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Colossians

the new old perfectly imperfect you



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Colossians

the new old perfectly imperfect you



by Edl Bajema


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Grand Rapids, Michigan

*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord,
continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him,
strengthened in the faith as you were taught,
and overflowing with thankfulness.*

—Colossians 2:6-7

We are grateful for the many comments and helpful suggestions of interested small groups and leaders who contributed to the development of this study.

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Map: Matthew P. Faber

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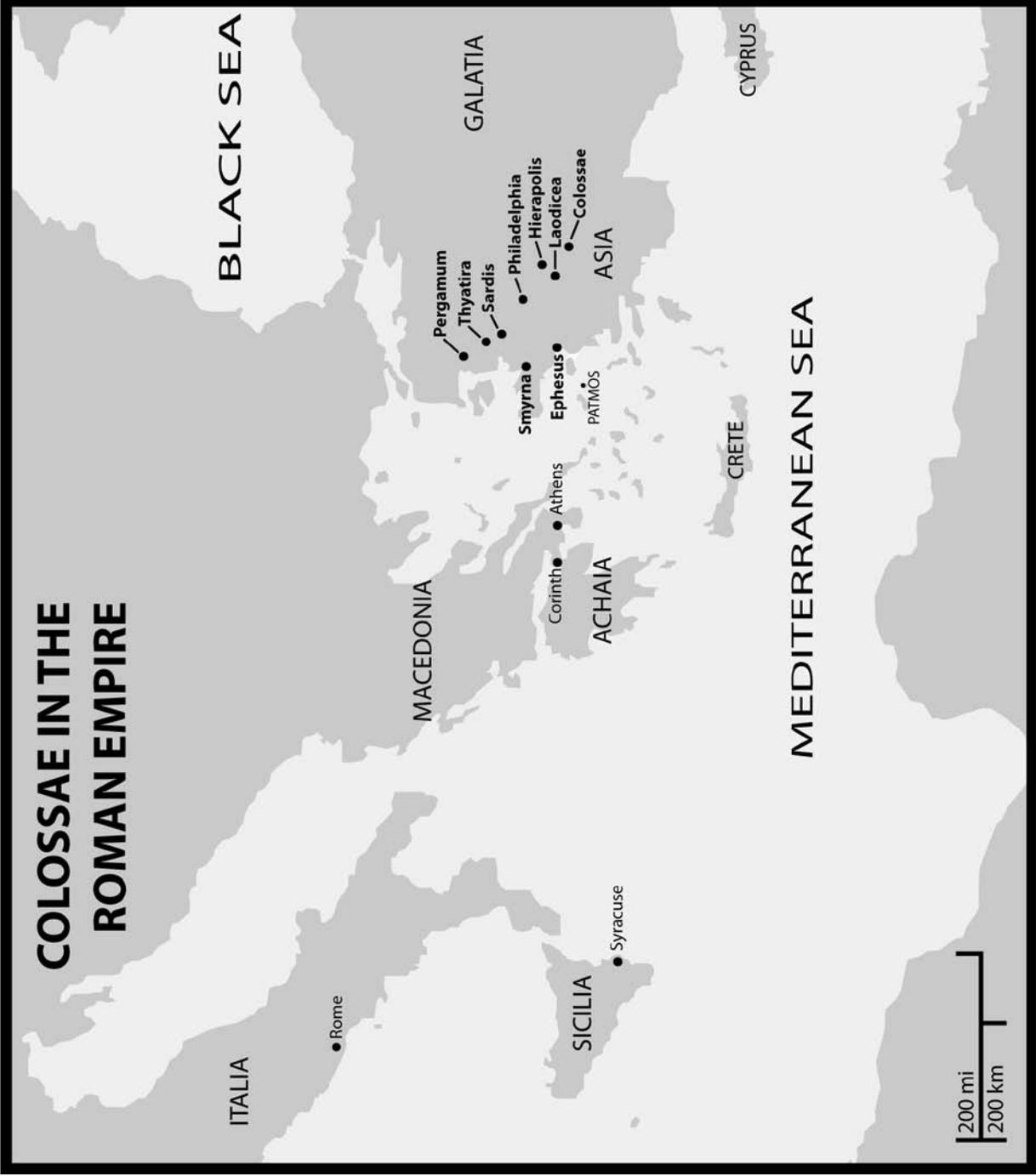
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Glossary

angels—supernatural beings created by God to be messengers, to carry out God’s will in this world, and to serve and care for all who belong to God (Ps. 91:11-12).

apostle—“one sent forth”; refers to a messenger sent on a special mission. The New Testament apostles were leaders in the early Christian church; they were specially chosen by Jesus to be his witnesses (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8, 21-25; 9:1-15; 1 Cor. 9:1-2).

baptism—the act of sprinkling with or immersion in water as a sign of God’s claim on a person’s life to be part of the covenant family of God. Baptism is an outward sign that Christ’s blood washes the believer clean of the guilt of sin.

Christ Jesus—the sinless Son of God, who gave his life as the payment for our sin. *Christ* means “Anointed One,” and *Jesus* means “Savior.”

circumcision—removal of the male foreskin. God commanded Abraham and his descendants to do this as a sign that they belonged to God and as a symbol of the cutting away of sin from their lives (Gen. 17). In the New Testament circumcision is replaced with baptism in Christ. True circumcision is of the heart, not the flesh (Jer. 4:4; Col. 2:9-12).

dominion of darkness—anyplace outside of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of light (Col. 1:12-13). The ruler of this domain is Satan, an angel who rebelled against God and now seeks to promote evil, confusion, chaos, and destruction in God’s creation (see Rev. 12).

earthly—refers sometimes to things of the physical, material world, but can also refer to our sinful nature.

elemental spiritual forces—literally “elements of the cosmos”; can also mean “basic principles of this world.” This term, according to the *TNIV Study Bible*, may refer to “false, worldly, elementary, religious teachings” or “evil spiritual powers.”

faith—defined in Hebrews 11:1 as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Can be defined in simple terms as “belief and trust.” True saving faith is a gift that consists of knowledge and confidence—a sure knowledge by which we accept as true all that God has revealed in his Word, and confidence that all our sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake.

Gentiles—all people who are not Jews.

gospel—literally means “good news” and refers to the message of God’s salvation from sin and the promise of eternal life through Christ.

grace—God’s undeserved favor and forgiving love. Jesus is the full expression of God’s grace for the salvation of all who believe in him as Lord and Savior (Eph. 2:8-10).

holy—pure; set apart to bring glory to God.

hope—in combination with faith this means looking ahead in solid trust to the fulfillment of all God’s promises (Heb. 7:19; 11:1).

idolatry—worshiping something other than God. It can mean bowing down to a physical image of a god, but Paul uses it in Colossians to mean allowing one’s own desires to become more important than God.

inheritance of the saints—eternal life, a gift of God to all who believe in Jesus as Savior.

Jews—the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham; God’s special people chosen to be a blessing to all other nations (Gen. 12:2-3).

kingdom of light—another term for the kingdom of God, God’s rule over all creation, especially evident in the lives of his people, who follow Jesus and believe in him as Savior. Jesus’ central message is the good news that “the kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15).

new self—the new nature that comes into being when we are restored in our relationship with God. Through God’s Spirit the believer receives the power to live a new and holy life.

old self—the part of our human nature that still lives in disobedience to God’s command;

characterized by anger, malice, greed, selfishness, and immorality.

peace—a result of being reconciled to God through Christ that yields an assurance of well-being and freedom (guided by the Spirit) to live in relationship with God and others.

psalms—prayers of ancient Israel that were written down and set to music, with subjects ranging from praise and thanks to lament and trust. Most psalms emphasize God’s power, love, and holiness as contrasted with human weakness. See the book of Psalms in the Old Testament.

redemption—the act of buying something back with a ransom payment; sinners are freed from the consequences of sin by the ransom paid by Christ’s death on the cross (Mark 10:45). In this way Christ bought back all the lives of sinners who believe in him as Savior and Lord.

righteousness—the condition of being right with God. As God’s people, we are called to be righteous and are credited with Christ’s righteousness: we are made right with God through Christ’s death and given the ability to live in right relationships with others through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 3:21-26).

Sabbath—the seventh day of the week (Saturday), set aside as a day of rest and restoration according to the law of Moses. Jewish religious leaders developed a stringent code of rules for keeping the Sabbath, and Jesus often criticized them for being too legalistic in

this regard (see Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:16-17; 7:21-24).

Scythian—Originally from what is now south Russia, Scythians were a tribal, warlike people regarded by the Greeks and Romans as uneducated barbarians.

sin—disobedience to God; refers to breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4).

sinful nature—the condition in us that is prone to disobey God and reject God’s authority. All who put their faith in Christ still struggle with the “old” sinful nature but are encouraged to fight against it with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Spirit (Holy Spirit)—the third person of the Trinity. The other two persons are God the Father and God the Son (Jesus Christ). They are three persons in one being. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, works true faith in our hearts, and empowers us to live holy lives. The Spirit’s presence in our hearts guarantees that we will receive God’s promises (John 16:7-15; Rom. 8:11; Eph. 1:13-14).

How to Use This Study

This Bible study aims to help people engage in lively discussion and Bible discovery without having studied the text before doing each lesson together.

Map, Glossary

Near the front of this booklet are a map and a glossary that can be useful for locating places and the meanings of terms used in the book of Colossians.

Questions for Discussion

The main questions for discussion are numbered and are in bold print. Along with these questions you'll find points "to think about as you discuss" to help spark ideas for responding to each main question. In addition, you'll often see questions that help us connect the story to everyday life under the subheading "What does this mean to me?"

Please do not feel you have to answer every question in the lesson material. Our goal is to help make Bible study a creative, flexible, exploratory exercise in which you engage with your group and grow to know God and each other better.

Follow-up Ideas

At the end of each lesson are ideas that you might like to use for follow-up. These include Explore! activities that can help you learn more about items of interest related to the lesson and apply your learning to everyday life. There are also movie and video suggestions.

Break Away (at-home readings)

After the study material for each lesson you'll find readings for use at home. Take a break with God and do some thinking about the lesson material and how the Lord can use it to shape your life. If you like, clip these pages out and set them in places around your home or at work where they can remind you to spend time with God. You might also like to memorize some of the Scriptures used in these pieces.

An Invitation and Prayer of Commitment

If you're searching for a relationship with God, or studying with a friend who is searching, see An Invitation (to believe and commit to God) and a Prayer of Commitment provided at the back of this booklet. These can be helpful in talking one-to-one with God or with someone who is ready to make a faith commitment to God.

Leader's Notes

At the Faith Alive website page featuring this Bible study—see www.FaithAliveResources.org, search for "Colossians," and click on the link to "Leader's Notes"—you'll find tips for leading this small group study.

We wish you God's blessing as you participate in Bible study together. Have fun as you learn and grow closer to God and one another!

Introduction

Would you feel awkward if you peered over someone's shoulder to read a letter they'd received? Maybe—but not if the letter was also addressed to you.

The apostle Paul's letter to the believers at Colossae is impassioned and personal, but he intended it to be read by everyone it reached—and that now includes you. It was first opened in Colossae and read aloud there. Then it was passed along to the believers in nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis. From there it was probably read in Ephesus. Slowly the letter traveled around to Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Then it was included in the New Testament part of the Bible. And now, about two thousand years later, it has reached you.

Although it's old, Paul's letter is not out of date. He writes about two things that will never change or lose their importance:

- who Christ is, and
- how all who believe in Christ can live, in his strength

This may be the most important letter you will read in your life. This brief letter has affected many millions of people around the world for many centuries. It speaks of a transformation so deep and profound that it can only be described as dying and coming to life again. In this letter we discover the one in whom all things hold together, the one who transforms us and makes us new—Jesus Christ, the living Son of God—so that we can live for and with God forever.

Lesson 1

A Letter Packed with Prayer

Colossians 1:1-14

How do you get a vital message to someone far away? You pick up the phone, shoot off an e-mail or text message, or use Skype. If it's super-personal, you might catch a red-eye flight and deliver the message in person. Not many of us would write out an urgent message by hand and send it with someone who had to walk it to its destination. But then we're living in the 21st century, not A.D. 60.

The letter you're about to read is almost 2,000 years old, written by one of the most dynamic and daring people of the first century. He was writing to Christians in a small market town named Colossae (located in the country of Turkey today). The writer was Paul, an outspoken man who had turned from a Christian-hater into a follower of Jesus after having a face-to-face encounter with Jesus himself (see Acts 9).

As you'll discover, Paul's message was urgent. This letter was passed along from church to church to church and preserved in the Bible so that we can still read it today. Let's see what it has to say!

Opener (optional)

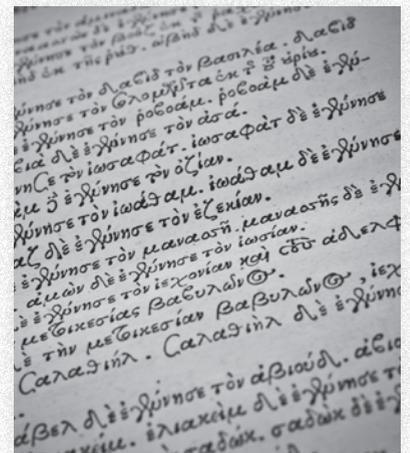
Has anyone sent you a note or e-mail to say "I'm praying for you"? How did that make you feel? Why?

Colossians 1:1-2

1. How does Paul describe himself? The people he is writing to?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the job description of an apostle (see glossary)
- what it means to be "faithful . . . in Christ"
- the significance of "grace" and "peace" (see glossary; we'll also see these terms again later)



Paul Who?

Saul of Tarsus (also known as Paul—Acts 13:9) was not always a “Jesus freak.” In fact, for a while his aim was to throw Christians in prison and get them a death sentence for heresy against Judaism. Saul was a smart, well-educated Jew of the strictest kind: a Pharisee. He *loved* Jewish law and tradition and *hated* anyone who threatened it. But all of that changed when Jesus (the risen, ascended Son of God) stopped Saul on the road one day and talked with him (see Acts 9:1-31). After a few days Saul began risking his life to spread the good news about Jesus. His mission was now to tell Gentiles (non-Jews) about the new life that everyone could have through Jesus Christ. For the next three decades, Paul endured beatings, imprisonment, hunger, snakebite, shipwreck, treachery—all while he traveled (mostly by foot) through Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, Spain, Italy, Palestine, and other places. (Read the book of Acts for some amazing stories of Paul’s missionary journeys.) Wherever he went, churches sprang up. Paul cared intensely about these churches, prayed for them faithfully, and wrote many letters of instruction, correction, and encouragement to them. Thirteen of these letters survive in our Bible today.

Colossians 1:3-8

2. Why is Paul thankful? What has he heard about the Christians in Colossae?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the person they had put their faith in
- how the gospel (“good news of Jesus”) had affected them
- how faith, love, hope, and heaven are related

FLASHBACK

Colossae was a has-been town in Paul’s day. Earlier, during the Persian and Greek empires, it had been a wealthy, bustling city on a major trade route. Rome changed the road system, however, and Colossae declined into a dying town, eclipsed by nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis (see map). All three cities had Christian communities (see Col. 4:13). The church at Colossae has been described by some as the least important of any church that received a letter from the apostle Paul. Today only a mound marks the city’s location.

Paul did not found the church in Colossae (see Col. 2:1). It was likely started by Epaphras (1:7), who is thought to have been converted by Paul in Ephesus (see map), and who later came to visit Paul. In fact, Epaphras was with Paul at the time this letter was written. He evidently had given Paul a glowing report of the church in Colossae but also asked for help in dealing with some false teachings that were creeping into the young church (2:4, 8, 16-23).

3. What do you think Paul means by “the true word of the gospel”?

What does this mean to me?

- Do you believe it’s possible to know that something is absolutely true? Why or why not? Where does the idea of faith come in?

4. What role did Epaphras play in the lives of the Colossian Christians?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- what he had taught in Colossae
- what he had told Paul about the Colossian believers

What does this mean to me?

- Think about times when people have talked to you about God or about issues of faith. How did you respond? What did you learn?

Explosive Spread of the Gospel

Paul was not exaggerating when he wrote, “The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world” (Col. 1:6). The Christian faith spread quickly across the Roman world during the first century, helped by these factors:

- Rome’s iron-fisted rule brought stability, allowing trade routes to flourish and creating good roads.
- The use of Greek as a common language in the Roman Empire greatly aided in communications.
- The diversity of cultures in Rome’s cosmopolitan empire made it easier for missionaries to reach across cultural barriers with the good news of Jesus.
- The impact of Jesus’ and the apostles’ miracles is hard to overestimate. Quadratus, a Christian apologist who was likely a disciple of Jesus’ apostles, wrote to the emperor Hadrian around A.D. 117, saying, “Our Saviour’s works were always there to see, for they were true—the people who had been cured and those raised from the dead, who had not merely been seen at the moment when they were cured or raised, but were *always* there to see, not only when the Saviour was among us, but for a long time after His departure; in fact, some of them survived right up to my own time” (in Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, Book 4, sec. 3; Penguin edition, 1965).

Colossians 1:9-14

5. What did Paul pray when he talked with God about the Colossian Christians?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- how it's possible to know God's will
- what kinds of things please God
- why believers in Colossae might have needed strength to endure

What does this mean to me?

- Do you think it's possible to grow in your knowledge of God? To actually please God? Explain.

6. How would Paul's words have encouraged his readers in Colossae?

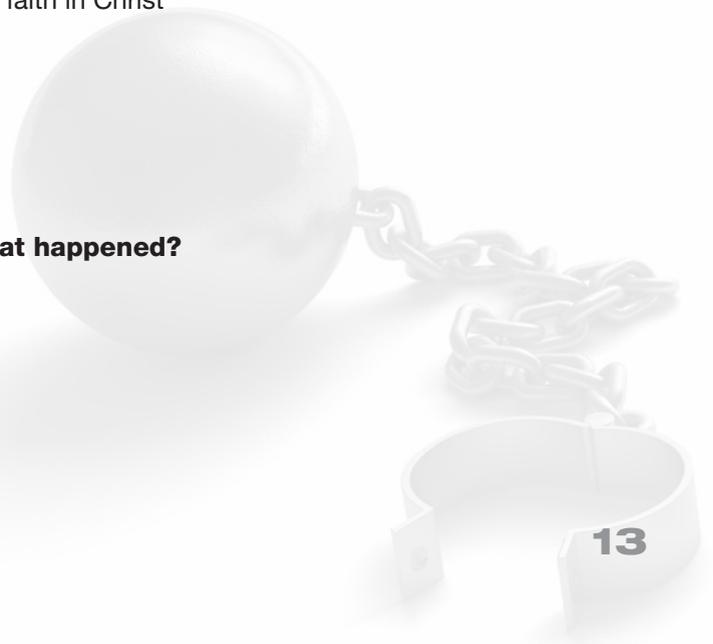
To think about as you discuss . . .

- the inheritance they qualified for (How had they become qualified?)
- what sort of kingdom they had entered through faith in Christ

7. What rescue operation had taken place? What happened?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the two kingdoms and how they are different
- what believers are given through God's Son



More to Think About

- Do you think God listened to Paul's prayers for the believers at Colossae? From the report of their reputation, does it seem as though his prayers were answered? Explain.
- Take a few minutes to list all the good things Paul associates with being a believer in Christ Jesus.
- Though Paul had probably not met the believers at Colossae, he prayed for them with passionate intensity. Why?

Explore!

- Watch a 40-minute presentation of the life and impact of the apostle Paul. Produced by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and narrated by Rick Steves of PBS, the video tells "the story of early Christianity's greatest missionary and leading theologian—the Jewish Pharisee and tentmaker from Tarsus who became the apostle Paul." At www.video.google.com, search keywords "life of apostle paul with Rick Steves."
- Obtain a copy of *The Apostle: A Life of Paul* by John Pollock, Cambridge-educated clergyman, authorized biographer of Billy Graham, and master storyteller. "As you turn the pages, you'll sense Paul's motives, his aims and priorities, what mattered to him, and what he was willing to die for." (Published by David C. Cook, 1994.)
- Get a sense of the amount of ground Paul covered in his calling as an apostle and evangelist. View interactive maps of Paul's missionary journeys and his final journey to Rome at www.apostlepaulthefilm.com/paul/journeys.htm
- Rent online an Amazon.com video-on-demand (26 min.) titled "Crossing Rome," directed by Jonathan Fulford (a Gateway Films/Vision Video release). "Takes us back into the intriguing and inspiring first centuries of the Christian faith and the experience of the early church at Rome." A seven-day rental (online) is \$1.99. At www.amazon.com search "Crossing Rome."

- Just for fun: read a poem written by a 17th-century preacher and metaphysical poet on the subject of heaven and light: Henry Vaughan's "They are all gone into the world of light" at www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/vaughan/worldoflight.htm



Break Away (at-home readings)

On your own, take some time to relax with the Bible and with God in the coming week. Find a comfortable, quiet place, and have a favorite snack handy. Ask the Lord to help you know him better and to give you insight and understanding through his Word, the Bible, our guide to live by. Use some devotional readings like these to help you focus, reflect, and see how God calls us to live. (If you like, use one reading for each of five days, or read a few of them in one sitting. You might also like to clip out these readings and put them in places at home or at work where they'll remind you to spend time with God.)

Letters that Give Life

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans. . . . —Colossians 4:16

My son had applied to graduate schools and was watching the mailbox closely. "Mail here yet?" he would ask if he'd been out running errands. I wondered what reply he was waiting for, but I figured he would tell me in his own time. A week later an envelope arrived for him, addressed by hand. He grabbed it and took it up to his room. Ten minutes later he emerged, smiling, his eyes lit up. "Here, read this, Mom."

It was a copy of a letter of recommendation from one of his undergraduate professors. The letter contained paragraph after paragraph of praise for my son's abilities as a student and his integrity as a person. It was a tribute to his hard work and dedication and included hopes for a bright future.

That letter brought immense pleasure to my son and to us, his family members. We read it aloud several times. It got quoted in e-mails to grandparents. It was given a place of honor in my son's important documents.

Think about the warmth and pleasure that the crowd of believers at Colossae must have felt when they heard the first part of Paul's letter read aloud. One of the greatest spiritual leaders in the early Christian church had praised them for their reputation of having great love and faith! Even more, Paul said he prayed for them continually, asking God to bless them with greater wisdom, understanding, strength, patience, and joy. This must have boosted the morale and energy of the church in that declining town.

Is there someone you know who could use an encouraging note, a letter filled with praise and commendation, an expression of thanks and gratitude for the role they have played in your life or for their achievements and example? Consider writing such a letter today. Letters like that are often kept—not only in a file of keepsakes but also in the heart.

Hope Now and Forever

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die." —John 11:25

My neighbor just said good-bye to his wife. Not the everyday sort of good-bye, as if he were going off to work or leaving on a trip. It was a good-bye for the rest of this life. She died of cancer yesterday.

A week ago he had told me, "She's not afraid of death. She says, 'I know where I'm going.' And that helps. It helps tremendously. To know that she still lives and that I'll be able to see her again . . ." He couldn't finish. It was difficult for him to find words to express what this hope meant to him.

The Christians at Colossae shared the same hope. They believed the gospel that Jesus taught, the good news about God's grace. They believed that, because of Christ's death and resurrection, they would enjoy life with God forever, in the present and even after passing through death.

This hope gave new meaning to their life. It energized their faith in God and their love for each other. The Colossians had a hope that nothing could take away, an exciting hope—something amazing to look forward to!

What do you believe about life after death? What happens to people when they die? If you want to better understand what the Bible teaches about this, read 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 21-22. Think about how people





might live their lives differently if they believe what the Bible says about the hope that is stored up for believers.

Plump, Sweet Fruit

[Jesus said,] “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. . . . I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” —John 15:4-5

You should see my dad’s grapevines. They sprawl along the back fence at his home in central California. In August and September, foot-long clusters of Thompson seedless grapes crowd the vines, green-gold and bursting with sweetness. Muscat grapes grow in such abundance that we can’t eat all the tangy-sweet goodness, and we leave some for the birds.

In late fall we prune, cutting long, leafy branches back to the vine itself. The branches lie twisted and dry on the ground. They will never bear fruit again, severed as they are from the vine. The same holds true for any other kind of fruit-bearing tree or shrub. No branch bears fruit once it gets detached from the main trunk or vine.

Plants aren’t the only living things with fruit-bearing issues. People bear fruit too. Paul prayed that the believers at Colossae would bear fruit. His letter to the Galatian church gets specific about the amazing fruit Christians can bear: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). (See also Col. 3:12-17.)

The Colossian believers had the ability to grow this incredible fruit in their lives because they were connected to Jesus. It was not fruit that grew out of human effort and determination. Rather, it grew when they remained close to the kindness, joy, and peace found in the faithful love and patience of Christ, through his Spirit living in them. Tasting the sweetness of this close relationship with the loving God, they were changed.

If you think of your life in terms of a grapevine, would you say it’s bursting with the spiritual fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, and more—or like a withering branch? Do you feel connected to God, disconnected, or somewhere in between? Consider getting closer to the One whose power fuels the

universe, and whose personal love for you can't even begin to be measured (Eph. 3:17-21). Ask him to show you the truth of these words: "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8). As your connection to God strengthens, watch for fruit to grow. It will!

Coming Out of Darkness

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth). . . . —Ephesians 5:8-9

A new friend from church invited me to lunch. We talked about our lives, and she described a childhood of verbal abuse, an adolescence of drugs and rebellion, and an adult life of prostitution. "That's behind me now," she said. "The Lord is good." She is drug-free, attending school, and focused on healing and growth.

A week later, I had coffee with an old friend who had grown up in a church-going family. She described a childhood filled with physical abuse, shame, and alcohol. "We always looked good on the outside," she said. "But my home was just a place of darkness. Every day I thank God for Al-Anon." With the help of others whose lives have been traumatized by alcohol, God has led her to take steps into freedom, forgiveness, and healing.

When we're in the dark, there's no light. We can't see a way out. We can't see pitfalls in front of us or things coming at us. We live with fear, confusion, and shame. Darkness has us in its clutches. But someone can rescue us from the dominion of darkness. When God turns on the light and brings us to a different place, healing can begin. Evil gets replaced by goodness and righteousness. Lies get replaced by truth.

Do you know someone who could use this kind of rescue, someone who seems stuck in the grip of something that can be described as the "dominion of darkness" (Col. 1:13)? Is it someone who can't seem to shake free of an addiction, or of a sense of emptiness and futility? Maybe that person is someone you love, or maybe it's you. God is the only one able to perform such a rescue. He is listening, waiting for a call for help. Let him know if there's someone in your life who needs it. The Lord will act.





Forgiveness: A Sure Thing with God

If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

—Psalm 130:3-4

A few years ago Bruce inadvertently offended a woman from his church. He had shared one of her e-mails with others on a committee on which they both served. It was about a matter that she and Bruce had disagreed on. He wanted the committee to have her opinion, in order to balance out the opinion he had voiced. He meant to show respect for her point of view. She misunderstood his motives, and her temper flared. She lashed out at Bruce, calling him manipulative and controlling. She quit the committee and refused to talk to him.

Bruce searched his conscience and examined his motives. He began to see how she could have misunderstood his actions. He apologized several times, once by letter, but received no response.

This grieved Bruce, who valued the woman's skills on the committee and, even more, the faith she had shown as a Christian leader in their church. Because she would not talk to him, he wrote her one more letter, asking again for her forgiveness and offering to meet with her and another person to help work through their differences. Again, no response.

Do you ever fear that God treats you that way when you ask forgiveness for doing something you know has offended him, or disappointed him, or hurt him? Not in "the kingdom of light . . . the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Col. 1:12-13). This is how things work in God's kingdom: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). God *wants* to forgive you. He offered his Son in your place so that he could forgive you. It's a sure thing.

In a time of quiet reflection, ask God to make you aware of things you've done that you should ask forgiveness for. Then take him up on his offer to forgive you! While you're at it, see if there's anyone you've been withholding forgiveness from. Ask God to help you to show them the same kind of love he has shown to you.