely written in AD 62, Paul is writing to people who are very influenced by spiritual forces, which results in things such as the worship of angels (Col. 2:18). In contrast, in Paul’s first epistle, Galatians, the emphasis is much more on the “elementary” or “foundational” principles that are found in the Old Testament law and/or were believed by the Jews of the time that kept them in bondage to the Law and doing things in the flesh that would supposedly please God (Gal. 4:3).

[See figure of speech “amphibologia.”]

Col 2:9

**“embodied.”** The Greek is *sōmatikōs* (#4985 σωματικῶς), and it is an adverb. In this context, it modifies the verb “dwells,” and is thus saying that what God is, His godly character and way of being, is embodied, or expressed in a mortal body, in Christ. This verse is very good proof that Jesus Christ was not God. It would make no sense to say that “what God is,” dwells in God. It is only because Christ is not God that it makes sense to say that what God is dwells in Christ. Also, the verse uses the word “God,” not “the Father.” If Trinitarians were correct that the Father and Christ were two separate “Persons,” but both the Father and Christ were “God,” then this verse should state that in Christ dwells all the fullness of “the Father.” The verse says “God” is dwelling bodily in Christ, that is, being embodied in him. What God was, all his character and glory, dwelt in Christ in a bodily form. Some Trinitarians recognize that logically what God is could not dwell in God, and so they assert that this verse is referring to the “man” part of Christ (the doctrine of the Trinity states that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. The fact that this is logically impossible by definition is ignored and taken as one of the mysteries of the Faith). For example, Lenski writes:

“It cannot even be said that ‘all the fullness of the Deity dwells in God,’ for ‘Deity’ is only the abstract term for God himself. Deity dwells in Christ because of his human nature, it could not ‘dwell,’ ‘reside,’ in him if he had not become man. The adverb modifies the verb and emphasized the manner of the indwelling: this manner is ‘bodily,’ the idea to be expressed being that the indwelling is not mystical, not spiritual, not in the spirit of Christ alone, but in his whole human nature.”[[53]](#footnote-26411)

The idea that what God is could dwell in the man side of Christ is a contrived argument, and based upon faulty Trinitarian logic. Jesus Christ was not a divided person, with what God was dwelling in one part of him but not in the other part because that other part was God. Lenski is correct that Jesus had to be a man: “Deity [what God is]...could not ‘dwell,’ ‘reside,’ in him if he had not become man.” Jesus was the created, fully human, Son of God, and what God was, all the character of God, dwelled in him, and could do so because he was a man, not God.

**“fullness.”** The Greek word “fullness” is *plērōma* (#4138 πλήρωμα). The noun *plērōma* occurs 17 times in the New Testament, and has various meanings that all relate to the basic meaning of the word, which is “fullness.” For example, some of the things that it refers to are: to baskets full of food (Mark 6:43 and 8:20); to the full number of Gentiles (Rom. 11:12, 25); to love being the “fullness” (i.e., fulfilling) of the Law (Rom. 13:10); to the full measure of a blessing (Rom. 15:29); to the fullness of the earth (1 Cor. 10:26); to a fulfilled time period (Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10); to the Body being the fullness of Christ (Eph. 1:23); to the fullness of God that each believer has (Eph. 3:19); and to the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

Seeing the wide variety of subjects that “fullness” refers to shows us that we must understand the word in its context and from the scope of Scripture. Thus while Trinitarians want to assert that “all the fullness” means “everything God is,” it is clear that they are importing that meaning from their theology, because *plērōma* does not have to mean that. In this context, *plērōma* means the same thing as it does in Ephesians 3:19, which says that each believer may be “filled with all the fullness [*plērōma*] of God.” Colossians 2:9 is saying Christ was filled with all the fullness of God, and the next verse, Col. 2:10, says that we believers have what Christ had, and Ephesians 3:19 is saying that we should be, in a practical outward sense, filled with the *plērōma* of God also. In fact, it is very logical that since each believer has “Christ” in them (Col. 1:27), and is part of the “Body of Christ” (Eph. 5:30), and is in union with Christ (Rom. 6:3-6), and “in Christ” also partakes of the “fullness” (Col. 2:10), that the meaning of *plērōma* in these verses in Colossians refers to being filled with the character, power, and glory of God, just as Christ was. Reinier Schippers writes: “This fullness which is described in Col. 1:15-18 is entirely related to Christ’s cross (Col. 1:20), death (Col. 1:22), and resurrection (Col. 1:18). For this reason believers also have this fullness in them (Col. 2:10). By his cross, death, and resurrection they are reconciled through faith (Col. 2:12ff.), renewed, and made to participate in his triumph.”[[54]](#footnote-19319) There is no justification in saying that because the *plērōma* is in Christ, he must be God. If “all the fullness” of what God was, being in Christ, made him God, then the next verse (Col. 2:10), would make us God also, because it says that we have that same fullness.

No doubt *plērōma* was chosen carefully by God because of its meaning and use in the scope of Scripture (such as Ephesians 3:19), but also because of what it meant to the early Christians, because by the time Colossians was written (about AD 62), some Christians were beginning to turn to Gnosticism.

“In Christian Gnosticism *plērōma* is a technical term for the totality of the 30 aeons. This totality is closest to God but is his product; he stands over it. The *plērōma* is the supreme spiritual world from which Jesus comes and into which the spiritual enter. Implied in the use of the term are the fullness and perfection of being. In the plural the aeons are called *plērōmata*, and *plērōma* is also used at times for the Gnostics’ angelic partners who help to carry them up into the spiritual world.”[[55]](#footnote-25072)

The early Christian Gnostics were turning away from the simplicity of Christ and adding confusing mythology to the Gospel. Paul’s writing that all the *plērōma* dwelt in Christ was in essence saying that there was no point in looking anywhere else for spiritual knowledge, power, or fulfillment because it all could be found in Christ.

**“divine.”** The Greek is *theotēs* (#2320 θεότης), which is an abstract noun for God.[[56]](#footnote-27482) Many versions translate it as “divine nature,” but Louw-Nida comments: “The expression ‘divine nature’ may be rendered in a number of languages as ‘just what God is like’ or ‘how God is’ or ‘what God is.’[[57]](#footnote-21022) We thought that the translation “what God is” was very clear.[[58]](#footnote-23642) What it means for the fullness of the *theotēs* to dwell in Christ has to be gleaned from the entire scope of Scripture, and not just the phrase or word itself, which is open to a number of interpretations. Gerhard Schneider notes: “The meaning of the Colossians passage is not entirely clear,”[[59]](#footnote-24559) and that is the reason for all the various interpretations of the phrase and the wide variety of ways it is translated. Thus different theologians have interpreted it to mean various things, including the will of God, divine grace and gift, and even “the Church” itself, along with interpretations that can be found in many translations, such as Deity, divinity, Godhead, God, “God’s being,” “all that God is,” and “God’s nature.” What is clear from Scripture is that God gave Christ the gift of holy spirit and worked through him to accomplish His purposes. Thus, God was in Christ, reconciling the world (2 Cor. 5:19), and Jesus said, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” This verse is not saying that Jesus was God, but rather the fullness of what God is was in Christ—God’s character, power, and glory, resided in Christ, and now, as per Col. 2:10, it resides in us, and our challenge is to allow it to show forth from our flesh bodies and walk like Christ walked.[[60]](#footnote-29351)

Col 2:10

**“have been filled *with that fullness*.”** The whole phrase is a translation of the one Greek word, *plēroō* (#4137 πληρόω), which is the verb form of the noun *plērōma* that occurs in Colossians 2:9. The idea of the “fullness” we have been given comes from the context. Although a strict translation of the verb would be, “you have been filled,” or “you have been given fullness [or “made full”],” the “fullness” that we have been given comes from our being in union with Christ (“in him”), and the fullness that Christ has is spoken of in verse 9. Since Colossians 2:9-10 are all part of the same sentence, the sentence would have been easier to understand if it had not been divided into two separate verses. The essence of the verses is: all the fullness of what God is dwells in Christ, and we have been given that fullness too, because we are in union with Christ. The New American Bible has: “and you share in this fullness in him.” What a blessing to know that the same fullness that Christ has in God, we have in Christ.

[For more on the meaning of “fullness,” see commentary on Col. 2:9.]

**“in *union with* him.”** In Greek, the phrase “in him” refers to the union we have with Christ, which is in part due to being part of his Body (see commentaries on Rom. 6:3 and Col. 2:11). The italics are added to make the English clear.

**“every ruler.”** The Greek is *pas archē* (#3956 πᾶς; #746 ἀρχή), and it can be translated “every ruler” (cf. HCSB), or “all rule” (ESV). The larger scope of Scripture supports that “every ruler” is the better translation. Also, although the designations “ruler” and “authority” can refer to human rulers, angelic rulers, or demonic rulers, the context of Colossians 2:10 indicates that these are demonic rulers (cf. Col. 2:15).

[For more on the use of “rulers” and “authorities” in the New Testament, see the REV commentary on Eph. 6:12.]

Col 2:11

**“in *union with* him.”** That is, in union with Christ. The preposition *en*, “in” refers to a relationship, not a physical position (see commentaries on Eph. 1:3 and Rom. 6:3). In this case, it is due to our being “in” union with Christ, but the reading “through” seemed much clearer in English (cf. Charles Williams, *The New Testament*, Cassirer, *God’s New Covenant*; Goodspeed’s translation). Another option of the translation would have been to repeat the pattern of Col. 2:10, and saying, “*by being* in *union with* him.” This verse is making it clear that when we got born again, we became part of the Body of Christ and in union with Christ, a union that is so complete that we are said to be circumcised due to our “union with him.” The Christian was circumcised in Christ (Col. 2:11), crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20), died with Christ (Rom. 6:8), was buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4), and was raised with Christ (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1), and we are said to be already seated with Christ in the heavenlies (a future event; see commentary on Eph. 2:6).

**“you were also circumcised.”** It would have been very meaningful for Paul to include this part about the Colossian believers being circumcised because it was a way of saying that they were included in the people of God.

**“made without hands.”** The Greek word is *acheiropoiētos* (#886 ἀχειροποίητος), a compound word made up of the alpha privative, “not,” and the words for “hand” and “do, make.” It means, “not made by hands,” “made without hands,” “not done by hands,” etc. The Jews circumcised “by hand,” but God spiritually circumcises us (thus bringing us into the covenant; cf. Gen. 17:10-14).

**“by the removal of the body of flesh.”** We must understand the emphasis on “body” in this verse. When the Jews performed circumcision, only the foreskin was removed, the rest of the fleshly body remained—and caused problems. When Christians get born again, it is not just the foreskin that gets removed, but the whole fleshy body. Thus our circumcision in Christ is no ordinary circumcision! Our old flesh nature is said to be removed (cf. Col. 3:3; “for you died”). Of course, scriptures such as Romans 7:13-25 and Galatians 5:16-18, as well as our daily experience of struggling with sin, show us that our sin nature is still alive and well, but the promise is that when we get our new bodies we will be rid of it. In the meantime, we Christians are to consider ourselves as dead to sin and not let sin reign in our bodies (Rom. 6:11-12).

The word “removal” is the Greek *apekdusis* (#555 ἀπέκδυσις, pronounced äp-'ek-doo-sis). It refers to stripping off clothes, then to removing something. Friberg’s Analytical Lexicon defines it “as an action, of clothes *stripping off, undressing*; figuratively, of believers *being set free* from their sinful nature through union with Christ *putting off, removal* (Col. 2:11).”

**“by the circumcision from *our union with* Christ.”** The Greek preposition *en* is best viewed in an instrumental sense “by” and the genitive phrase *tou Christou* is a genitive of source or production (“from Christ” or “produced by Christ”). Meyer comments that it is “the circumcision which is produced through Christ.”[[61]](#footnote-16678) The phrase means, the circumcision we receive due to our being in union with Christ. It is by virtue of our being in union with Christ that our whole flesh body gets “circumcised,” removed. The circumcision of Christ in this verse does not refer to the circumcision he underwent as a baby. Now it is the job of each believer to walk in such a way as to manifest this circumcision in our lives. It is because the Christian is circumcised in Christ that we do not have to undergo physical circumcision of the foreskin (see commentary on Gen. 17:10).

Col 2:12

**“in baptism.”** When a person is “baptized in holy spirit” (Acts 1:5; which is the “one baptism” of Eph. 4:5), that person is “saved,” “born again,” and has become a new creation. He is at that time in union with Jesus Christ (see commentary on Rom. 6:3), and via this union has been circumcised with Christ (Col. 2:11), crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20), died with Christ (Rom. 6:8), buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12), raised with Christ (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1), and will be seated with Christ in heaven (see commentary on Eph. 2:6). Some scholars make the baptism in this verse Jesus’ baptism, but while his baptism made our union with him available, it was our baptism in holy spirit that made it a reality.

**“in which you were also raised.”** The “in whom” that many translations have is considered by some to be actually “in which,” referring to baptism, but that is not likely the meaning. The thought of being “in Christ” continues here.[[62]](#footnote-13170)

**“through *your* trust.”** The idea is clearly that we have what we have because of our individual trust. The Greek has the article before *pistis*, which helps identify that it is the personal trust of the person. Therefore, it is “your trust” in the working of God. Nonetheless, the emphasis is still on “trust,” which is God’s provision, and not on what we have done to acquire salvation.

**“from among the dead.”**[[63]](#footnote-12679) See commentary on Romans 4:24.

Col 2:13

**“due to *your* transgressions.”** The preferred Greek text is τοῖς παραπτώμασιν, a dative phrase which has the emphasis of “through,” or “by reason of,[[64]](#footnote-17149) “due to.”[[65]](#footnote-18412) The Greek *en* in some Greek texts, which became part of the Textus Receptus, seems to be a scribal addition.[[66]](#footnote-19991) The Greek for “transgressions” is *paraptōma* (#3900 παράπτωμα) which is to “misstep,” “to fall by the wayside.” This “misstep” is not necessarily intentional, although it can be. Thus, in life, “transgressions,” are much more common than “sins.” Meanings of *paraptōma* include: “faults,” “deviations from truth,” “lapse,” “error,” “mistake,” “wrongdoing.” (See commentary on Eph. 1:7).

**“uncircumcision of your flesh.”** This is not referring to physical uncircumcision, as if that could keep someone from being saved. Jesus stated that “many” would come from the east and west (being uncircumcised Gentiles) and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, but the “sons of the Kingdom” (i.e., the Jews who were chosen to be there and were physically circumcised) would be excluded (Matt. 8:11-12). The “uncircumcision of your flesh” is the flesh nature that everyone has, and it is in union with Christ that we undergo a circumcision made without hands (Col. 2:11), and acquire a new nature and are righteous before God.

**“He made you alive.”** God made us alive with Christ.

**“having forgiven us.”** The context thus far in the chapter has been “you,” but now Paul makes it “us,” thus showing that the forgiveness of God belongs to both Jews (of which Paul was one) and Gentiles.

Col 2:14

**“wiped clean.”** The Greek is *exaleiphō* (#1813 ἐξαλείφω, pronounced “ex-al-'ā-fō”), and in its basic meaning it refers to wiping something clean until no trace of what was written before exists, “to cause to disappear by wiping.”[[67]](#footnote-16263) In the ancient world, writing materials were scarce and expensive, so many of them were reused. Papyrus was sometimes washed clean and then rewritten on. In this case, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God wiped clean the certificate of debt that was against us. Moulton and Milligan write that *exaleiphō* “...is the technical term for ‘washing out’ the writing from a papyrus sheet. So complete was the forgiveness which Christ by His work secured, that it completely canceled the old bond, that had hitherto been valid against us, for it bore our signature (χειρόγραφον), He made the bond as though it had never been (Exod. 32:23ff; Rev. 3:5).”[[68]](#footnote-27416)

Some English versions read “erased,” and while that is not a bad translation, there were no pencils and erasers in the ancient world, so the reader may get the wrong impression. “Wiped out,” which some versions have, is fine if people do not get the wrong impression from the common use of “wipeout” today. The essence of what this is saying is the handwriting written against us is no longer there to be held against us—it is gone.

**“record of debt.”** The Greek word is *cheirographon* (#5498 χειρόγραφον), a compound word made up of “hand,” and “writing.” It refers to a handwritten document, but every document at the time was handwritten. *Cheirographon* is used in ancient literature of a bond of debt,[[69]](#footnote-11260) which is why so many versions have something about debt, such as “certificate of debt” (HCSB), or “record of debt” (ESV). While c*heirographon* was used of other things besides certificates of debt, including deposits, labor contracts, business agreements, and even authorization to act, the scope of the New Testament thought about sin and debt makes a certificate of debt fit well here. The Scripture and commands of God ensured that everyone would be a sinner: “both Jews and Greeks…are all under sin” (Rom. 3:9). The commands of God made not only the Jews, but the whole world, guilty before God (Rom. 3:9-20). Furthermore, those commands were in a sense “God’s handwriting,” for some of it came directly from the mouth of God and by the hand of God. (Exod. 20:1; Exod. 32:16). Not many people are aware that some of the Law was spoken from the mouth of God directly to the people, but it was. (Exod. 19:9; 20:1; Deut. 4:10-13, 15, 36; 5:4-6, 22-27; 18:14-16; Heb. 12:18-21). The only reason God stopped speaking the Law to the people was that they asked Him to stop and to speak just to Moses (Exod. 20:19). After that, God spoke to prophets who wrote down the words of God.

When people sinned against God it created a debt that had to be repaid, and we humans had no way to repay it except by our death, since the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). But then, by the grace of God, Jesus Christ, a sinless man, died in place of us (Rom. 5:8). When he did, and when we accepted him as Lord and believed God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9), God canceled our debt. Like the king in Matthew 18:23-27 who forgave a debt that was impossible to repay, God forgives us on the basis of the death of Christ and forgives our sin.

**“(caused by the regulations).”** This phrase comes from one Greek word *dogma* (#1378 δόγμα), a noun that occurs 5 times in the New Testament and means: “a formal statement concerning rules or regulations that are to be observed; an imperial declaration, a decree; something that is taught as an established tenet or statement of belief, doctrine, dogma.”[[70]](#footnote-32279)

How to understand this word and its relation to the sentence is one of the most difficult questions in New Testament translation. Not only is it a rare word, but it occurs in the dative case with no prepositions (which would help in understanding its use), and the repetitive phrases, “that was against us,” and “hostile to us,” add to the obscurity.

Now, there are three primary ways to understand what *dogma* is referring to in this context. The first option is that it is referring to the ‘doctrines (*dogma*) of the Gospel.’ In this understanding, Colossians 2:14 would be teaching that Christ has cleared our debt through the Gospel message and would be translated as something like, “he has wiped clean the record of debt by the teachings *of the Gospel*.” This understanding was the primary one held by the early Church.[[71]](#footnote-18534) Yet, its primary shortcoming is that referring to the Gospel message as *dogma* would be uncharacteristic of Paul, and secondly, this understanding does not fit at all with how Paul uses the verbal form of *dogma* in Colossians 2:20 to refer to commandments, “Do not handle! Do not taste!”

The second possibility is that *dogma* refers to regulations outside of the Law of Moses that some people were imposing upon Colossian believers. However, the problem with this view is, if these are not God’s standards, and are rules created by humans (cf. Col. 2:22), “it is hard to see how these clearly illegitimate decrees could feature in any way in the objective state of indebtedness that required Christ’s sacrifice on the cross to erase.”[[72]](#footnote-30100) In other words, human-made commandments would not create indebtedness that Christ would then need to erase, only God’s commandments would create indebtedness to God.

The final possibility for understanding *dogma* is that the word refers to the regulations of the law (most likely the Mosaic law). The evidence for this understanding is strongest. The first reason is that this meaning of *dogma* has the most support in the immediate context and in the closely related book of Ephesians. In the immediate context, Paul uses the verbal form of our noun *dogma* to refer to commandments. In Colossians 2:20-21 it reads, “why, as though you were still living in the world, do you submit to regulations—*such as*, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” So, Paul understands the verbal form *dogmatizō* (“submit to regulations”) to refer to commandments, which supports *dogma* referring to the commandments, likely ones of the Mosaic Law. *Dogma* also seems to refer to “decrees of the Law” in Acts 16:4 (cf. commentary on Acts 16:4; cf. NIV). Thirdly, another parallel idea that helps bring clarity is in Ephesians 2:15 where Paul uses the phrase, “—the hostility—the law consisting of commands *expressed* in regulations.” Paul is directly connecting the terms “hostility,” “law,” and “regulations” in Ephesians 2:15. Since he refers to “regulations” in Colossians 2:14 and also uses the term “hostility,” there is good reason to believe he has in mind “the regulations of the Mosaic Law.”

There is another interesting insight into the meaning of *dogma* here in Colossians 2:14 in a lost work of Irenaeus (AD 180). In Fragment XXXVIII it reads, “Let us offer a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips. These offerings are not according to the law, whose record of debt the Lord erased and took away from our midst, but according to the spirit, for it is in spirit and truth that we must worship God.”[[73]](#footnote-24557) Here, Irenaeus uses the exact same word as in Colossians 2:14 (“record of debt”) and ties it to the Law. This means Ireneaus likely understood the “regulations” to refer to the Law.

If *dogma* refers to the regulations of the Law, the question still remains, how does the “record of debt” relate to the Law? Again, because there is no preposition, and *dogma* is simply in the dative case, many options exist for how to take the dative. Biblically, when someone breaks the Law they incur a record of debt. Applying this principle to Colossians 2:14 would suggest a causal dative. The “regulations” (*dogma*) of the Law cause a record of debt because of human sin and the inability to live in complete obedience to God (Rom. 2:25; 3:10-20; Gal. 3:10). This is not totally different from how laws work in today’s society. When one breaks a law they owe a debt.

The wages of sin (or what someone owes for their sin) is death (Rom. 6:23), and Paul also says that when the law came, “sin came alive and he died” (Rom. 7:9-10). In both of these places we see the principle that the Law incurs a debt, namely, death. Thus, it makes perfect sense why Paul would say, here in Colossians 2:14, that Christ wipes clean our record of debt by the cross. His death pays the debt of those who broke the Law. That record of debt was nailed to the cross of Christ and is no longer against us.[[74]](#footnote-16584)

So, the most likely meaning of Colossians 2:14 is that Christ has wiped away the debt (death) that sinners owe which was caused by people’s inability to keep God’s regulations (Gal. 3:10; Rom. 3:23). This aligns with Paul’s teaching that “there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), and the teaching that “we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all” (Heb. 10:10). Christians who believe in Christ Jesus will be justified (Gal. 2:16) and forgiven (Acts 2:38).

**“hostile.”** The Greek word is *hupenantios* (#5227 ὑπεναντίος), and it means “against, opposed, contrary, hostile.” In this case, “hostile” seemed like a good translation, because while God in one sense meant the Law for good (Rom. 7:12; Gal. 3:24), He also knew that it would mean that everyone would become guilty when judged by its standards (Rom. 3:20; 8:3; Gal. 3:11), and therefore the Law brought a curse on people (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26). Thus the Law is “hostile” (“openly against”) people, because there is no way to live by it and be safe from judgment and death.

**“taken it away.”** The Greek phrase is ἦρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου, literally, “has taken it out of the midst (or middle).” This is a time when the Greek literature shows us that the phrase was used idiomatically for something being “removed.”[[75]](#footnote-31947) When Jesus Christ died on the cross for us, God took the Law, which was hostile to us due to all the regulations that we could not keep, and He “removed” it, He did away with it. Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the Law, and God nailed it to the cross when His Son was nailed to the cross, and when Jesus died, we died to the regulations of the Law as a standard for righteousness.

Col 2:15

**“stripped.”** The Greek word is *apekduomai* (#554 ἀπεκδύομαι, pronounced äp-ek-'do-oh-my). The key to understanding how to translate this word, indeed, the whole verse, is by paying attention to the whole verse and how the vocabulary interrelates. In this case, the words clearly refer to a Roman “Triumph,” the triumphal march (“parade”) that was held in Rome after a war that met specific conditions, such as adding territory to the Empire. Once we understand the verse is referring to a Triumph, then many nuances of the verse, and many implications, come to light.

The word *apekduomai* literally refers to taking off clothing, stripping off clothing.[[76]](#footnote-23683) Louw and Nida write: “To take off or strip off clothing; to undress, to disrobe, stripping off. ‘He stripped off the clothing of the rulers and authorities and made them a public spectacle’ (Col. 2:15). [The use in Colossians] appears to be a case of figurative usage, but it may refer to the stripping away of weapons and hence the removal of authority and power.”[[77]](#footnote-22283)

It is also true, as BDAG points out, that the word can refer to “disarm,” and many versions read that way, but that is a secondary meaning, and furthermore, it is difficult to see exactly how that would fit as well as “stripped” in this verse. If a person is stripped naked and chained as a prisoner in a Roman Triumph, of course he is also disarmed. On the other hand, to simply use the word “disarmed” does not fit the picture being painted by this verse, for the powers are not just “disarmed,” they are stripped, chained, and exposed to public view and ridicule.

We must keep in mind as we read that comparing Christ’s defeat of demonic powers to a Roman Triumphal procession is a metaphor, an illustration, and therefore is not an exact comparison. For example, in an actual Roman Triumphal procession, the captives were stripped naked and walked in chains. The demons Christ defeated were not literally “naked” (we can’t even see them anyway), but they were naked in the sense that they were defeated by Christ: their power has been limited and their end in the Lake of Fire is assured (cf. Matt. 25:41).

Some commentators state that because the verb is in the middle voice, God stripped Himself in some way,[[78]](#footnote-19673) but the middle voice is often used in an active sense and those arguments are well handled by Lenski, Hendriksen, Lange, Meyer, etc.

[For a much more complete description of a Triumph, see the commentary on 2 Cor. 2:14.]

**“the rulers and the authorities.”** The designations “rulers” and “authorities” occur together nine times in the New Testament (Luke 12:11; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; and Titus 3:1). Sometimes the rulers and authorities are demons (Eph. 6:12), sometimes they are human rulers (Luke 12:11; Titus 3:1), and sometimes the designations are more general and refer to all rulers and dominions, both spirit beings and human beings (Eph. 1:21).

[For more on the use of “rulers” and “authorities” in the New Testament, see the REV commentary on Eph. 6:12.]

**“made a public spectacle.”** The Greek word is *deigmatizō* (#1165 δειγματίζω, pronounced dag-mä-'tee-zō), and it refers to disgracing someone in public. It is only used two times in the New Testament, the other time being when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, and did not want to disgrace her publicly, but wanted to divorce her privately (Matt. 1:19). Being paraded through the streets of Rome in chains (and usually stripped naked), was the ultimate public disgrace, and slavery or death, often in the arena, came shortly after the Triumph procession. In fact, the Roman historian Plutarch wrote that when Antony and Cleopatra lost the war with Octavian, and Octavian wanted Cleopatra to be a prisoner in his Triumph, Cleopatra committed suicide. Nonetheless, Octavian had an effigy of Cleopatra made and included that in his Triumph. In the context of the Roman Triumph, the translation “made a public spectacle” is a fitting translation (cf. NAB, NIV, NKJV).

**“leading them *as captives* in a triumphal procession.”** The Greek word is *thriambeuō* (#2358 θριαμβεύω, pronounced three-am-'byoo-ō) and it means to lead someone in a Roman Triumph procession. The words “as captives” were added to ensure that the reader did not think that “to lead” simply meant “to go in front of,” but rather “to lead” as someone might lead a dog down the street on a leash. Lightfoot writes that the word is “wrongly translated in the A.V. [KJV], ‘causes us to triumph.’” He goes on to say “....it is the defeated powers of evil...who are led in public, chained to the triumphal car of Christ.”[[79]](#footnote-21118)

It can be tempting to remove the Triumph from the verse and turn it into a general reference to how God “triumphed” (“won”) over the forces of evil, and it does certainly make the verse easier to read for those Christians who do not know what a Roman “Triumph” is. However, although God did defeat the powers of evil, that is not what the verse is saying, and omitting the Triumph from the verse causes it to lose much of its meaning.

That the powers of evil are led in a Triumph means, among other things, that they have been totally defeated. They have no weapons, in fact, no clothes. Who and what they are can be seen by everyone. They are chained and powerless. Their evil deeds are known, and they are being publicly disgraced for who they are and what they have done. Furthermore, their future holds nothing but more disgrace and destruction.

As part of every Triumph, the conquering general rode in a chariot, gloriously dressed and receiving the accolades of the crowd. While this verse confirms that the victory is “through him,” through Christ, it does not specifically refer to all the glory and honor Christ will receive, although that certainly is part of the analogy. Also, in every Triumph, the general’s army followed him, enjoying the fruits of victory. By using the analogy of the Triumph, we Christians are known to be enjoying the fruits of victory, even though that, like the glory the general receives, is not specifically stated.

[For more on a Roman Triumphal Procession, see commentary on 2 Cor. 2:14.]

**“in *connection with* him.”** God has been in a war with Satan since Satan sinned, and the victory in that war has now been assured through the work of Christ even though every battle has not yet been fought. The Greek text puts the phrase at the end of the verse, but that makes the English read awkwardly. Of more concern is that the commentators and translators are divided as to whether the dative masculine pronoun (“him” or “it”) refers to Christ or to the “cross.” Many versions read “it,” while versions such as the Holman Christian Standard Bible, ESV, NASB, and Goodspeed’s translation, read “him,” and the scholars, both ancient and modern, are as divided as the versions. Both “cross” and “Christ” seem to make sense, and indeed it could be said that both Christ and the cross are vital to the victory. However, the use of the Greek ἐν αὐτῷ (“in him,” cf. Col. 2:6-7, 9-10), and “in whom” (Col. 2:11-12) has been consistent in this section in referring to Christ, not to something else, and it certainly is “in him,” (“in connection with him,” or “through him”) that God won the battle and was able to have the Triumph. Therefore, we believe that although the use of the pronoun retains the cross as an image in the background, the light is clearly cast on Christ himself and all that he did and accomplished.

Col 2:16

**“let no one judge you.”** Paul is saying that Christians should not judge one another with regard to whether one keeps the Jewish festivals or does not. Thus, if someone comes from a Jewish background and is used to keeping the Sabbath, or they live in Israel where the Sabbath is still kept to this day, they are welcome to keep the Sabbath and fellow Christians should not judge them. On the other hand, what is more likely happening in this context of Colossians 2:16 (cf. Col. 2:21) is that Jewish Christians are judging Gentile Christians for not keeping the Jewish festivals. Yet, since we are under the New Covenant, Christians are not obligated to keep these festivals, thus, we should not judge one another for those things.

There are many other instances in Scripture that Christians are supposed to judge rightly (John 7:24), for purposes such as keeping the Church pure (1 Cor. 5:12) and judging if people are telling the truth (1 Cor. 10:15). Therefore, this should not be taken to mean Christians cannot judge other Christians at all. Of course, when Christians do judge one another rightly, this should always be done in the most loving way possible.

**“a new moon.”** The new moon, the beginning of the month, was celebrated with special sacrifices and offerings under the Law of Moses. Eventually, it became a feast day and a holy day in which no work was allowed. Here in Colossians, we see that more than 30 years after Christ died, people were celebrating the new moon.

[For more on the new moon rules and celebrations, see commentary on Num. 28:11.]

**“Sabbath day.”** When it comes to the Sabbath, verses such as Colossians 2:16-17, and Romans 14:5, as well as what was apparently practiced and taught in the first century, show that while rest and respecting God are important, God has not designated a day of rest for the Church even though He had designated the Sabbath to be specially respected by Israel.

Although the word “Sabbath” in Greek is technically in the plural, which would be “Sabbaths” this is not referring to some special Sabbath holidays, besides the weekly Jewish Sabbath, but is referring to the weekly Sabbath, as it does in its other uses in Scripture (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; Hos. 2:11 LXX). The phrase, “Festival, new moon, or Sabbaths,” was a regular way to designate all of the appointed feasts for Israel (Ezek. 45:17).[[80]](#footnote-30643)

To properly understand the Bible, one of the things we must know is that from time to time God changed the rules by which He governed mankind. This means that to live in obedience to God, the proper question to ask is not, “What did God say?” but rather, “What does God say that applies to me?” For example, God said to Adam and Eve to eat only plants (Gen. 1:29). Later, He changed that rule and so now we can eat meat without breaking God’s command. Similarly, after Jesus’ resurrection, God changed the rule about the Sabbath.

God set the pattern for the Sabbath by Himself resting on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2). However, He never commanded people to rest on the seventh day until the Exodus when He gave the Mosaic Law, and there is no evidence from Scripture or history that the patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob observed a Sabbath, which meant for more than the first 2,500 years of human history people did not keep the Sabbath. When God gave the Ten Commandments, however, He commanded Israel to keep the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11). The fact that this was a new ritual is clear in part from the fact that God had to explain what it meant to keep the Sabbath and why the Jews were to keep it. Thus He took three verses in the Ten Commandments to explain it, and added more detail in Deuteronomy 5:15, whereas most commandments were very short, such as “Do not murder” (Exod. 20:13). However, when the Christian Church started on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), God changed the rules for believers and no longer required them to keep the Sabbath.

It is clear in the Mosaic Law that God commanded the Israelites to keep the Sabbath, and was serious enough about it that He commanded that Sabbath breakers be put to death (Exod. 31:14). Moses obeyed God’s command and executed a Sabbath breaker (Num. 15:32-36). Although there is no other record of a leader putting a person to death for breaking the Sabbath, that does not mean that it did not happen. Nehemiah did not execute Sabbath breakers, but he did treat them harshly (Neh. 13:15-21). At the time of Christ, the Pharisees were very concerned about protecting the Sabbath and Jesus never reproved them for that. He only reproved them for making unreasonable rules about what activities, such as healing, violated the Sabbath.

Because in the Old Testament and Gospels keeping the Sabbath was a command of God, it was appropriate to “judge” people who did not keep it (cf. Num. 15:32-36). But Colossians says not to let people judge us about the Sabbath, which would only be the case if God’s laws about the Sabbath changed. Colossians also points out that the Sabbath was a shadow, but the body who casts the shadow is Christ (Col. 2:17).

Another reason we know that Christians do not have to keep the Sabbath is from the record in Acts. When the Jewish believers in Jerusalem decided what regulations the Gentile converts should follow, they never mentioned keeping the Sabbath (Acts 15:24-29). Similarly, although Peter, and especially Paul, taught the new Christians many things, there is not one record where they taught people to keep the Sabbath. This is especially important when Paul started reaching Gentiles. It could be argued that when he went into synagogues and taught Jews that they were already keeping the Sabbath, but by the end of Acts, when Paul was going to the Gentiles, it seems that if they needed to keep the Sabbath it would have been mentioned at least once. He certainly spoke about being obedient and holy in the context of many other behaviors.

Christians do not have a specific Sabbath to keep, but we should “rest” in Christ every day.

[For more on the Sabbath, see commentary on Exod. 20:10.]

Col 2:17

**“the reality is Christ.”** The word “reality” in Colossians 2:17 is the Greek word for “body,” *sōma* (#4983 σῶμα), cf. BDAG definition 4, “substantive reality, *the thing itself, the reality* in imagery of a body that casts a shadow, in contrast to [the shadow].” The fact that it can refer to a reality explains why some translations clarify the verse by using the word “reality.” This is an example of a verse that can be very confusing if it is just translated literally, as it is in the KJV, “the body is of Christ.” The regulations of the Law about such things as eating and drinking were only a “shadow,” they were not the “body,” the substance, the “real thing” if you will. The body (reality) that casts the shadow is Christ.

This phrase, “the body is of Christ,” is a genitive construction in the Greek. The Greek text more literally reads, “Which is a shadow of the things to come, but the body [is] of Christ.” The meaning is that regulations about food, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths were not in themselves the ultimate point, but rather are merely a hint of something greater. Things like food and Sabbath regulations were like a shadow on the ground; the important thing was the body that casts the shadow, the “reality,” if you will, and that body is Christ himself. He is the “body” of which the regulations in the Law were but his shadow. The shadow was there, but it pointed to there being a greater reality.

Understanding the verse this way takes the phrase “*sōma* of Christ” as an objective genitive: the body is Christ. Other versions take the phrase as a genitive of possession: “the reality belongs to Christ.” But we think that the point being made by Paul is that Christ himself is the true “body,” not just that the true “body” of these ceremonial laws belongs to him.

Col 2:18

**“disqualify you from the prize.”** The Greek word is *katabrabeuō* (#2603 καταβραβεύω, pronounced ka-ta-bra-'byoo-ō), and there are many different ways it can be translated. In fact, this verse has a number of words that can be translated in different ways, which explains the large number of variations among the English versions.

As Hendriksen[[81]](#footnote-26060) and many other commentators point out, this word refers to the judgment of a judge or umpire who would make a decision or judgment against someone. In this case, the idea would be that someone who did not believe in Christ, and thus the actions and beliefs of the Colossian Christians, would declare them to be disqualified. Lenski writes:

“This pictures the man who awards the prize in the athletic contests and denies this prize to the true Christians in Colosse, and does this mean thing in the way and on the grounds now stated. Paul says: ‘Let no man do this sort of thing to you,’ i.e., disregard him who tries it, laugh at him; the prize is yours whatever decision the fellow may hand down.”[[82]](#footnote-11628)

We see that meaning of *katabrabeuō* represented in translations such as the NET Bible: “Let no one who delights in humility and the worship of angels pass judgment on you.” Based on that meaning of the word, one thing this verse pictures is people telling us we are not qualified when in fact we are, and we need to learn not to believe them. Far too often Christians are discouraged in their Christian beliefs and activities because unbelievers mock or disparage them.

Lightfoot[[83]](#footnote-14530) points out that *katabrabeuō* can also refer to a fellow competitor trying to hinder us. What often happens in life is that this person who passes judgment on us gets us to believe him, and we start to follow his ways, which does lead to us being disqualified for the prize. In light of this, the translation, “Let no one disqualify you for the prize” (NIV; cf. HCSB, ESV, NRSV) is a good one. We are not to let people tell us we are not qualified, and we are certainly not to follow their disobedient ways and become “disqualified.” Here is an example of God packing a paragraph of meaning into one word, and the essence of the verse, in a very expanded form, is: “Let no one say, or try to convince you, that you are disqualified for the prize, and do not follow what they are doing and thus become disqualified.”

**“delighting in.”** The Greek is *thelōn en* (θέλων ἐν). The commentators and versions differ on what this phrase means in this verse. Although the root word refers to “will” or “want,” which leads to translations such as “voluntary” (KJV); “doing his own will” (DBY); or “chooses to” (NJB), Lightfoot and many others show that the phrase is used to refer to delighting in, or taking pleasure in, doing something. Lightfoot notes: “The expression is common in the LXX [the Septuagint; the Greek Old Testament],” and he notes there is no valid reason not to understand it that way, as “delighting in” or “devoting himself to.”[[84]](#footnote-32591)

**“*false* humility.”** The Greek word is simply *tapeinophrosunē* (#5012 ταπεινοφροσύνη) “humility.” Humility is generally considered to be a wonderful virtue, so here it obviously refers to a “false humility” (NIV), or unnecessary actions that are supposed to demonstrate humility (cf. “asceticism” ESV; “self-abasement” NASB). The REV adds the word “false” in italics to make the meaning plain. Many religious people do things that demonstrate their humility that are unnecessary in the Christian Faith, and can even derail the freedom we have in Christ by emphasizing works rather than faith and grace.

Many commentators have pointed out that in this specific context humility and the worship of angels are likely connected because the person who was so quick to judge others was trying to create the impression that he considered himself (or mankind) too lowly to approach God, but “humbly” tried to contact Him through the mediation of angels.[[85]](#footnote-26817)

Using angels as mediators to reach God would make perfect sense in the Patron-Client culture of the Roman world. Dignitaries and powerful people were almost always contacted through intermediaries, not directly. This also helps explain the worship of angels. Although there are likely many reasons why they were worshiping angels, part of the ritual behavior of the Patron-Client society is that when someone in a more influential position (the “Patron”) helps you, you return the favor by praising and extolling that person, particularly to others.

It certainly seems that the meaning of this verse includes someone who appears very humble by using angels and mediaries to “get to God,” and worshiping those angels in return, all the while asserting that we mere humans are not good enough to approach God. This “humility” and worship may confuse some people, but the knowledgeable Christian is not deceived. We are to approach Jesus and God directly, and worship only them. In spite of the clear directives about that in the Word of God, many people today pray to saints instead of God, often asking the saints to procure the favor of God for them.

**“the worshiping of angels.”** The Greek phrase is *thrēskeia tōn angelōn* (θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων). The phrase seems simple and straightforward, referring to the people worshiping angels. The definite article before “angels” is evidence that the word “angel” is not used as an adjective or in a descriptive manner (“angelic piety,” or “worship practiced by angels”). Neither is there a need to see here the figure hendiadys[[86]](#footnote-31717) which would make the phrase “the religious humility of angels.” If that were the case, it would seem that the humility of angels would be something to aspire to, not something to be warned about.

Colossians goes to great lengths to establish the preeminence of Christ and that he is above all (cf. Col. 1:15-20, 22, 28; 2:8-9, 17). Furthermore, there is historical evidence that supports that angel worship was going on in the area of Colossae.[[87]](#footnote-21571) The Church Father Irenaeus, who lived in the second century AD, who historians believe came from Smyrna in the Roman province of Asia (modern Izmir, Turkey) not far from Colossae, mentioned “angelic invocations” in his writing, so it was going on in the culture.[[88]](#footnote-11347) It is also possible that, given the allusions to Jewish customs in the context (cf. Col. 2:16), Paul has in mind Jewish Christians or simply Jews who do not believe in Christ and who are leading the Colossian Christians astray. N.T Wright says, “The people he is opposing spend so much time in speculations about angels, or in celebrating the fact that the law was given by them, that they are in effect worshiping them instead of God.”[[89]](#footnote-15549) Thus, one could see how a Jew who was elevating angels too highly, could in effect, be seen as worshiping angels.

Even today there are very dedicated Christians who love God but who venerate angels and saints, so the idea that it was going on in Colossae when it was part of the native culture should not surprise us. In fact, that God does not ignore it but instead makes a point about it should show us that prayer to saints and veneration of saints and angels is not “harmless,” but a sin in the eyes of God.

**“going into detail about *visions* he has seen.”** The Greek is *ha heoraken embateuōn* (ἃ ἑόρακεν ἐμβατεύων), a phrase that has led to “well nigh endless discussion.”[[90]](#footnote-28156) The word *embateuō* (#1687 ἐμβατεύω; “going into detail”) occurs only here in the New Testament.

Martin Dibelius did extensive research on some inscriptions that use *embateuō* found on ancient temples, and understands it to refer to being “consecrated” or initiated into a mystery cult, so that one can enter into sacred chambers of their Temples.[[91]](#footnote-13641) The word *embateuō*, which ordinarily means “to enter” or less likely, “take a stand on,” was possibly used in a technical sense in the mystery religions of those who entered into full initiation (they also apparently physically stood on something in the initiation).

One downside to this view that *embateuō* is referring to mystery cults or temple practices is that it does not really make sense of why Paul would say, “what he has seen.” If Paul was referring to the fact that these false teachers were “being initiated” into mystery cults, the phrase “what he has seen,” is unnecessarily vague and does not clearly have anything to do with temple rituals. One would expect Paul to say that these people were “being initiated into the temple” or “false practices” not that these people were “being initiated into what he has seen.” Additionally, the reason why the second meaning “taking his stand” is likely not Paul’s intended meaning, is that “taking his stand” is not a very common meaning for *embateuō.* It is not listed as a lexical option in BDAG, and if Paul had meant to communicate that these false teachers were “taking a stand” or “standing firm” on what they had seen in the mystery cult so as to be “puffed up,” we would expect Paul to use a more common Greek word for “standing firm,” which is *histēmi* (#2476, ἵστημι).

Another possible meaning for *embateuō* in Colossians 2:18, which was taken from one of the Temple inscriptions, listed in BDAG is “entering an oracle for interpretation of what he has seen.”[[92]](#footnote-24919) The downside to this view is that, not only do you have to add an object (i.e., enter “an oracle”), which is not present in the text itself, but also, it does not fit the immediately following context in which these people are described as being “puffed up.” How does asking an oracle for an interpretation make one “puffed up?” Therefore, this is likely not what Paul meant by *embateuō* in Colossians 2:18*.*

A more likely meaning for *embateuō,* is “going into detail.” This is a meaning found in some ancient literature (2 Maccabees 2:30; Philo, Planting 80 Wendl. v.l.) and it makes sense in the context, and it avoids adding extra words into the sentence that are not present in the text, which the other interpretations must do. One could understand the phrase to mean, “going into detail about what he has seen.” This would make great sense with the context in which these people are “puffed up with pointless notions,” which is seen by the fact that they ramble on about their visions and experiences, but are not holding fast to Christ (Col. 2:19).

**“puffed up with pointless notions.”** People have reasons for what they do, but Paul writes from God’s perspective—there is no cause for being puffed up.

Col 2:19

**“the head.”** The Head of the Body of Christ is Jesus himself (cf. Eph. 1:23).

**“joints and ligaments.”** The physical body owes its functionality partly due to the sinews (which is connective tissue that includes ligaments and tendons). The Body of Christ is like our physical body in that it takes many members of the body working together to really “hold it together” and make it work as it should. Sadly, too many members of the Body of Christ do not see themselves as important in the Body and so do not do what God gave them to do. God says every member of the Body is important, and that is absolutely true. This is similar to Ephesians 4:16.

**“growth that is from God.”** The Greek is more literally, “the growth of God.” This is a genitive of source (origin), that God is the source of the growth.

Col 2:20

**“Since.”** The Greek word *ei* (#1487 εἰ) usually means “if,” but in some contexts, it can mean “since.” Friberg’s Lexicon states that in some cases, *ei* “express a condition of fact regarded as true or settled; *since, because*.”[[93]](#footnote-19736) R.C. H. Lenski referred to the *ei* here as the “if of reality.”[[94]](#footnote-13624) E. W. Bullinger wrote that *ei* sometimes: “assumes the hypothesis as an actual fact, the condition being unfulfilled, but no doubt being thrown on the supposition.”[[95]](#footnote-19929) Here in Colossians 2:20, the *ei* can mean “since” because the Colossian believers had accepted Christ, and when they did they died with Christ (Rom. 6:1-8). Here in Colossians 2:20, Paul is making the point that “since” the Colossians died with Christ, why are they still submitting to worldly regulations. Although many versions have the translation “if,” the last part of the verse shows that the “if” would be rhetorical. Other verses that have *ei* used in the sense of “because” or “since” include Romans 6:8, Colossians 3:1 (cf. NIV translation, “Since...”).

**“died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the world.”** This does not mean we are not influenced by these spirits anymore, but it does mean we are no longer a slave to them (Gal. 4:7-9; Col. 2:8, 15).

[For more on the “elemental spirits,” see commentary on Col. 2:8.]

**“submit to.”** This is a passive verb. It is not middle as many versions translate it. The Colossians were being pressured to submit to them (passive), as we all often are. The passive verb carries a permissive force: “Why do you allow yourself to be subject to….” The BDAG *Greek-English Lexicon* shows this verb as a permissive passive.[[96]](#footnote-28112)

**“regulations.”** The Greek is the verb, the noun is in Colossians 2:14 (see commentary on Col. 2:14).

**“still living in the world.”** We do live in the world, so this use of “living” does not refer to physical life. It refers to living in the world in the sense of being subject to the elemental spirits of the world.

Col 2:21

**“Do not handle.”** These are all food regulations. People feel such a need to be pleasing to God and in harmony with him that they allow themselves to be subjected to all kinds of regulations in the physical world that in reality do not bring them closer to God in any way.

Col 2:22

**“*things that* perish when consumed.”** When putting this statement in context its meaning becomes clearer. Just a few verses later, in Colossians 3:2 we read, “Think about the things that are above, not the things that are on the earth.” Paul is exhorting the Colossians to not follow regulations that have to do with earthly things that can be destroyed, but to follow Christ, with whom they have been hidden in heaven (Col. 3:3). This echoes very closely Jesus’ sentiment in Matthew 6:19 where Jesus encourages his followers not to store up treasures for oneself on earth, where moth and rust can destroy them, but instead, to store up treasures in heaven. This idea is part of the reason why these regulations are bad, because not only do they come from the “elemental spirits” but they are concerned with the wrong things, temporal things.

**“based on human commandments.”** Paul is adding to the list of why these regulations are bad. Not only are these regulations referring to temporal things, things that do not really matter in the end (Col. 2:22a), but in this phrase Paul reminds the Colossians that they are also based on human commandments. In other words, they are not God’s commandments, they do not have divine origin.

**“doctrines.”** The Greek word is *didaskalia* (#1319 διδασκαλία), a noun, and it has two primary meanings: It is used of the act of teaching or instruction (as if it were a verb), and it is also used for what is taught, i.e., the doctrine or material that was presented. In this verse, we felt “doctrine” was better than “teaching.”

[For more on *didaskalia,* see commentary on 1 Tim. 4:13.]

Col 2:23

**“*they are* of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”** There are differences of opinion among commentators as to how this last phrase in verse 23 needs to be understood and translated. However, most modern commentators fall into one of two major camps. In the REV translation above, the translation “in stopping” comes from the Greek preposition *pros*, which, like most Greek prepositions, is very flexible and has multiple definitions. In fact, it is *pros* that is at the heart of the two major ways this last phrase of Colossians 2:23 has been interpreted. If the *pros* is seen as having the sense of “against,” as the majority of the modern versions and the REV represent it, then we end up with a translation similar in impact to the REV translation, “but *they are* of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (cf. HCSB, ESV, NASB, NIV, RSV, NRSV). Although the use of *pros* in the sense of “against” is not the most common use of *pros*, the grammar of the verse seems to support it, which is why the majority of modern translations favor it.

If, however, *pros* is understood to mean, “to, toward,” i.e., “with a view to,” which is its most common meaning, then the translations by Hendricksen, Williams (New Testament), and the NET would be the better translations. The NET reads: “Even though they have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility achieved by an unsparing treatment of the body—a wisdom with no true value—they in reality result in fleshly indulgence.” Hendriksen’s translation reads: “Regulations of this kind, though, to be sure, having a reputation for wisdom because of their self-imposed ritual, humility, and unsparing treatment of the body, are of no value whatever, (serving only) to indulge the flesh.”[[97]](#footnote-14343)

The translations by Hendriksen, Williams, and the NET, make a very important point, that regulating the flesh to somehow be right in the sight of God is not valuable in and of itself, but in fact, serves only to indulge the flesh. The translation in the REV, while not making that point as clearly, shows that regulation of the flesh does not stop the indulgence of the flesh. True! Fleshly regulations do not stop the indulgence of the flesh, in fact, they indulge the flesh. The “humble” and “disciplined” people who were trying to influence the Colossians were actually filled with pride. They rejected God’s grace and His simple truth about Jesus Christ, and piled on regulations and extra things to believe, trying to show themselves humble by their learning and discipline. Like the leaders among the Jews, they “load people with loads *that are* grievous to carry” (Luke 11:46). It is only pride and arrogance that lead people from the simplicity of Jesus Christ and salvation by faith. Furthermore, rules that supposedly produce righteousness in the sight of God by governing the flesh are really only an indulgence of the flesh.

A first-century Christian reading the Greek would see both definitions of *pros* as applying, and indeed they do, making the verse a kind of amphibologia (double entendre), in which we can see that fleshly regulations do not stop the indulgence of the flesh, they actually indulge the flesh.

[See figure of speech “amphibologia.”]

**Colossians Chapter 3**

Col 3:1

**“Since.”** See commentary on Colossians 2:20. Some versions leave the text as “if,” and in that case, the believer’s position is not in doubt, but the believer is being asked to do a mental check and make sure he has confessed and believed in Christ. To better understand Colossians 3, it is helpful to see Colossians 3:1-4 as one connected thought (see commentary on Col. 3:4).

**“you were raised with Christ.”** This is speaking of the Christian being “raised from the dead” by virtue of being in union with Jesus Christ. The Bible says Christians are “in Christ,” often meaning “in union with Christ,” and that union is an actual spiritual union. Christians are part of the Body of Christ, so we are in a mystical spiritual union with him, and thus by virtue of that union, we went through what Christ himself went through. This is expressed in the Bible when it says that the Christian was circumcised with Christ (Col. 2:11); baptized with Christ (Rom. 6:3); crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20), died with Christ (Rom. 6:8; Col. 2:20; 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:11), buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12), raised with Christ (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1), and is now, in God’s eyes, seated with Christ in heaven (Eph. 2:6).

The statement that we “were raised” (past tense) with Christ is the use of the prophetic perfect idiom. The prophetic perfect idiom speaks of a future event as already having occurred in order to assure people that the event will absolutely occur. In this case, we are said to already be raised from the dead with Christ in order to assure us that we will be raised from the dead. In the Administration of Grace in which we live, the Church Age, Christian salvation is guaranteed, so it can be spoken of as if it had already occurred even though it is still future.

[For more on being in union with Christ, see commentary on Eph. 1:3. For more on the prophetic perfect idiom, see commentaries on Eph. 2:6 and 2:8. For more on Christians having a guarantee of salvation, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation.”]

Col 3:2

**“Think.”** The Greek verb *phroneō* (#5426 φρονέω, pronounced fro-nay’-oh) means to think about something, give careful consideration to something, form an opinion about something. Here it is present tense, imperative mood, so it means “keep thinking about,” not think about something just one time or simply form an opinion about it. Our minds are always active, and we are always thinking about something. God commands that we keep thinking about heavenly things and the things of God.

**“the things that are above.”** The Church Epistles have statements that are literally true now, and some that are deliberately figurative in order to make or emphasize a point. This statement in Colossians 3:2 is literally true: we are alive on earth now, so we think about things “that are above,” that is, things in heaven where Christ is. Philippians 4:8 also encourages believers to think about godly things.

Colossians 3:2 is literal and in contrast to Ephesians 2:6, which is figurative. Ephesians 2:6 says that we are “seated...in the heavenly places.” We are not currently seated in heaven, but we will be at the Rapture of the Church when we are taken into heaven to be with Christ (1 Thess. 4:15-17). Ephesians 2:6 is using the prophetic perfect idiom to show us that Christian salvation is not in doubt and Christians will absolutely be in heaven with Christ in the future. So, while Colossians 3:2 is literal and directs us to think about things in heaven, Ephesians 2:6 is figurative and comforts us by letting us know that our salvation is guaranteed.

[For more on the prophetic perfect idiom, see commentaries on Eph. 2:6 and 2:8. For more on the assurance of salvation that Christians have, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation.”]

Col 3:3

**“for you died.”** The Christian died with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4, 8; Col 2:20; 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:11), (for more on the Christian’s identity with Christ, see the REV commentary on Rom. 6:3).

**“hidden.”** What does it mean for Christians’ lives to be “hidden” with Christ? There are a few possible interpretations. The first is that Paul is intending to say that Christians’ lives are hidden in the sense that their old life has disappeared, they have died to their old selves. Thus, their old life is gone, it is hidden. Another interpretation is that it is referring to the safety of believers,[[98]](#footnote-32696) namely, that believers’ salvation is secured, it is hidden with Christ in heaven. Although these are valid points, they do not align well with the immediate context. Instead, due to Paul’s emphasis on our union with Christ in the very next verse, Colossians 3:4, “but when Christ—your life—appears, then you also will appear with him in glory,” and our union with Christ described in Colossians 3:1, then what has happened to Christ has figuratively happened to us. Thus, since Christ has been seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:13), we too are seated at the right hand of God (Eph. 2:6), in heaven. Since heaven is hidden to us in our current state, the Colossians’ lives are said to also be hidden. Therefore, their lives are not hidden because they have disappeared, but because their lives have been united with Christ’s life.

**“in *the presence of* God.”** Colossians 3:3 is a spiritual passage, not literal, which teaches the great extent to which we are united with Christ. It is as if we died with him and were raised to life with him, and are seated in the heavenly places with him (Eph. 2:6).

There are a few important things to note in the context and the verse itself to properly understand Paul’s words here. Firstly, just a few verses earlier, in Colossians 3:1, Paul has identified us with Christ, he is showing our union with Christ when he says, “you were raised with Christ.” Clearly, the Colossians were not literally raised from death with Christ, but because they have been united with Christ due to their trust (Eph. 2:8), in Paul’s metaphor, it is as if they have been raised with Christ.

Secondly, Paul’s focus has been on location twice in the immediate context. Paul says to, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated” (Col. 3:1). Then again, “think about the things that are above, not the things that are on the earth” (Col. 3:2). The idea of this verse is that since the Colossians are united with Christ, and Christ is in heaven, they should be thinking about heavenly things. It is important to notice that Paul is emphasizing location: “where Christ is seated,” and, “things that are above.”

With all of this in mind, when we arrive at Colossians 3:3 and Paul literally says that, “Your life has been hidden with Christ in God,” we can rightly discern what Paul means by the phrase “in God.” In Greek, the preposition is “*en*” (#1722, ἐν) and it is followed by the dative case “God.” It can have a wide variety of meanings such as “in,” “by,” or “with.” Although it is possible to take the preposition “*en*” in an instrumental way, such that the Colossians’ lives are hidden ‘by’ God, which would mean that Christians’ lives are protected and secured by God, this interpretation does not align with Paul’s emphasis on the location of Christ in heaven, nor with Paul’s exhortation for believers to think about heavenly things (Col. 3:2). Paul’s logic throughout verses 2-3 would be, “Think about heavenly things...because your life is protected by God.” The logic of this scenario is quite unclear. However, if one takes the Spatial (or locative) Dative, which would be translated something like, “your life is hidden with Christ in *the presence of* God,” the logic of Paul’s argument works nicely. Paul’s logic would be, “Think about heavenly things...because you are (figuratively) in heaven with Christ.” One can see the power of Paul’s sentiment. The Colossians are to think about heavenly things because they are figuratively in heaven, due to their union with Christ.

The purpose of Paul’s whole analogy is to show that due to the Colossians’ union with Christ, it is as if they died to their old selves and are living in heaven where Christ is living. Therefore, Paul is exhorting them to live like it! To live as if they died to their old selves (Col. 3:5-6), and to set their minds on heavenly things (Col. 3:4) as if they are living in heaven with Christ.

Col 3:4

**“your.”** There is good textual support for “your,” which is why almost all the modern versions follow that translation. Commentators suggest that Christ is called “your” life because now the Gentiles are included in Christ, whereas under the Law they were excluded. Thus, by saying “your life,” Paul is emphasizing that the Gentiles—and Colossae was in a Gentile part of what is now Turkey—were included in Christ.

**“*but* when.”** Although the Greek text starts the verse with “when,” the “but” has been added to make the English smoother and clearer. The Greek text closes Colossians 3:3 with a semicolon, not a period (Young’s Literal Translation follows the Greek text), but a comma fits the syntax well too. Some other English versions also add an “and” (NLT) or a “but” (NJB). The “but” in Colossians 3:4 makes sense because Colossians 3:3 is speaking about our life being hidden, “but” it will be revealed when Christ appears.

It is helpful to keep Colossians 3:2-4 as one sentence in English as it is in the Greek text because the affirmation in verse 4 that the Christian “will appear with him [Christ] in glory” is based upon the premise in verse 3 that the person died with Christ. In fact, it is helpful to read Colossians 3:1-4 as one interconnected thought because it includes dying with Christ, being raised from the dead with Christ, and then appearing in glory with Christ (although not in that order in the text):

Colossians 3:1-4: “Since, then, you were raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think about the things that are above, not the things that are on the earth, for you died and your life has been hidden with Christ in God, *but* when Christ—your life—appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

We can see that this section of Colossians starts with the statement that the Christian has been raised from the dead already, (we learn from other places in Scripture that this happened by virtue of our being in union with Christ). Of course, we have not yet been raised from the dead; Colossians is using an idiom—the prophetic perfect idiom—to express that the future event of being raised from the dead is not in doubt but will absolutely occur. Because we will be raised from the dead as verse 1 says, we then should, as verse 2 says, think about things above and not focus on the petty things of this life. Colossians 3:3 then goes on to expound on why we should focus on things above: we died with Christ, and because we died with Christ to the world, it should not matter much to us. Furthermore, our life is now “hidden” with Christ in God. The word “hidden” communicates a couple of deep meanings. For one thing, people hid things that were valuable to keep them safe. Also, however, the text is saying that our true life, our real life, is “hidden.” It is not currently visible to the world, and if a Christian is not spiritually minded it may even be hidden from that person. In any case, our real spiritual life is currently hidden. Then Colossians 3:4 starts with a contrast to our life being now hidden. Our real life may be hidden now, but, in the future, both Christ and our real life will appear and be openly visible. Indeed, we will openly appear with Christ in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4 is an affirmation of the permanence of Christian salvation. Our salvation is guaranteed, so the Bible can speak of us as already being raised with Christ and affirm that we “will appear with Christ in glory.”

[For more on the prophetic perfect idiom, see commentaries on Eph. 2:6 and 2:8. For more on our guarantee of being saved in the future, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation.”]

**“then you also will appear with him in glory.”** This statement in Colossians 3:3-4 is one of the many statements in the Epistles to the Christian Church that indicate that Christian salvation is guaranteed and every born-again Christian will be saved. Christian salvation, which comes via the New Birth and makes the Christian part of the Body of Christ, is unique to the Christian Church and was made available by the death of Christ. The fact that Paul can write that “you,” the people of the church in Colossae, will appear with Christ in glory is good evidence that each and every Christian will be saved. Paul could not assure the whole church that every one of them would appear with Christ in glory unless he knew that once a person got born again they were guaranteed to be saved.

When Christ appears, every saved person will be with him in glory—that is, in the glorious future. However, it is important to note that not every believer will experience the same rewards in the future. That is why wise believers obey the guidance and commandments in the Word of God. Believers who have not followed the guidance in the Bible or may have even spoken against it and the God and Christ who gave it, will be ashamed when Christ comes (1 John 2:28), and may even receive no rewards at all (1 Cor. 3:10-17, esp. v. 15 ). The point that Christians will be repaid for what they have done, good or bad, is made at the end of the chapter, in Colossians 3:23-25.

[For more on Christian salvation, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation.”]

Col 3:5

**“the parts of you that are earthly.”** The Greek text is literally, “the members, the ones on the earth,” meaning the parts of your life that are associated with being worldly.

**“impurity.”** The Greek word translated “impurity” is *akatharsia* (#167 ἀκαθαρσία), and it refers to being “unclean” before God. *Akatharsia* is “a state of moral corruption; immorality, vileness especially of sexual sins”;[[99]](#footnote-15061) “in a moral sense, the impurity of lustful, luxurious, profligate living; used of impure motives in 1 Thess. 2:3.”[[100]](#footnote-26707) The dominant use of *akatharsia* in the New Testament includes sexual sin, which we see here in Colossians.

[For more information on *akatharsia*, see commentary on Gal. 5:19.]

**“and greed (which is idolatry).”** In most English versions it is unclear if the word “idolatry” refers to the whole list of things in Colossians 3:5, or just the last item, “greed.” Thankfully, however, the Greek text is clearer, and from it we can see that the word “idolatry” refers only to the last thing on the list, “greed.” We have tried to make that point clear in the REV.

Before we begin to discuss greed being idolatry, we should discuss if “greed” is the proper translation. Some versions have “covetousness” (ESV, KJV, RSV, YLT), while others have “greed” (HCSB, NASB, NET, NIV). In translating the Bible, our intent must be to try to duplicate the meaning of the original language (in this case, Greek), in the receptor language (in this case, English). While that sounds easy, it is actually often exceedingly difficult. This is due to many factors, one being that most Greek words (indeed, most words in every language) do not have a singular meaning, but rather a range of meanings, which is referred to as the “semantic range” of the word. This means that the task of the translator becomes one of finding which English word has a semantic range that most closely matches the semantic range of the Greek word, and that often becomes a judgment call rather than a clear choice.

In this case, the Greek word that is translated “greed” or “covetousness” is *pleonexia* (#4124 πλεονεξία), and it refers to a person desiring to have more than he needs, or more than his share. The English word “greed” is a selfish and excessive desire to have more than one needs. In contrast, the English word “covetousness” has two primary definitions. The first is simply to have a strong desire for something, apart from any reference to need, or to the abundance one already has, as in “I greatly covet winning the blue ribbon.” This definition of covet can be good or evil, depending on the context in which it is used. The second definition of covet is always evil and refers to wanting something that belongs to someone else, as in, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Exod. 20:17). Upon studying the English words “greed” and “covetousness,” it seems clear that the word “greed” is a better match to *pleonexia* than “covetousness.”

It is not the entire list of sins in Colossians 3:5 that is idolatry, but only the last item on the list; greed. R. C. H. Lenski[[101]](#footnote-21965) and J. B. Lightfoot[[102]](#footnote-29695) both point out in their commentaries that the Greek construction of the sentence makes that clear. Thus we should understand that the Word of God teaches that greed is idolatry. By selfishly desiring to take and/or acquire more than we need, we are elevating ourselves in an unhealthy way. Greed makes us the center of our attention: we spend our money, time, and energy on ourselves, when the Word of God says to seek God and His kingdom first (Matt. 6:33). There are different reasons for greed, but one of them is certainly not trusting God to take care of us. Furthermore, a hurtful aspect of greed is that the greedy person is not sensitive to the needs of those who are less fortunate, and who could use what he is needlessly accumulating.

God says greed is idolatry, which alerts us to another important aspect of greed: it is a heart issue, not a “things” issue. Having great wealth is not necessarily “greed,” and there are certainly wonderful people in the Bible who were wealthy, including Abraham and David. True greed is an issue of the heart that is evidenced in the flesh, so we cannot just look at how much a person owns and decide the person is greedy. Idolatry is always an issue of the heart, and sometimes the idol is clearly manifested in the senses world for all to see, while sometimes it is not.

Greedy people who end up with lots of material goods can seem to have confidence or peace from a fleshly perspective, but from God’s perspective, they are really hurting themselves. “I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner” (Eccl. 5:13). It is specifically because earthly wealth promises things like power and safety, but in the end does not deliver those things, that the Bible twice mentions “the deceitfulness of wealth” (Matt. 13:22; Mark 4:19). Wealth is deceitful because it promises much but delivers little. The only true safety in life, and the only true fulfillment for the heart, come from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Col 3:6

**“is coming.”** The present tense would normally be understood as “is now coming,” but the wrath of God that is coming is mainly coming in the future. This is what Greek grammarians refer to as a “gnomic present,” a general use of the present tense to represent something without a specific reference to when. The present tense is also used because there is indeed a sense in which ungodly people are under the wrath of God at this time (cf. Rom. 1:18).

**“on those who are disobedient.”** This phrase is omitted in many early manuscripts, and thus left out of many versions. Its omission would cause the reader to want to complete the thought, and the parallel in Ephesians 5:6 is a ready source for completion, which would explain how it could have been added if the original did not have it. However, there is enough evidence for it that it is left in brackets in the UBS and NA Greek texts, and it does seem to need to be there since Col. 3:7 has “you too.”

Col 3:7

**“you too once walked.”** The pagans in the Roman world did not have a joyful hope of a future life after death, if they had any hope at all. Some of them are described as having no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). That hopelessness generated a worldview that was very materialistic and very “get it right now.” A phrase that is repeated twice in the Bible about people with no hope is “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we will die” (Isa. 22:13; 1 Cor. 15:32). Because of that attitude, sexual indulgence of all kinds was an ordinary part of the culture, as was greed, selfishness, cruelty to others, etc. The Colossians would have been no different than the Roman culture before they were saved.

Colossians 3:7 is quite similar to Ephesians 2:2.

Col 3:8

**“you too.”** The commentators differ as to what the words καὶ ὑμεῖς in this verse refer to, which accounts for the many differences in the way this verse is translated. We thought that it most likely represented the fact that the believers of Colossae were to not do any of the things Paul was about to list, and not to think that they could overlook cleaning themselves of them. Too many times believers do not get truly serious about living godly lives and give themselves a “pass” on things like anger and shameful speech.

**“slander.”** The Greek noun is *blasphēmia* (#988 βλασφημία, pronounced blas-fay-'me-ah), and was used of someone speaking against another. The primary meaning as it was used in the Greek culture was showing disrespect to a person or deity, and/or harming his, her, or its reputation.

[For more on *blasphēmia*, see commentary on Matt. 9:3.]

**“obscene language.”** The Greek word *aischrologia* (#148 αἰσχρολογία) is hard to define, and this verse would be a good place to argue for an expanded translation. Vulgar, low, obscene, abusive, shameful, foul, etc. all fit. “Obscene, shameful speech involving culturally disapproved themes - vulgar speech, obscene speech, dirty talk.”[[103]](#footnote-26479) “Speech of a kind that is generally considered in poor taste, *obscene speech, dirty talk*.[[104]](#footnote-13307) *Aischrologia* might properly be defined as story-telling involving such unseemly deeds as adultery or pederasty.”

[For more on “obscene language,” see commentary on Eph. 5:4.]

Col 3:9

**“Do not.”** This comes from the present imperative of “not.” Notice how lying is not in the list of sins in Col. 3:8, but is listed separately and has its own imperatives. Lying is a very harmful and hurtful sin that cannot be a part of a Christian’s life.

“**since you have stripped off**.” At first reading this seems to be a kind of built-in contradiction, for if you have put off the old man and its practices, why do you need to be told not to lie? We have put off the old man nature in a spiritual sense, for we have died in Christ. However, our flesh and old nature still exert an influence in our lives, and we must be aggressive to live in the flesh in a way that matches the work that Christ has done in us. The Greek word translated “stripped” is rare; its only other occurrence in the New Testament is in Colossians 2:15.

Col 3:10

**“new *self*.”** “Putting off” the old self and “putting on” the new self is a very important Christian concept that comes up several times in the Bible (e.g., Rom. 13:14; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:10; see the REV commentary on Eph. 4:24).

Col 3:11

**“In *the new self*.”** This phrase is added for clarity's sake so that the reader is not confused as to what the subject of the sentence is. The literal Greek is “where” but Paul is referring to the new self that he introduced in the verse before, Colossians 3:10.

**“barbarian.”** The Greek word is *barbaros* (#915 βάρβαρος). Although “barbarian” is a transliteration of the Greek word, it does not have the same meaning today as it did in the time of Paul, and to fully understand Colossians 3:11, we have to understand the vocabulary as Paul understood it. To the Greeks, any foreigner who did not speak Greek sounded as though all he could say was “bar, bar, bar,” hence the onomatopoetic word, “barbarian” to describe one who was not familiar with Greek language and culture, and thus “uncivilized,” no matter how highly educated or morally cultured they actually were. But the English word barbarian is perhaps too harsh. “Foreigner” will usually do, but in this case, it is contrasted with “Scythian” who were considered savage and barbaric even to “uncivilized” foreigners. “The savageness of the Scythians was proverbial.”[[105]](#footnote-28670) For another use of *barbaros s*ee commentary on Romans 1:14.

**“Christ is all *that matters*.”** Paul is teaching that in the new self, your old identity as a “Greek” or “Jew,” or as a “slave” or “free” person does not matter, but that being identified with Christ is all that matters.

Although the literal Greek text is simply “Christ is all” or “Christ is everything,” there are other scholars and translators who translate the phrase as “Christ is all *that matters*” (e.g. NLT).[[106]](#footnote-28473) The phrase “Christ is all” is ambiguous and there has been much discussion on what this means and why Paul phrased his thought like this. Many Trinitarian interpreters think that, “it speaks to the totality of his presence,”[[107]](#footnote-32098) yet if Paul had meant to say that Christ is “everywhere” he would have likely used the Greek word which specifically means “everywhere” (#3837 πανταχοῦ “*pantachou*”), but he did not. Also, the idea that a human being who went to one place (the right hand of God; Heb. 10:12; Acts 2:33; Eph. 1:20) is present everywhere, is quite illogical.

Instead, Paul used the Greek word “*panta*” which has a much broader range of meanings but typically means “all,” “everything,” or “all *things*.” When the word “all” is used, it is often used in a limited sense. For example, when Absalom was holding a council against his father, David, 2 Samuel 17:14 says that “all the men of Israel” agreed on advice that was given. “All” the men of Israel were not there and did not all agree, but the verse uses “all” in its limited sense, meaning, “all” who were there, and that limited group all agreed. Here in Colossians 3:11, it is also being used in a limited sense because it cannot mean “Christ is all things *in existence*.” Even Trinitarians who believe that Christ is omnipresent in some way, would not say that Christ *is* literally everything; that is the idea of Pantheism in which everything (plants, animals, and the universe) is God.

So, in this context, since Paul just previously mentions how in the new self there is not “Greek,” “Jew,” “Barbarian,” or “Scythian,” the natural follow-up question is—what is there? Paul’s response is “Christ is all.” Thus, Paul is talking about the Christian’s new identity. Instead of these labels being the Christian’s identity, Christ is now one’s identity. It is how the Christian should label themselves and how God views us, as having been raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places (Col. 3:1). Our previous identity and label do not matter, Christ is all that matters.

**“Christ...is in *union with* all.”** Christ is in union with every believer who has put on the “new self.” Although this phrase is often translated “(Christ) is in all,” the preferable translation is, “(Christ) is in *union with* all,” for a few reasons. Firstly, since Christ is currently (and at the time of writing Colossians) an exalted human being (Rom. 1:4; Heb. 10:12; 1 Pet. 3:22), how can he literally be “in” each Christian? He would have to be omnipresent in some sense. Secondly, translating the “in” (#1722 ἐν) as “in *union with*,” which is called the “static *en*” in Greek, is very common in Paul’s vocabulary. Thirdly, Paul frequently teaches that believers are united with Christ (Eph. 1:7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:1), and does so in this immediate context (Col. 3:1), such that it is as if we died and were raised from the dead with him (Rom. 6:5). Since Paul’s subject is what is true for the believer (in the new self) this is likely what Paul intends by using the phrase “in all,” namely that Christ is “in *union with* all” Christians.

Lastly, the idea that Paul would just tag on the idea that Jesus is omnipresent at the end of his thought does not fit the topic Paul is discussing. Paul is talking about how a Christian’s new identity is found in union with Christ and how he is the only identity Christians should be concerned about (Col. 3:11). Therefore, to end his thought by saying that Jesus is omnipresent would be out of place.

[See the commentary on John 10:38 for more information on the “static *en.*”]

Col 3:12

**“put on.”** The Greek means to put on as clothes, or apparel, thus, “to dress,” and the middle voice indicates that we are to clothe ourselves. We have free will, and if we are going to be like Christ by being compassionate, kind, humble, etc., we have to make a diligent effort. We can pray all we want to for God to make us like Christ, and He will help, but we have to do a lot of work also. Here in Colossians, Paul has gone from “put off” to “put on.” There are things the Christian is to take off, and things we are to put on (cf. Eph. 4:24; Eph. 6:11). See commentary on Galatians 3:27.

**“compassionate mercy.”** The Greek text more literally reads “bowels of compassion,” which makes good sense medically, but not to the average reader today. The bowels are a center of a person’s emotional life, and that is reflected in the biblical text. Colossians 3:12 is directing the Christian to have compassion for people, which it does by using the word “bowels,” a word omitted in most English translations. The Greek text simply has “bowels,” and reads, “put on bowels,” but it is obvious that translation would not communicate to a modern reader and only be confusing. The word “bowels” is referring to a feeling, and in this context, the feeling being communicated by “bowels” is compassion or mercy.

[For more on “bowels,” see commentary on Phil. 1:8.]

Col 3:13

**“bearing with.”** The Greek word translated as “bearing with” is *anechō* (#430 ἀνέχω), and it means to “bear with, forbear, put up with, endure, sustain yourself under, tolerate.” Anyone trying to be unified with others knows that in order to do so there has to be some “bearing with,” “putting up with,” and “tolerating.” This is never an easy thing, but it is a Christian virtue that must be developed by any Christian who wants to be mature in the Faith. This same phrase occurs in Ephesians 4:2.

**“one another.”** The phrase “one another” occurs in the context of the Christian community, and while we are to be good to everyone, in the context of the New Testament Epistles, the commands toward “one another” are specifically to other Christians. Christians are to be “especially good to the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). It is very important for the richness of our lives together here on earth, for our personal growth here on earth, and for rewards in the next life, that each Christian needs to be “other-focused,” focused on others and how we can help them. The phrase “one another” occurs many times in the New Testament, stating and reinforcing that truth.

[For more on the “one another” commands, see commentary on Gal. 5:13, “one another.” For more on “love one another,” see commentary on John 13:34.]

**“Just as.”** The Greek also has a *kai* (and, also), but it is stylistic and appears in classical Greek writings also.[[108]](#footnote-28274)

**“*must forgive*.”** The verb is not supplied, and although not completely necessary and therefore not necessarily an ellipsis, nevertheless, it seems logical to supply the verb, as many English versions do. Even those English versions which do not supply the verb “forgive,” often add words so the English reads easily. The Greek text is quite abbreviated, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς; literally, “so also you.” Even the KJV adds the word “do” to help complete the sense: “so also *do* ye.”

Col 3:14

**“perfect bond.”** The Greek is *sundesmos tēs teleiotētos* (σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος), where *sundesmos* is a bond, something that holds things together, and is *teleiotētos* “perfection,” or “completeness.” The Greek noun translated “completeness” is *teleiotēs* (#5047 τελειότης), and it means “perfection; perfectness; completion, maturity.” It refers to bringing something to a goal or an end state. Its root word is *telos* (#5056 τέλος; goal, finish, thus that which has reached its goal or end). Putting *teleiotēs* in the genitive case creates a couple different meanings, each of them true. When one phrase can be read in at least two different ways, and both are true, it is the figure of speech amphibologia.[[109]](#footnote-12107) There is no doubt that when God inspired Paul to write, He knew He was making a sentence with multiple meanings, and now it is our joy to understand everything that God has packed into the verse.

Versions that translate the phrase as an attributive genitive, where the genitive functions as an adjective include the HCSB, ESV, NET, NIV, NJB, and NRSV. The genitive can also be understood to be a genitive of character, specifically production, and thus the phrase would mean that love is the “bond that produces completeness,” or “the bond that leads to completeness.” Hendriksen points out that this seems to be the most natural reading of the text based on the Epistle to the Colossians itself. For example, in Col. 2:2 Paul wants the Colossians to be united in love. He also points out that the Epistle points people away from the false teachers’ ideas of philosophy and knowledge, and also obedience to human regulations, and points instead to love as being what will strengthen and unite the people and lead them to where they want to go. He writes: “Love, then, is ‘bond of perfection’ in the sense that it is that which unites believers, causing them to move forward toward the goal of perfection.”[[110]](#footnote-30904) The genitive could also be a genitive of apposition, which would mean that love is “the bond, that is to say, completeness.”

No doubt all the meanings have some truth to them. Love is both that which unites and binds things together, and it is also that which leads us on to completeness, and indeed, helps us along the way to reach that goal. Given that, it was best to leave the ambiguity of the Greek text in the English translation, and have it read, the “bond of completeness.”

[See figure of speech “amphibologia.”]

Col 3:15

**“the peace of Christ.”** It is called “the peace of Christ” because the peace we have is due to the work of Christ who ransomed us from death so we have everlasting life, and it is associated with Christ because Jesus is constantly working with us and in us to fulfill the will of God and walk in newness of life, which involves being peaceful. Jesus Christ was and is intimately involved with the peace available to us. Furthermore, the peace we have has a social aspect to it because Christians were called as one body to this peace. We are to be at peace with the Body of Christ, and having loving peaceful fellowship with other Christians is part of what gives us peace.

**“be the umpire.”** The Greek word translated “be the umpire” is the verb *brabeuō* (#1018 βραβεύω), and it only occurs this one time in the New Testament and in the Septuagint (although related words do appear). The fact that *brabeuō* is used here and nowhere else in the Old or New Testament is good evidence that Paul means something here that is different from what has been said elsewhere. For example, if Paul had meant “rule” or “control,” which many of the English versions have, there are good Greek words for those concepts and Paul could have used those words here just as he used them in other places. For example, if he meant “rule” in Colossians 3:15, then why not use *archō*, which means “rule” and occurs over 80 times in the New Testament?

It is reasonable to assume that Paul used a rare but specific word because he was trying to portray a specific concept, in this case, bringing in a concept from athletics. Athletic events and contests were very common in the Greco-Roman world and athletic metaphors appear in many places in the New Testament because they were generally very well understood (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; 9:24-27; Gal. 2:2; 5:7; Eph. 6:12; Phil. 2:16; 3:13-14; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:7-8; Heb. 12:1).

The commentators agree that *brabeuō* is taken from the world of sport in Paul’s time, and although some of them do not think that *brabeuō* is being used in an athletic sense here, many of them think it is. For example, A. T. Robertson has its meaning in Colossians as “to act as an umpire.”[[111]](#footnote-24418) C. F. D. Moule writes that *brabeuō* is, “apparently one of St. Paul’s athletic metaphors.”[[112]](#footnote-14977) John Lightfoot translates *brabeuō* as “be umpire,” and writes: “Wherever there is a conflict of motives or impulses or reasons, the peace of Christ must step in and decide which is to prevail…”[[113]](#footnote-23293)

Bratcher and Nida catches the sense of the verse very well when it says, “The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make.”[[114]](#footnote-21233) Kenneth Wuest says, “‘Rule’ is an athletic term, ‘be umpire,’” and he translates the verse as “And the peace of Christ, let it be acting as umpire in your hearts.”[[115]](#footnote-16846) *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* has “rule,” but explains the meaning of the verse, saying, “The meaning is: in deciding on any course of action, let that be chosen which does not ruffle the peace within you.”[[116]](#footnote-24375)

James Dunn writes, “As already observed…the verb *brabeuō* is drawn from the athletic contest,” and he points out that peace can help in “determining what courses should be followed in difficult decisions and how the tensions of community relations…may be resolved.” Dunn translates the verse as: “And let the peace of Christ arbitrate in your hearts….”[[117]](#footnote-19062)

R. C. H. Lenski writes, “‘Rule’ in our versions misses the point of *brabeuō*, which means ‘to act as an umpire,’ as an arbiter to decide with finality to whom the prize is to go.”[[118]](#footnote-22276)

As has been pointed out, it seems that if Paul meant “rule” or “control,” as some English versions translate *brabeuō*, it seems that he would have used a more common Greek word to express that point. But besides that, nowhere else in the New Testament is the concept that peace is to rule or control our hearts. God and Christ are to be our rulers, leaders, and guides, and they rule in many ways, not just via peace. On the other hand, there are many other verses that speak of seeking peace or making decisions based on what is peaceful and what will bring peace (cf. Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 1 Cor. 7:15; 2 Cor. 13:11; 1 Thess. 5:13; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 3:11). In that greater context, Colossians 3:15 is just one more verse that teaches us how to live in peace with the world around us. When conflict or difficult decisions confront us, we can often make the right decision by letting the peace of Christ step in and help us to decide which path we are to take.

Different commentaries and versions have wrestled with how to translate Colossians 3:15 and bring forth what it is saying. For example, Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible has, “And let the peace of Christ act as umpire in your hearts.” The Complete Jewish Bible says, “and let the *shalom* [peace] which comes from the Messiah be your heart’s decision-maker.” Goodspeed’s translation is, “Let the ruling principle in your hearts be Christ’s peace.” The New English Bible has, “Let Christ’s peace be arbiter in your hearts.” Weymouth’s New Testament has, “and let the peace which Christ gives settle all questionings in your hearts.”

The point of Colossians 3:15 is that we believers are to let the peace of Christ act as the umpire in our hearts, and when we have decisions to make it is that peace that will make the decision easier for us. If we make decisions based on peace we will have the best possible chance of having peace within ourselves and peace within the Body of Christ.

**“as one body.”** The Greek text literally reads “in one body” (ἐν ἑνὶ σώματι, *en heni sōmati*), referring to being called to be part of one body.

**“and *always* be thankful!”** The present tense imperative verb “be” has the meaning of “always be,” thus, “always be thankful,” (cf. NLT, “always be thankful”).[[119]](#footnote-13168) The point is that the phrase is not saying to wait until there is something specific to be thankful for and then “be thankful.” God has done so much for humankind in general and each human individually that there is no excuse not to be perpetually thankful, adding specifics to that overall thankfulness as they occur.

Col 3:16

**“message about Christ.”** The Greek text literally reads, “word of Christ” with “Christ” being in the genitive case in Greek. However, translating it in the typical genitive way, “word of Christ” makes it seem possessive, that it is Christ’s word. However, in this context, it seems more likely that the Colossians are supposed to dwell on the gospel message, the “message about Christ,” not necessarily Christ’s teachings in general. This dwelling on the good news of the gospel message would lead them into thankfulness (Col. 3:16). Also, the fact that the word “word” is in the singular in Greek, suggests that it is not the words of Christ that are supposed to dwell in the Colossians, but a singular “word” or “message” that is supposed to dwell in them, which is the message of the good news.

**“admonishing.”** The Greek word translated “admonishing” here in Colossians 3:16 is *noutheteō* (#3560 νουθετέω) and according to BDAG it means, “to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct,”[[120]](#footnote-14208) hence it is usually translated “admonish” or “warn.” Although it can be translated “exhort,” “counsel,” or “instruct” in some specific contexts, the translator must be careful not to water down this powerful word. It almost always involves a confrontation over bad or unprofitable behavior.

We humans often get caught up in sinful or harmful behavior that we ourselves do not see, or cannot seem to muster the strength to overcome, and the loving admonishment of others can change our lives for the better. People often do not have the awareness or ability to deliver themselves from evil, and as Scripture says, “wickedness will not allow those who practice it to escape” (Eccl. 8:8 HCSB). Godly admonishing can deliver people from evil.

It takes great wisdom and patience to properly admonish people because most people resist being warned and counseled about something wrong they are doing. Sadly, many people admonish others to make themselves feel good, to “speak my truth” and “get this off my chest,” but self-centered admonishing is never the will of the Lord. Christians are always to speak in a way that benefits others, and to do that requires prayer, love, patience, listening, and more. Furthermore, admonishing someone about how they are behaving should also mean that you care enough about the person to stay in the fight with them—get your hands dirty—and continue supporting them until they are delivered. We admonish people, yes, but then we should be prepared to stick with them through the process of change. If there is no real benefit to the one being admonished, the one speaking is not “admonishing,” they are just broadcasting their own feelings, which is selfishness.

On the other hand, some people never admonish others, even when they should, because it can turn into an argument. But avoiding admonishing others even when the other person clearly needs it is not about helping the fellow Christian, it is about avoiding personal pain. Godly people have to be courageous to risk an argument in order to help others. Let’s admonish each other as needed, but let’s do it God’s way—right time, right place, and with genuine love and commitment to the other person.

**“one another.”** Christians are to be “especially good to the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). It is very important for the richness of our lives together here on earth, for our personal growth here on earth, and for rewards in the next life, that each Christian needs to be “other-focused,” focused on others and how we can help them. The Greek for “each other” is different than the Greek for “one another,” but the meaning can be much the same, as it is here.

[For more on the “one another” commands, see commentary on Gal. 5:13, “one another.” For more on “love one another,” see commentary on John 13:34.]

**“admonishing one another with all wisdom in psalms, hymns, *and* spiritual songs.”** This text is very similar to Ephesians 5:19-20. In Ephesians 5, the believers are speaking to each other in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” while here in Colossians 3:16, believers are admonishing one another in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” In both cases, the “speaking” and “admonishing” is to help and bless other believers. These verses in Ephesians and Colossians show that one of the ways believers can help one another is through the Word of God and the truths and principles of God in music. Godly music can be a great help to believers.

**“psalms.”** The Greek word translated as “psalms” is *psalmos* (#5568 ψαλμός), and although the general meaning of the Greek word is a song of praise, in this context it no doubt refers to the psalms of the Old Testament, which have brought comfort and inspiration to generation after generation of believers.

**“hymns.”** The Greek word is *humnos* (#5215 ὕμνος), and in the Greek culture, it was used of a song that praised gods and heroes. As it was used by Christians it referred to songs that praised and exalted God and Jesus Christ, extolling them and what they had done.

**“songs.”** The Greek word is *odē* (#5603 ᾠδή, pronounced o-'day). In Greek, *odē* was wider in meaning than *psalmos* or *humnos*, and referred to any song, ode, or even poems. Thus it was important to put the adjective “spiritual” with the word *odē* in order to properly delimit it for the believers. Far too many Christians spend time and money listening to music that is contrary to Christian beliefs, morals, and practices. It is important that we notice that this verse, which speaks of the word of Christ dwelling in us “richly,” is immediately conjoined with music. Music exerts a powerful influence on what we believe and how we act, and Christians must pay serious attention to the music they listen to.

**“thankfulness.”** The literal Greek is with “grace,” *charis* (#5485 χάρις), but that phrase was used for with “gratitude,” or with “thankfulness.” It is used that way also in 1 Corinthians 10:30.

Col 3:17

**“to God the Father.”** The Greek text is very unusual here, reading, “to God Father” (*tō theō patri*; τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ), which most modern versions translate as “to God the Father,” but it could be loosely translated as “to God who is our Father.”[[121]](#footnote-14601) The unusual Greek construction apparently prompted some scribes to add the word “and” (*kai*) to the Greek text to make it less unusual, which was actually a fairly common practice, and hence some Greek manuscripts have “God and Father” instead of simply “God, Father” (thus “God the Father”). Omanson has the following comment: “the very unusual placing together of the words θεῷ πατρὶ, which has widespread manuscript support, was changed by copyists….”[[122]](#footnote-15278) With over 5,700 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament discovered and available to study now, and especially with the help of computers, it is getting easier to determine the wording of the original text, and in this case, the wording of the Greek text is not in doubt and the translation “God the Father” is completely acceptable and adopted by almost all modern translations.

Col 3:18

**“submit yourselves.”** The Greek verb *hupotassō* (#5293 ὑποτάσσω) means to be subordinate, submit to, be subject to, to yield to someone’s admonition or advice. While the verb has the same form in both the passive and middle voice, it makes the most sense that this verse is middle voice, the women are to submit themselves out of their free will, in other words, they make the choice to submit, they are not forced to against their will and better judgment.[[123]](#footnote-21451)

**“your husbands.”** The Greek reads, “the husbands,” but the fact that it refers to “your” husbands is clearly in the context. The “your” is also added for clarity in Colossians 3:19, 20, and 3:22.

**“proper.”** The Greek verb is *anekō* (#433 ἀνήκω), and it means fitting, proper, appropriate.

**“in *connection with* the Lord.”** Lit. “in the Lord” (*en kuriō, ἐν κυρίῳ*). “In the Lord” is a common phrase and concept, sometimes starting with the Greek preposition *en* and sometimes with the preposition *eis*. The phrase indicates “in *connection with* the Lord” or sometimes “in *union with* the Lord” (for more on this, see commentary on Rom. 6:3).

It is very important when reading Colossians that we notice that when it comes to wives submitting and children obeying (Col. 3:20), these things are to be done “in the Lord,” that is, in connection with the Lord. The wives are asked to submit in the Lord (Col. 3:18), and children are asked to obey in the Lord (Col. 3:20). The husband is not asked to submit in this context of running the household.

Whenever someone is asked to submit to or obey another person, it is always upon the condition that what they are asked to do is right and godly. Thus, the woman submits, and children obey, “in connection with the Lord, Jesus Christ.” These verses (Col. 3:18, 20) are not saying that it is fitting to the Lord that women and children submit or obey no matter what they are told to do. Husbands have a responsibility to make sure that they are being godly in their leadership, not worldly, and that they are asking things of their wives that Jesus would approve of; things that their wives can submit to with dignity and godliness.

Similarly, parents have a responsibility before God to make sure that what they ask their children to do is godly, not sinful in any way. In accordance with this verse, wives have a responsibility not to submit to requests that are clearly outside the will of God, and children have a responsibility to not obey if the requests of the parents are clearly outside the will of God. Since Christians expect to be able to live by the Bible they read, it is unfortunate that the same phrase at the end of verses 18 and 20, “in the Lord” (ἐν κυρίῳ), is almost always correctly translated “in the Lord” in verse 18 in English Bibles, but is almost always translated differently in those same English Bibles at the end of verse 20. For example, the HCSB, ESV, NIV, and RSV, all end verse 20 by saying: “for this pleases the Lord.” The KJV, NAB, NJB, and YLT end the verse in ways that are similar in meaning. But this makes the verse say that it pleases the Lord when children obey, no questions asked, which is not at all what the verse is saying. God saw fit to put the conditional phrase “in the Lord” at the end of the verses about wives and children, and English translators should represent that in their translations.

The phrase “in the Lord” governs the verse instead of modifying a specific word. It brings the concept, “in connection with the Lord,” into the verse. Thus, we could translate verse 18 into English as it is, with the phrase at the end, but the meaning would be the same if we said, “In the Lord, wives submit...,” or “Wives, in the Lord, submit...,” or “Wives, submit yourselves, in the Lord, to....” That the phrase “in the Lord” governs the verse instead of modifying a specific word in the verse occurs in some other places in the NT as well as here. For example, Ephesians 5:8 says, “for you were once darkness, but now, in the Lord, *you are* light.” The idea is that it is only “in the Lord,” i.e., in association or union with the Lord, that we are light. Various versions place the phrase in different places in the verse, most having “in the Lord” at the very end of the verse. In Colossians 3:20, concerning the children, the phrase “in the Lord” is also a governing phrase instead of just modifying a single word in the verse.

[For more on submission, see commentaries on Eph. 5:21 and 5:22.]

Col 3:19

**“do not be harsh with them.”** This phrase is seen by some commentators to be the figure of speech litotes (also called meiosis), or “belittling.”[[124]](#footnote-30006) In other words, the phrase is placed in the negative “do not be” so that we will see it in a much larger, and more positive, light. In that case, although the vocabulary says, “do not be harsh,” our hearts say, “be totally good, kind, and considerate.”

Col 3:20

**“in *connection with* the Lord.”** Lit. “in the Lord” (*en kuriō, ἐν κυρίῳ*). This verse is not saying, as so many versions say, that when children simply obey their parents, it is “pleasing to the Lord.” While it is absolutely true that if the parent’s request is godly, it is pleasing to the Lord when the child obeys, the point of the phrase “in the Lord” is to show that the child’s obedience to their parents is an “acceptable (i.e., “pleasing”) *behavior* when it is one that is “in *connection with* the Lord.” For a child’s obedience to be “in *connection with* the Lord” means that the child is obeying their parents in a way that honors the Lord and is commensurate with the will of God.

[For more information on “in *connection with* the Lord,” see commentary on Col. 3:18.]

Col 3:21

**“provoke.”** The Greek verb is *erethizō* (#2042 ἐρεθίζω), and it means to stir up, excite, stimulate, to provoke. A person can be stirred up for good (2 Cor. 9:2), or, as in this verse, in an evil sense. The essence of the verse is that fathers should not stir up their children by unjust or evil treatment, and thus “exasperate” fits well here (cf. HCSB). Louw-Nida has: “do not cause your children to become resentful,” which catches the sense well also.

Col 3:22

**“Servants.”** The Greek word *doulos* (#1401 δοῦλος), can mean “servant” or “slave,” and here it refers to both, and the English versions are divided as to how they translate it. In many situations in the Roman world, the lines between servants and slaves were often blurred with servants being treated like slaves and slaves being treated like servants.

**“earthly masters.”** The Greek is “lords according to the flesh.” The Greek for “lord” is *kurios* (#2962 κύριος ), “lords,” the same Greek word as “Lord” in Col. 3:18, 20. However, here it more properly means “masters,” referring to the earthly owners of slaves, whereas in verses 18 and 20 it refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. The word *kurios* was used in a large number of ways in the Greco-Roman world, and referred to one who had authority. Thus, Lord, master, owner, are all good translations depending on the context, and when used in direct address, it was used like we use the word “sir” today (cf. Matt. 27:63). God is called “Lord” (Matt. 1:20); a slave owner was called “lord” (Matt. 10:24); a landowner was referred to as “lord” (Matt. 13:27; 20:8; 21:40); a father was sometimes called “lord” by his children (Matt. 21:30); and Jesus Christ is called “Lord.” This same phrase is used in Ephesians 6:5.

**“not only to win their approval when they are watching you.”** See commentary on Ephesians 6:6, where almost the same phrase is used.

Col 3:23

**“soul.”** The Greek word often translated “soul” is *psuchē* (#5590 ψυχή, pronounced psoo-'kay), and it has a large number of meanings, including the physical life of a person or animal; an individual person; or attitudes, emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Here “soul” is inclusive of the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the person himself; in other words, “work with all that is within you,” which is why some versions have “heartily.” The CJB has, “put yourself into it.” The verse could read, “Whatever you do, work from your soul, like you are working for the Lord and not for people.”

[For a more complete explanation of “soul,” see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’”]

Col 3:24

**“the inheritance as a reward.”** The Greek reads, “the reward of the inheritance,” or “the repayment of the inheritance.” This is a genitive of apposition in which the reward is the inheritance. We might translate the genitive as, “the reward, that is to say, the inheritance,” or “the reward, namely, the inheritance.” Many English versions express the Greek text very clearly. For example, the NIV reads, “you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.” The CJB reads, “as your reward, you will receive the inheritance.” The ESV reads “you will receive the inheritance as your reward.” Other versions that read very clearly include the CEB, NET, NLT, NRSV, and RSV.

Although English uses apposition quite often (i.e., “My teacher, Miss Smith,” or “His hometown, Indianapolis”) it rarely uses it in the genitive with the word “of.” Sometimes very literal versions that follow the Greek grammar do use “of,” for example, the KJV has “the earnest of the Spirit” (2 Cor. 5:5). However, modern versions usually reword the grammar for more proper English, and thus the ESV has, “the Spirit as a guarantee.” Another example is Romans 5:17, which says, “the gift of righteousness,” which means, “the gift, namely, righteousness.” The CJB has “the gift of being considered righteous.” Similarly, “the reward of the inheritance” here in Colossians is to be understood as, “the reward, that is, the inheritance.”

The Greek word “inheritance” is *klēronomia* (#2817 κληρονομία), and it refers to whatever we inherit (Matt. 21:38). However, when referring to what we “inherit” from God in the future, it can either refer to our inheritance being everlasting life (Eph. 1:14) or our “inheritance” can be the rewards we receive in the future Kingdom of Christ (Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:24). The context in which *klēronomia* is used determines which meaning it has.

That the context determines the meaning is standard for many words. For example, the Greek word *sōzō* is used of being “saved” (given everlasting life) in many contexts, but it also can mean to be “healed” (Luke 7:50), or “rescued” from immediate danger (Acts 27:31). Similarly, “inheritance” or “inherit” does not have a single meaning that then determines the context, rather the word has multiple meanings and we determine which meaning it has in any given verse by studying the verse itself and the context.

A person can be saved and live in the future kingdom without having an “inheritance,” a reward, in it, just as Abraham lived in the Promised Land for 100 years (from age 75 until his death at 175) but did not have an inheritance there (Acts 7:5). The Bible has many stern warnings, worded in many different ways, that a person can be saved and live in the future Kingdom of Christ on earth, but not have an “inheritance” there. For example, Galatians 5:19-21 speaks of the works of the flesh, and says that people who live overtly sinful lives “will not inherit” the Kingdom: they will be saved, but have no inheritance in it. Every Christian should desire to rule with Christ in the coming kingdom on earth, and that means seeking God first and loving and obeying Him.

Here in Colossians 3:24, the “reward” or “repayment” that we receive from God for the good works we have done is called an “inheritance.” In other words, being saved and getting in the Kingdom is not the “inheritance,” but the rewards that people receive in the Kingdom are the inheritance. Here in Colossians, the “inheritance” is specifically said to be the reward, and thus Colossians 3:24 helps explain difficult verses such as Galatians 5:21 and Ephesians 5:5, which say that flagrant sinners will not inherit, or have an inheritance in, the Kingdom of God, meaning they will not have a reward.

People are saved by faith in Christ and not by works, and when a person is “saved,” or born again (1 Pet. 1:23) that person has a guarantee of salvation; his salvation is secure and cannot be lost (Eph. 1:13-14). However, God created people to serve Him, and there is more to the future than just salvation. People who serve God will get a reward, an inheritance.

The teaching that on Judgment Day people will get what they deserve, good or bad, based on what they have done in their life is taught many times in Scripture (e.g., Job. 34:11; Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Ezek. 33:20; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3:8; see commentary on Ps. 62:12).

[For more on salvation for Christians, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation.” For the difference between salvation and rewards, and what some rewards may be, see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10. To see why some people may get no rewards, see commentary on 1 Cor. 3:13. For sins that result in people not having rewards, see Gal. 5:19-21 and commentary on Gal. 5:21.]

**“reward.”** This is from the Greek *antapodosis* (#469 ἀνταπόδοσις), which only occurs here in the New Testament, but which Lightfoot points out is a common word in both the Septuagint and the Greek classical writers. He says, “The double compound involves the idea of exact requital.”[[125]](#footnote-16068) This reward, or more exactly, a “repayment,” can be either good or bad depending on whether the work done was good or bad. In this context, *antapodosis* is translated “reward” because it is a repayment for doing good and serving God from the heart, but it would be possible, if a person did evil, that his “repayment” would be for the evil he had done. Salvation is by grace (Eph. 2:8), but the reward, or the “repayment,” that we receive at the Judgment will be in correspondence to the kind and quality of work we have done. When Jesus comes to earth and sets up his kingdom he will reward or punish people for how they have behaved in response to his free gift of salvation.

[For more information on rewards in the future Kingdom of Christ, see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10. For more information on Christ’s coming kingdom on earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“serve the Lord Christ!”** The form of the Greek word translated “serve” is the same for both the indicative and the imperative mood. Due to the lack of a conjunction at the beginning of the sentence, the imperative mood seems to fit best and is favored by several commentators and translators.[[126]](#footnote-15519) This injunction from the imperative mood both matches the previous imperative (“do,” Col. 3:23), and it more naturally connects with the following particle *gar* (“for”) in Colossians 3:25, which gives the reason for this admonition.

Col 3:25

**“will be paid back for his wrong.”** It is a consistent theme in Scripture that on the Day of Judgment, people will get what they deserve for how they have lived, and that is the big reason that we should earnestly confess our sins and ask to be forgiven; if we ask, God forgives us and cleanses us from our sins (1 John 1:9). Salvation is by grace, but rewards in the Kingdom are earned. Colossians 3:25 is one of the stern warnings in the New Testament that Christians should seek first the Kingdom of God and obey God so that they can be richly rewarded.

The Bible has many stern warnings that make the point that a Christian can be present in the future Millennial Kingdom of Christ yet have no rewards there (cf. 1 Cor. 3:15; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; 2 John 1:8). Sadly, some Christians end up actually attacking and doing harm to the Kingdom, and they will receive some kind of punishment (1 Cor. 3:17; 1 Thess. 4:6; and the repayment for sin here in Colossians 3:25 is likely saying that as well). Jesus said much the same thing in Luke 12:47-48.

The wise Christian takes God’s warnings seriously. As much as we sinful humans would like to say we just serve God out of our love and thankfulness for what He has done for us, the simple fact is that sometimes it is the fear of punishment that helps us keep our minds and lives straight. We know this is true of little children, and we are all God’s little children. God’s warnings are not meant to put fear in us, but rather to honestly tell us what will happen if we do not obey Him. The rewards obedient Christians will receive at the Judgment will truly make that day a day of rejoicing for them, in contrast to those who have not obeyed Him and feel shame when Jesus comes (1 John 2:28).

[For more information on Christian salvation, see Appendix 10: “God’s Promise of Salvation.” For the difference between salvation and rewards, and what some rewards may be, see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10.]

**Colossians Chapter 4**

Col 4:1

Colossians 4:1 should be the last verse in Colossians 3 rather than starting a new chapter, chapter 4. The fact that Colossians 4:1 is wrongly placed as a new chapter could tend to confuse the reader. For one thing, instead of seeing Colossians 4:2 as beginning a new subject, the implied subject in Colossians 4:2 might erroneously be supplied from verse 1 as if it were only the “masters” that were to be steadfast in prayer, rather than the whole church.

**“Masters...master.”** The Greek is *kurios* (#2962 κύριος ), literally “lord.” From the structure, this should have been the last verse of chapter 3, because Col. 3:18 is “Wives,” Col. 3:19 is “husbands,” Col. 3:20 is “children,” Col. 3:21 is “fathers,” Col. 3:22 is “servants,” and now Col. 4:1 is to “masters.”

Col 4:2

**“being watchful.”** The Greek verb is *grēgoreō* (#1127 γρηγορέω), and here it combines a range of meanings. It was used of guards who were alert and watchful when on duty, and it carries that meaning in part here. For example, in Matthew 26:41 and Mark 14:38, Jesus told Peter to watch and pray not to enter into temptation, so in that context, Peter and the apostles were to be awake and alert, not sleepy, but it was with the effect that they would not fall prey to the enemy, temptation. It also has the meaning of being awake and alert as it is used in 1 Thessalonians 5:6, which is in the general context of being alert and vigilant in looking forward to the coming of Christ. So we watch to guard against some things, and we watch to know what we should be praying for. Yet, perhaps the biggest thing we should watch for in prayer is God’s answer. This is why Paul connects this idea with thanksgiving. We are to be watchful for answers to our prayers, so that we can thank God for answering them, and we should be thanking God for the prayers He has answered.

In general, being “watchful” has the advantage of combining both the idea of being alert about what to pray for and watching for how our prayers are being answered.

Col 4:3

**“a door for the word.”** The literal Greek is “a door of the word,” which is an idiomatic phrase referring to an opportunity to speak.

**“sacred secret.”** The REV translates the Greek word *mustērion* (#3466 μυστήριον) as “sacred secret” because that is what *mustērion* actually refers to: a secret in the religious or sacred realm.

[For more information on the “Sacred Secret” and the Administration of Grace, see commentary on Eph. 3:9.]

**“I am imprisoned.”** The Greek is literally, “I have been in chains” (*dedemai*, δέδεμαι), using the perfect tense. But the perfect tense of the Greek focuses upon the present circumstances and can be rendered with the present tense (“I am in chains”). However, Paul was not “in prison,” because he was in his own hired house, but he was “imprisoned” in the sense that he was not free to leave or travel and was chained to a Roman soldier.

Col 4:4

**“reveal it clearly.”** The Greek is *phaneroō* (#5319 φανερόω), which means to make it manifest, or reveal it. In this context, “reveal it clearly” is a good translation, because that is what Paul was trying to do for his listeners (cf. ESV, NAB, RSV).

**“in the way that I need to.”** Paul needed to reveal and teach the sacred secret clearly as an apostle appointed and chosen by God (Acts 9:15).

[See commentary on Eph. 6:20 for more information on Paul’s calling and the challenges he faced in order to teach the sacred secret.]

Col 4:5

**“walk.”** The Greek verb is *peripateō* (#4043 περιπατέω), and it means “walk,” but it was used idiomatically for “live,” as we might say, “live your life.” People walked everywhere, so “walk” came to mean “live.” The verb is present tense, active voice, so the meaning is “Be walking,” continuously be “walking” (living) in wisdom. “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders” catches the meaning of the phrase.

**“making the best use.”** The Greek is *exagorazō* (#1805 ἐξαγοράζω). It means,

1. to redeem by payment of a price and thus recover from the power of another; to ransom;
2. metaphorically, of Christ freeing the elect from the dominion of the Mosaic Law at the price of his vicarious death
3. to buy up, to buy up for one’s self
4. to make wise and sacred use of every opportunity for doing good.

The idea of the verse, combining *exagorazō* (“buy up, buy back”) with *kairos* (an opportune time, opportunity), gives us the mental picture of us buying up the opportunities to reach out to others or to bless others before those opportunities get away. Every shopper knows that truly good deals are short-lived. If we do not move quickly, they are gone; other people have snatched up the good deal before us. We are to walk in wisdom toward outsiders, and when there is an opportunity to be a blessing and especially to lead them to Christ so they become “insiders,” we should quickly buy up that opportunity and not let it get away. Perhaps an expanded way to translate this verse would be: “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, buying up your opportunities *to be a blessing*.” (See commentary on Eph. 5:16.)

**“time.”** The Greek word is *kairos* (#2540 καιρός), and it refers to a fixed and definite time, an opportune or seasonable time; the right time; and means in this context, the “opportunity” of time that each person has. This is not the Greek word *chronos* (#5550 χρόνος), which usually refers to a period of time.

Col 4:6

**“always be with grace.”** The Greek word for “grace” is *charis* (#5485 χάρις), but it is in the prepositional phrase, *en chariti* (ἐν χάριτι). Hendriksen points out that at the time Paul was writing, the phrase *en chariti* was used by the pagans as well as the Christians.[[127]](#footnote-22773) However, when the pagans said “in grace” (with grace), they meant your speech should include witty and clever remarks. In contrast, what Paul means is the language we use should be the outflow of the grace of God at work in our hearts. This is why the REV went with “with grace” instead of “gracious,” like many other versions (HCSB, ESV, NET, NRSV). In English, “gracious” usually means marked by courtesy, tact, delicacy, and kindness. However, anyone who has been exposed to “Southern hospitality” knows too well that “graciousness” can be devoid of any grace in the heart. Thus the REV went with “with grace.”

**“seasoned with salt.”** Often a metaphor like salt is hard to exactly describe. Christ said that we are the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13). Salt preserves, heals (sometimes with a little pain, like putting salt in the wound), cleanses, adds flavor, and as one young man observed, “kills slugs.” Also, in the Greco-Roman world at the time of Christ, salt was quite valuable. There is no reason to believe that any of these meanings is excluded. When we speak to others, and in this context, to unbelievers, our speech is to be healing, but it also might well be challenging, and it should be “worth its salt” to hear.

**“so that you know.”** The Greek verb *eidō* (#1492 εἰδῶ) means “know,” but in this case, the perfect tense infinitive is an infinitive of result.[[128]](#footnote-21292) Thus, although the English grammar is clipped, the idea is that if we speak with grace and truth, “the result will be” that we “know,” i.e., “come to know” or “learn” how to speak to each person. Paul writes with the dual idea of expressing the proper manner of communication and then with the implied verification of what he is saying. We would probably say something more like, “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, [I am telling you this] so that that you know….” Or perhaps “[I am telling you this] so that you will come to know (or learn) how you are to respond to each person.”

We are to walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of our opportunities with them. In that context, our speech with them should always be combined with grace, seasoned with salt for truth, cleansing, and healing. If we will speak this way with people, we will come to know how to respond to them and the concerns or situations they bring up to us. If, in contrast, our speech is condescending, harsh, condemning, or “better than you,” the outsiders will not speak to us or share their hearts with us, and we will never get to know them or find out how to respond to them to reach them for the Lord.

**“how you are to respond.”** The Greek is literally “how it is necessary to respond.” The Greek verb translated “respond” is *apokrinomai* (#611 ἀποκρίνομαι), and it means to answer, to reply, to continue speaking, and it can refer to the continuation of discourse, each person replying to the other as the conversation moves forward. Thus, while most versions have “answer,” that seemed too much like all we are doing is answering questions, which is not the case. The CJB, NAB, and NASB have “respond,” which seemed more conversational. The NEB translates the last phrase: “study how best to talk with each person you meet.” While that translation is certainly not literal, it does carry much of the meaning of the phrase.

Col 4:7

**“in the Lord.”** See Word Study: “In the Lord.”

Col 4:8

**“so that you will know how we are doing.”** See commentary on Ephesians 6:22, which has the same Greek phrase (cf. Phil. 2:19, which has the same construction).

**“I am sending.”** The Greek is in the aorist tense, which normally would be “I sent,” or even “I have sent,” but this is the idiom of the “epistolary aorist,” because the Greeks thought in terms of the arrival, not the time of departure, so this has the force of “I am sending.”

Col 4:9

**“*He is coming* with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother.”** Onesimus was Philemon’s slave who ran away and who Paul witnessed to and led into the New Birth. Paul sent him back to Philemon (Phlm. 1:10-16). We learn from Colossians 4:7-9 that Tychicus went from Rome to Colossae, and Onesimus went with him. Tychicus was returning Onesimus to his owner Philemon, who therefore also lived in Colossae. Interestingly, Philemon is not mentioned in Colossians, which may be because Paul did not want to seem like he was overly pressuring Philemon to take Onesimus back or even free him.

Col 4:10

**“received instructions.”** The scholars debate whether or not this is an “epistolary aorist,” or a standard aorist. If it is an epistolary aorist, then Paul was actually saying that you “are receiving” instructions, which would be along with the letter itself, likely brought by those who were carrying the letter. On the other hand, if it is a standard aorist, then Paul, by some means, had already sent instructions to the Church at Colossae about Mark.

**“instructions.”** The Greek word is *entolē* (#1785 ἐντολή ) and typically means a command or commandment. However, many versions go with “instructions,” and that is likely the sense Paul is using here. He is not giving a rigid command, but is giving instructions on how to receive Mark in a welcoming way, and possibly with a few other instructions that he does not mention in this verse. Paul is speaking from a sense of authority that he has received as an apostle in his instructions for them in how to receive and deal with Mark.

**“welcome.”** The Greek word is *dechomai* (#1209 δέχομαι), receive, but in contexts such as this it does not just mean to “receive” in a formal way, but rather to favorably accept, or “welcome.”

Col 4:11

**“Jesus, who is called Justice.”** “Jesus” is the English name of Joshua, and in Greek the name was *Iēsous* (#2424 Ἰησοῦς, pronounced Ē-ā-'soos). Joshua was such a very famous person that many Jewish boys were called “Joshua.” However, after the Christ was called “Joshua,” the Jews stopped using the name to avoid association with the Christians, and the Christians stopped using the name out of respect for Jesus Christ. Here is a man named Jesus who became referred to by another name: Justice.

Col 4:12

**“Epaphras.”** See commentary on Colossians 1:7.

**“Christ Jesus.”** Some Greek texts omit “Jesus” and just read “Christ.” The manuscript evidence is very divided and competent scholars come to different conclusions about the original reading.

**“fighting.”** The Greek is *agōnizomai* (#75 ἀγωνίζομαι, pronounced äg-ō-'need-zo-my), and it is used in Colossians 1:29 of Paul’s striving to bring Christians to maturity in Christ (see commentary on Col. 1:29; 2:1). In this verse, Epaphras is striving in prayer for the believers in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Anyone who prays faithfully understands this struggle. First, prayer is itself warfare. God is a warrior (Exod. 15:3), and we help Him in the spiritual battle when we pray. Just as no soldier fights half-heartedly or carelessly, so we too should battle in prayer with great diligence. Second, we have to strive (even struggle) in prayer because we fight our flesh, which gets distracted or tired. We lose focus and it is a struggle to stay focused in our prayer life. Third, we struggle against frustration. Anyone who prays for a cause as great as the salvation of others or the movement of the Word of God in an area knows what it is to pray day after day and see little results. It is frustrating and can lead to us giving up on prayer. It is exactly why Christ “spoke a parable to them about the necessity for them to pray always, and not become discouraged” (Luke 18:1). Prayer can be a struggle, but it is a good fight and one we all need to strive for and stay engaged in.

**“that.”** The Greek word is *hina* (#2443 ἵνα), and in this context, it is not clear whether it is a result clause (“in order that”), or rather also points to the context of the prayer: “he is praying that you will stand mature....” It can actually be both, and so we left the English just “that.”

Col 4:13

**“Indeed.”** The Greek is *gar* (#1063 γάρ), which is usually translated “for.” However, there is no causal link between Col. 4:12 and 4:13. Instead, this is what Greek grammarians refer to as a “confirmatory gar.”

**“works very hard.”** There is a variation in the Greek texts, with some reading *zelos* (zeal, concern), and some reading *ponos* (which is pain, distress, or hard work that causes that pain). Most scholars believe the reading *ponos*, which is more unusual and therefore more likely to be switched to a more common word, is the original. Epaphras worked very hard for the believers in Colossae, even causing himself some pain concerning them.

Col 4:15

**“Nympha, and the church *that is* in her house.”** The Greek manuscripts vary on this verse, some making Nympha a woman, some a man, and some saying “her” house, some “his” house, and some even “their” house. The strongest manuscript evidence supports that Nympha was a woman. Furthermore, when there is disagreement between the manuscripts, one of the ways to determine the original is to ask which reading would be the most difficult, and which the most sense to create. In this case, if the original was Nymphas, and “his” house, it is very unlikely that scribes would change the masculine to a feminine. However, if the original was feminine, it can easily be seen that a later scribe would consider that so unlikely that he would change the feminine to a masculine.

Col 4:16

**“read.”** Read out loud. Since only a small percentage of the people could read, it was very important that letters be read to the people so they could learn the Scripture.

**“among.”** The Greek is *para*, which is not normally “among,” however, in the context of reading a letter the meaning becomes “among.”[[129]](#footnote-16906) The Church would assemble, and someone would read the epistle to them.

**“the church of the Laodiceans.”** The “church” was the people, not a building.

**“the letter from Laodicea.”** There has been much scholarly debate about the letter to the Laodiceans. Marcion (c. 85-160) taught that this was the letter to the Ephesians, and historically that position has been taken and defended by John Mill and John Lightfoot. However, it seems most likely that Ephesians was written after Colossians, which would rule out that interpretation. Some have suggested that the Epistle to Philemon is this letter, but Philemon lived in Colossae, not Laodicea, and the letter would have come directly to him. It is most likely that this letter has not survived.[[130]](#footnote-25010) Of course the debate then rages about “some of the Word of God being lost.” There is no reason to believe that every letter Paul wrote was the Word of God. In fact, Paul was likely an aggressive communicator, with contacts in churches all over the Roman world, and he certainly would have written many letters in his many years in prison (two in Caesarea, Acts 24:27; two in Rome during his first imprisonment there, Acts 28:30; and an uncertain amount of time in his second imprisonment in Rome, from which we know he wrote 2 Timothy, so he was allowed to write letters). Not all of these would have been the Word of God, and none of his letters except the ones we know to be the Word of God have survived.

Col 4:17

**“Archippus.”** Mentioned here and in Philemon 2.

**“assignment.”** The Greek is *diakonia* (#1248 διακονία) and means “service,” and depending on the context refers to different kinds of service, including a task or assignment that a person is given. Because it can refer to the lifelong call of a person to ministry, it can in some contexts refer to a lifelong Christian ministry, or calling. Here in Colossians, the evidence is that what Paul is referring to is some kind of specific task or assignment because Archippus is told to “fulfill it.” Generally, lifelong ministries cannot be “fulfilled.” It seems that if Paul was making the general statement about the lifelong ministry that Archippus had, he would not have used the word “fulfill,” although we must admit that he could have used it to mean that.

**“in the Lord.”** See Word Study: “In the Lord.”

Col 4:18

**“by my own hand.”** Paul usually wrote some kind of closing to his epistles in his own handwriting. See commentary on Galatians 6:11.

**“Remember.”** This is the idiomatic sense of “remember,” sometimes called the “pregnant sense” of the word. It means much more than just remember, it means to pay special attention to, to help, support, etc.

[For more on the pregnant sense of “remember,” see commentary on Luke 23:42.]

**“you all.”** The “you” is plural, thus “you all.”

1. Cf. Peter O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon* [WBC], 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30872)
2. James R. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* [NIGTC], 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-23162)
3. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 625. [↑](#footnote-ref-18788)
4. Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 631. [↑](#footnote-ref-16493)
5. BDAG, s.v. “ἀπόκειμαι.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12172)
6. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-30225)
7. Cf. Meyer; Lange; Bratcher & Nida; *Expositor’s Greek Testament*. [↑](#footnote-ref-31069)
8. Lenski, *Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-12783)
9. O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon* [WBC], 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-23302)
10. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-20476)
11. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 790-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-27434)
12. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-28765)
13. Louw and Nida, s.v. “ἐπίγνωσις.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17396)
14. Cf. Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians* [WBC], 25-27; contra Lenski. [↑](#footnote-ref-23168)
15. Bruce Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 620. [↑](#footnote-ref-23113)
16. Heinrich Meyer, *Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon*, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-26730)
17. O’Brien, *Colossians* [WBC], 25-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-23222)
18. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-18808)
19. Bruce M. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18866)
20. See also, John W. Schoenheit, *The Christian’s Hope*, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-16470)
21. Cf. R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul’s Espistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-23348)
22. Chang, *The Only Perfect Man*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-30559)
23. See F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* [NICNT], 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-19730)
24. Cf. Peter O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* [WBC], 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-21358)
25. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 245, “epanadiplosis.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26347)
26. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-10954)
27. Barth and Blanke, *Colossians* [AB], 197-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-28389)
28. Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* [PNTC], 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-14463)
29. Plato, Cratylus, Parmenides, Greater Hippias, Lesser Hippias: English Text, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. H. N. Fowler, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press; William Heinemann Ltd, 1977), 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-18668)
30. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-32392)
31. Moulton and Milliagan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. “συνίστημι,” 608. [↑](#footnote-ref-18819)
32. BDAG *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “συνίστημι.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15572)
33. Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon*, s.v. “συνίστημι.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15430)
34. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “συνίστημι.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31209)
35. Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* [NAC], 217. Melick even goes so far to say that Jesus is the foreman of the construction of the universe. [↑](#footnote-ref-11331)
36. Lenski, *Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-32280)
37. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-12665)
38. See Graeser, Lynn, and Schoenheit, *Is There Death After Life?* [↑](#footnote-ref-21146)
39. Cf. H. Meyer, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-29920)
40. Cf. O’Brien, *Colossians* [WBC], 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-14974)
41. E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Ephesians and Colossian*s [NICNT], 206-07. [↑](#footnote-ref-18904)
42. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ἀνταναπληρόω.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11820)
43. BDAG *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ἀνταναπληρόω.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29245)
44. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians*, 72-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-30676)
45. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, 164-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-30715)
46. Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-23833)
47. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* [PNTC], 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-27303)
48. Margaret Y. Macdonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* [SP], 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-29558)
49. Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* [NTL], 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-12615)
50. See Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 657, “hendiadys.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29283)
51. BDAG, s.v. “στοιχεῖον.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28977)
52. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 804, “amphibologia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25084)
53. R. C. H. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-26411)
54. Reinier Schippers in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed., s.v. “Fullness,” 1:740. [↑](#footnote-ref-19319)
55. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “πλήρωμα.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25072)
56. Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon*, s.v. “θεότης”; Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of Theology*, 2:86. [↑](#footnote-ref-27482)
57. Louw and Nida, s.v. “θεότης.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21022)
58. Cf. Stern, *Complete Jewish Bible*, “all that God is.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23642)
59. Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:143. [↑](#footnote-ref-24559)
60. For more on *theotēs* (#2320 θεότης), see Graeser, Lynn, Schoenheit, *One God & One Lord*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29351)
61. *Meyer’s Commentary: Colossians*, 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-16678)
62. Cf. Dunn [NIGTC], 160-61; O’Brien [WBC], 118-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13170)
63. Cf. Wuest, *New Testament*, “out from among the dead,” 472. [↑](#footnote-ref-12679)
64. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-17149)
65. Lenski, *Colossians*, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-18412)
66. See Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 183-84; Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 493. [↑](#footnote-ref-19991)
67. BDAG, s.v. “ἐξαλείφω.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16263)
68. Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-27416)
69. BDAG, s.v. “χειρόγραφον.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11260)
70. BDAG, s.v. “δόγμα.” [↑](#footnote-ref-32279)
71. See, J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 8th ed., Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-18534)
72. Doug Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, [PNTC], 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-30100)
73. J. P. Migne, “Patrologia Graeca: Greek Text,” Patrologiæ Cursus Completus, 1253. [↑](#footnote-ref-24557)
74. Cf. O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon* [WBC], 124-26; Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemo*n [NIGTC], 165-66; Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* [NAC], 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-16584)
75. Cf. *Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament*, 308; J. B. Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 189; cf. Lenski,*Colossians*, 113-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-31947)
76. Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon*; BDAG; Liddell and Scott; s.v. “ἀπεκδύομαι.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23683)
77. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ἀπεκδύομαι.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22283)
78. Cf. Wuest, *Word Studies: Ephesians and Colossians*, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-19673)
79. J. B. Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-21118)
80. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC], 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-30643)
81. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-26060)
82. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-11628)
83. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-14530)
84. Lightfoot, *Colossians, Philemon*, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-32591)
85. Cf. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-26817)
86. Cf. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 667, “hendiadys.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31717)
87. Cf. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-21571)
88. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book II, chap. 32.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11347)
89. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* [TNTC], 126–127. [↑](#footnote-ref-15549)
90. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-28156)
91. Markus Barth, and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Astridk B. Beck, trans. [AB], 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-13641)
92. William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-24919)
93. Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon*, s.v. “εἰ.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19736)
94. Cf. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, note on Col. 3:1, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-13624)
95. Bullinger, *Lexicon*, s.v. “if.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19929)
96. Cf. O’Brien [WBC], 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-28112)
97. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-14343)
98. Richard R. Melick,  *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* [NAC], 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-32696)
99. BDAG, s.v. “ἀκαθαρσία.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15061)
100. Thayer, s.v. “ἀκαθαρσία.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26707)
101. Lenski, *Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-21965)
102. Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-29695)
103. Louw and Nida, s.v. “αἰσχρολογία.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26479)
104. BDAG, s.v. “αἰσχρολογία.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13307)
105. Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-28670)
106. Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, UBS Handbook Series, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-28473)
107. Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* [NAC], 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-32098)
108. Markus Barth, *Colossians* [AB], 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-28274)
109. Cf. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 804, “amphibologia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12107)
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111. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 4:505. [↑](#footnote-ref-24418)
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116. W. R. Nicoll, *Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 3:541. [↑](#footnote-ref-24375)
117. Dunn, Colossians [NIGTC],210. [↑](#footnote-ref-19062)
118. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-22276)
119. See Lenski, *Colossians*, 172-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-13168)
120. BDAG, s.v. “νουθετέω.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14208)
121. Bratcher and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-14601)
122. Roger Omanson, *Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15278)
123. Cf. Roberson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 807; Lenski, *Colossians*, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-21451)
124. Cf. R. C. H. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, 180-81; Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 168-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-30006)
125. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-16068)
126. O’Brien [WBC], 229; M. Barth and H. Blanke [AB], 447; also, the NEB, Douay-Rheims, NAB, NET; cf. C. William’s New Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-15519)
127. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, 183-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-22773)
128. Lenski, *Colossians*, 194; Robertson, *Grammar*, 1090. [↑](#footnote-ref-21292)
129. Cf. Peter O’Brien, *Colossians* [WBC], 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-16906)
130. Cf. O’Brien, *Colossians* [WBC], 257-58; R. C. H. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Thessalonians*, 8, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-25010)