

LEADER GUIDE

discover

NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Selections from Colossians

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Coffee Break



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Selected passages from Colossians

New Life in Christ

Getting Started

The purpose of this lesson is to emphasize the gospel (“good news”) message and to make clear that the gospel is for everyone. Now that you have studied the book of Colossians, consider what you have learned about Jesus Christ and his message of salvation. This lesson is designed to focus on the main teachings in Colossians about Christ and the new life he offers, and this can help to prepare you to share this vital information with others—especially if they do not yet know Christ. To begin, consider the following excerpt from Eugene Peterson’s introduction to Colossians in *The Message*:

Hardly anyone who hears the full story of Jesus and learns the true facts of his life and teaching, crucifixion and resurrection, walks away with a shrug of the shoulders, dismissing him as unimportant. People ignorant of the story or misinformed about it, of course, regularly dismiss him. But with few exceptions, the others know instinctively that they are dealing with a most remarkable greatness.

But it is quite common for those who consider him truly important to include others who seem to be equally important in his company—Buddha, Moses, Socrates, and Muhammad for a historical start, along with some personal favorites. For these people, Jesus is important, but not central; his prestige is considerable, but he is not preeminent.

The Christians in the town of Colossae, or at least some of them, seem to have been taking this line. . . . Paul writes to them in an attempt to restore Jesus, the Messiah, to the center of their lives.

It is important for you as a leader to remember that the gospel message is for group members studying the Bible for the first time and also for people who have never known a time when they did not believe.

The verses from Colossians in this lesson will allow everyone to hear the gospel explained again in clear terms. It will be important to ask God to guide you as you seek ways to make the message plain to each person,

particularly those who may not yet be believers. But you will first have to hear the message yourself. The gospel is not only for “the lost” but for us all. As we mature spiritually, we become more aware of our sin, which influences not just our actions but our attitudes as well. This realization drives us to the Savior, who has not only redeemed and justified all who believe but who also continues to “cover” our sins with his blood as he works to sanctify us, making us holy.

As you prepare to lead this lesson, ask God to show you the truths of these verses that everyone needs to hear. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Do I really believe I am a sinner?
- Do I ask Christ to change me on a daily basis rather than trusting in myself to improve?
- Am I quick to compare myself to others rather than comparing myself to a perfectly righteous God?
- Do I look down on those who have moral failures in their life?

If we honestly look at ourselves first, members of the group will be able to “read” more clearly the gospel in us.

Please also note that since this lesson is a review of the Colossians passages you have previously studied, you will already have notes and comments for the passages in this lesson, so you may want to look back to those as you prepare to lead this lesson. Also, with your group you will not need to look at each of these passages as thoroughly as you did in the preceding lessons. Here you will be looking at the “big idea” in these passages as they relate to the gospel message.

Optional Share Question

When you hear the names *Jesus* or *Christ*, what ideas come to mind?

Use this question to help gauge what group members know about Jesus. Accept the responses as information, knowing that you may well encounter misconceptions about Jesus as you go through this lesson. It will be good to remember to accept people where they are. There is no need ever to speak condescendingly or to argue with a group member. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to change hearts and minds. You are simply the messenger sharing God’s Word.

What Does It Say?

1. Colossians 1:15-18

Recall that when Paul uses the term “firstborn,” he is using it in the sense that it was understood by the people who first received his letter. In that culture the firstborn son held the place of supreme honor among his siblings and inherited the lordship over the household or family estate. Though Jesus became human and was born as a human infant, he had already existed as the second person of the Trinity in eternity with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, so he did not have a beginning.

a. How do these verses describe the Son and what he has done?

- **Who is he?**
- **What is the scope of his rule?**
- **What has he done? What is he still doing?**

There are many places to start when explaining the gospel. Eugene Peterson points out (above) that many people today do not understand the uniqueness of Jesus. As we look at the gospel in this lesson, it is important also to see the “cosmic” Jesus, one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, and Lord over all creation. In his book *The Mission of God’s People* Christopher Wright states,

In what is arguably Paul’s most eloquent summary of the identity of Christ *and* the scope of the gospel, he proclaims that all things in the universe have been created by Christ, are being sustained by Christ, and will be reconciled to God by Christ through the blood of his cross. That is the breathtakingly universal scope of the reign of God through Christ. And that, says Paul, is the gospel. . . . The Christians in Colossae could stay firm in their faith and hope (v. 23) because their salvation was bound up within a gospel agenda that was cosmic in scope, spanning all of space and time.

For some in your group these verses in Colossians will reintroduce some aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is God, and even though no one has seen God, John 1:18 states, “The one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” Jesus, with the Father and the Spirit, created everything, and together they sustain the entire universe.

If some group members have difficulty accepting this concept, suggest that they continue with the rest of the lesson because some things may become clearer. Also suggest they look up passages such as John 1:1 and John 1:14, 18 and read them on their own. The important thing is not to get bogged down in a theological argument. Allow the Holy Spirit to work.

b. How would the people living in Paul's day react to these words?

Note: The Roman Empire controlled a huge part of the known world at that time, including the people of Colossae.

- **Imagine Rome's reaction to the idea that Christ is “before all things, and in him all things hold together.”**

The person and teachings of Jesus had revolutionary implications. The Romans saw themselves in charge, but Paul reminded the Colossians that Jesus was in charge not only of the Roman Empire but also of the entire universe. Nothing that happens is outside of Christ's control.

c. What do these claims mean to us today?

- **How does this affect the way we view world events today?**

World events can leave us anxious, so take the time to consider together how we might view such events, knowing that Christ controls everything. We can take comfort because we know that Christ is also in control of what happens in our individual lives. Things may look out of control sometimes, as in many times throughout history, but it is a comfort to know that God controls all of history.

2. Colossians 1:19-23

a. When Paul says we were alienated from God, what does he mean?

- **Why do we view ourselves as pretty good?**
- **What is the state of human beings without God?**
- **When we think of someone being evil, what comes to mind?**
- **Are we as bad as we could be? Why or why not?**

The Bible teaches that all humankind is sinful and therefore separated from God (Rom. 3:23). Alienation suggests that two parties are incom-

municado. There is a rift between them, and in extreme cases they might consider each other enemies.

Most of us view ourselves as pretty good. Some members in your group may have a hard time seeing themselves as being sinful and therefore alienated from God. Or if they feel alienated, it might be because they have moved away from God. It may be helpful to explore the phrase “enemies in your minds” (v. 21), or as another translation puts it, “hostile in mind.”

The root of sin is an attitude that we can live our lives without God, thinking we don’t need him. Even if we say we believe in God, our lives may be in a state of passive alienation, in which we experience life driven by our own desires and needs. We are, in a sense, “functional atheists” when we live as if God does not exist. The truth is that whether we live in blatant immorality (showing no regard for God’s commandments) or we think we can be righteous on our own, we are alienated from God (as discussed in Col. 2:20-23 as well). All of us need Jesus.

Some in the group may have a hard time seeing themselves as evil, or engaging in “evil behavior” (v. 21). That concept in their minds is reserved for terrorists, murderers, rapists, sexual abusers, and so on. It may be helpful to explain that we are not as bad as we could be. In fact, God’s common grace allows many people to live outwardly moral lives. Without God’s restraining hand, given the right circumstances, all of us have the potential to do great evil. Most people will admit that they fall short of even the standards they set for themselves. There are things about themselves they want to change but cannot.

Again, there is no reason to argue with any group member. Allow time for the truths of the Bible to sink in. Affirm what the Bible teaches, and encourage group members to express where they are spiritually, remembering that this process is different for each individual and that the Spirit will continue to work in each person’s heart.

b. What is reconciliation, and how was it accomplished by God?

- **What did Jesus do for us?**
- **Why did he have to die (shed his blood)?**
- **What kind of peace was accomplished?**

Reconciliation is the restoration of a relationship. Because we are imperfect and God is perfect, he provided a way by which we could come to him. Isaiah 53:4-6 prophesied how the Messiah would restore this relationship. Jesus, that Messiah, was the one who took on himself the punishment we deserved for our sin. You might take some time with your group to explore what this actually cost Jesus. How was Jesus' death a substitute for what we deserved? How are our lives changed by what he did for us?

Romans 5:1-2 presents the peace that we receive through Christ, and this is a spiritual peace between ourselves and God. This spiritual peace leads to our own emotional peace and even peace with others. John 14:27 can be a helpful reference in this discussion.

c. What does reconciliation mean to you?

Allow people to answer on the basis of where they are in their spiritual journey. Some may still feel alienated from God. Encourage them to see that God has reached out to them. The reason God became human in Christ was to die for our sins and provide a way for us to be reconciled with God.

d. What signs do you see of God's reconciling spirit in yourself or in others?

If you feel it will be valuable, invite group members to give examples from their own lives or examples they have seen in the lives of others. Even people groups have reconciled with one another through the power of Christ.

3. Colossians 3:5-11

a. How does our “earthly nature” harm us and our relationship with God and others?

• Why are all the sins of the earthly nature harmful?

Paul tells us to put to death all that “belongs to [our] earthly nature” (Col. 3:5). It is not difficult to see that the attitudes and actions listed in these verses would not bring full life and well-being. They all spring from selfishness and pride, which place us in opposition to God and others, alienating us to an existence of ongoing conflict, breakdown, and eventual destruction.

To help us identify the sins of our earthly nature, God gave us the Ten Commandments and other guidelines for living. But we are not able to follow those guidelines in our own strength. We must recognize that we need redemption through Christ and that we need his strength daily to put off our old nature and put on the new life he has prepared for us. New life in Christ leads us to seek God's power to change our behavior.

b. What does the phrase “being renewed in knowledge in the image of [the] Creator” imply?

Children imitate the actions and behavior of their parents and family members, and when we are brought into God's family by faith in Christ, we begin to take on the character traits of God our Father and Christ our Savior, becoming renewed in the personhood that people had before they sinned—reflecting fully the image of God in which humans were first created. You may also wish to note that some examples of these character traits are mentioned in Colossians 3:12-15 and will come up soon in your discussion.

c. What is the result of “being renewed in knowledge in the image of [our] Creator”?

- **What does it mean that Christ is all and in all?**
- **What does verse 11 say about prejudice? About unity?**

In a world full of divisions between nations and ethnic groups, as well as between genders and income levels and more, the wonderful promise is that as we take on more of the image of our Creator, barriers will break down. Worldly divisions become irrelevant when we are one in Christ.

These verses remind us that because Christ is “in all” (by way of the image of God in which we are all created) we must take care to treat all people with honor and respect. Otherwise it would be as if we were treating Christ with dishonor and disrespect. (See also Matt. 25:41-45.) Members of the church, the body of Christ, should always strive for unity and should work against prejudice. In fact, when people see unity and an acceptance of all people, they take notice because that is not common human behavior.

4. Colossians 3:12-15

a. What does it mean to be chosen, holy, and dearly loved?

- **How does it make you feel that God expresses himself to you in this way?**

In these verses Paul reminds the Colossians that God is a relational God who has reached out to them. God originally created them, and it was God who initiated their redemption and salvation. God chose them, set them apart (the meaning of the word *holy*), and loved them dearly. In this way verse 12 describes our status before God, and that status does not come from anything we have done. In fact, as Ephesians 1:4 indicates, even before the creation of the world God already chose us, loved us, and set us apart.

b. Describe what we are encouraged to be clothed with. Why are we to do this?

- **List the various traits of the new life we receive in Christ.**
- **How will we be different if these qualities operate in our lives?**

This section makes clear that because of all that God has done for us, we will be different than we were before we came to faith in Christ, and we will be different from the ways of the world around us. Like an outfit we can put on when we get dressed, we are to clothe ourselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” The *Reformation Study Bible* points out that each of these attributes “can be traced to the character of God generally or Christ specifically. This demonstrates how literally Paul understood the idea of believers taking on the ‘image’ of God.”

c. How would our communities be different if people lived this way?

Allow your group to imagine what a community would look like if all its leaders and inhabitants exhibited these qualities.

d. How can Christ’s forgiveness help us to forgive?

In verse 13 we are told to “bear with one another and forgive,” recognizing that Christ has forgiven us. For many people, forgiveness is difficult or almost impossible under some circumstances. In addition, people are sometimes confused about forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration.

If it would be helpful, refer back to your earlier discussion of this topic in lesson 5. Dan Allender, writing in *Discipleship Journal*, explains forgiveness this way:

Perhaps the best place to start understanding what forgiveness is all about is to look at the way God forgives. God's forgiveness is a passionate movement of *strength* and *mercy* toward us, the offenders. His bold strength is the force of his holiness which will not rest until all sin is destroyed and his glory shines as the sun. His bold mercy constantly beckons us to return to his embrace, a place of rest and joy. He forgives our sin, but strongly moves to destroy the cancer within us that limits our joy and vitality. . . . He fully faces the damage we have done while offering us a taste of kindness intended to lead us to repentance and reconciliation.

After we experience God's forgiveness, we can begin to forgive others. Allender describes the process of forgiveness this way: "To forgive another means to cancel a debt in order to provide a door of opportunity for (1) repentance and (2) restoration of the broken relationship." It is important to notice that when we forgive, we are providing the open door. The other party has to walk through that door with a repentant heart in order for restoration to occur.

If any group members are struggling to forgive someone, they may find these words helpful (from the *Sonship* discipleship course): "The gospel means that the debts which you are incapable of dealing with out of your own meager resources are well within the resources of our big-hearted Father. You have all you need in him to become a more and more radically forgiving son or daughter." As with all the things we desire to change, we can go to God with our lack of forgiveness and ask him for the strength to forgive. The one who has forgiven us will surely work in us through his Spirit to help us forgive. Philippians 4:13 may be a helpful reference in this discussion.

5. Colossians 1:3-5

- When you think of "the hope stored up for you in heaven," what comes to mind?*
- What do you think about when you hear the word "heaven"?**

This question will help you know what group members feel about heaven. Listen to their input, and acknowledge that much of what we hear talked about today is speculative. Yes, there are people who have had near-death experiences and have even claimed to return from heaven, but these are their experiences. Instead of spending a lot of time in speculation, it will be more fruitful to refer to what the Bible teaches about heaven.

The hope Paul is referring to is not wishful thinking but the certain promise of eternal life in God's presence for all who believe in Christ. The gospel of John records Jesus' astounding claim that he is the resurrection and the life and is therefore the one who can promise people eternal life (John 11:25-26). In the book of Revelation, John also has much to say on what heaven will be like. It is the place where God will dwell among his people (21:3) and wipe every tear from our eyes (21: 4); "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (21:4), and God will make everything new (21:5). John goes on to describe heaven with images of incredible beauty and abundance (see Rev. 21:18-21; 22:1-5). In addition, the imagery in Revelation 19:9 of a wedding party (the marriage supper of the Lamb) indicates that heaven will certainly not be dull or boring but joyful and exciting. Isaiah 25:6-8 is another helpful reference; here the prophet Isaiah writes about the end of time, when God will destroy death and prepare a banquet for his people.

Tim Keller, commenting on our hope of heaven in his book *The Prodigal God*, says,

Jesus, unlike the founder of any other major faith, holds out hope for ordinary human life. Our future is not an ethereal, impersonal, form of consciousness. We will not float through the air, but rather will eat, embrace, sing, laugh, and dance in the kingdom of God, in degrees of power, glory, and joy that we can't at present imagine.

- b. *How does the existence of heaven affect our life right now?*
 - **How does heaven affect our choices?**
 - **How does it affect our desire to make things better on earth?**
 - **How does the hope of heaven change suffering?**

The reality of heaven dramatically changes the way we live our life on earth. In Colossians 1:5, Paul indicates that faith and love spring from the hope of heaven. Because there is hope for a joy-filled future in heaven—that is, in God’s presence—gratification can be delayed, and sacrificial love can be a part of our everyday existence. Those who suffer in this life have the comfort that God will one day wipe away every tear. Even the fear of death is diminished because Christ promises to prepare a place for us. John 14:1-3 can be a helpful reference in this discussion.

Taking It Home

- a. How do we receive a new life in Christ?*
- b. What have you heard God saying to you through this lesson?*
- c. In what ways has this lesson helped to clarify the gospel message for you?*

The various passages covered in this lesson present the richness of the gospel message. Use these questions to help group members reflect on how God has been connecting with them through Scripture and through your discussion together. Pray that everyone will come away with a better understanding of what the new life in Christ means to them. Be sensitive to group members who may still be exploring the meaning and implications of the gospel message. Follow up with anyone who may need to ask more questions, perhaps in a one-on-one setting.

For Further Study

John 1:1, 14, 18

Romans 3:23

Isaiah 53:4-6

Romans 5:1-2

John 14:27

Matthew 25:41-45

Ephesians 1:4

Philippians 4:13

John 11:25-26

Revelation 19:9; 21:3-5; 21:18-21; 22:1-5

Isaiah 25:6-8

John 14:1-3

An Invitation

Listen now to what God is saying to you.

You may be aware of things in your life that keep you from coming near to God. You may have thought of God as someone who is unsympathetic, angry, and punishing. You may feel as if you don't know how to pray or how to come near to God.

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5). Jesus, God’s Son, died on the cross to save us from our sins. It doesn’t matter where you come from, what you’ve done in the past, or what your heritage is. God has been watching over you and caring for you, drawing you closer. “You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13).

Do you want to receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord? It’s as simple as A-B-C:

- **Admit** that you have sinned and that you need God’s forgiveness.
- **Believe** that God loves you and that Jesus has already paid the price for your sins.
- **Commit** your life to God in prayer, asking the Lord to forgive your sins, nurture you as his child, and fill you with the Holy Spirit.

Prayer of Commitment

Here is a prayer of commitment recognizing Jesus Christ as Savior. If you long to be in a loving relationship with Jesus, pray this prayer. If you have already committed your life to Jesus, use this prayer for renewal and praise.

Dear God, I come to you simply and honestly to confess that I have sinned, that sin is a part of who I am. And yet I know that you listen to sinners who are truthful before you. So I come with empty hands and heart, asking for forgiveness.

I confess that only through faith in Jesus Christ can I come to you. I confess my need for a Savior, and I thank you, Jesus, for

dying on the cross to pay the price for my sins. Father, I ask that you forgive my sins and count me as righteous for Jesus' sake. Remove the guilt that accompanies my sin, and bring me into your presence.

Holy Spirit of God, help me to pray, and teach me to live by your Word. Faithful God, help me to serve you faithfully. Make me more like Jesus each day, and help me to share with others the good news of your great salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Evaluation Questionnaire

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As you complete this study, please fill out this questionnaire to help us evaluate the effectiveness of our materials. Please be candid. Thank you.

Was this a home group ___ or a church-based ___ program?

What church? _____

1. Was the study used for

- ___ a community evangelism group?
- ___ a community faith-nurture group?
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2. How would you rate the materials?

Study Guide: excellent very good good fair poor

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3. What were the strengths?

4. What were the weaknesses?

5. What would you suggest to improve the material?

6. In general, what was the experience of your group?

Your name (optional) _____

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Other comments: