



Colossians - Chapter Four

VI. Colossians 3:1-4:6 - Instructions on Living the Christian Life (continues/concludes)

VI.b Colossians 3:18-4:1 - Rules for Christian Households (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

The concluding section of each of Paul's letters contains his benediction, typically expressed as a prayer or doxology. Ancient writers usually added various greetings, specific instructions and general exhortations to their closings. Paul is no different, although he baptises these literary conventions with the distinctive phrases of his Christian ministry. Appropriately then, Paul's goodbye to the Colossian believers includes exhortations concerning their evangelistic work (vv.2-6), and internal relations (vv.7-17), before concluding with his benedictory doxology (v.18).

While this concluding passage has an eye to the situation facing his Colossian readers, it actually falls outside of the letter's main body, where Paul addresses the audience's spiritual crisis more directly and pastorally. Therefore, these verses should not be understood as part of Paul's polemic against his opponents. They rather reflect his general interest in the spiritual well-being of any church under his care, regardless of the particular problems they might be facing. His exhortations in this letter's benediction convey a universal message, equally valid for any church. Yet this passage is also interesting because it provides a window into earliest Christianity and offers an intriguing model that clarifies the dynamics of church life.

¹ Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

This verse was commented on at the end of the previous chapter.

VI.c Colossians 4:2-6 - Further Instructions

Paul calls all Christians to a lifestyle of constant prayer and provides instructions as to how they should live their lives within the community.

² Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.

Colossians 4:2

Devote yourselves to prayer. Paul is not so much issuing a command to this relatively young church but equipping them to be released to serve God by understanding the problems they face, seeking God in their midst and then responding in the way he will inevitably guide them as a response to their prayers: *<<You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name>>* (John 15:16). Jesus had encouraged his disciples to earnestly and persistently pray: *<<Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart>>* (Luke 18:1).

Keeping alert in it. Jesus likewise admonished his disciples to watch and pray: *<<Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak>>* (Mark 14:38), so that they would not fall into temptation.

Thanksgiving leavens prayer, so that it does not become merely a selfish pleading to have one's desires fulfilled: *<<Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures>>* (James 4:1-3).

³ At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, ⁴ so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

Colossians 4:3-4

Pray for us. Paul has always known the power of prayer, not just his own but that of the whole church. He asks others to pray for him and his team because he knows that God answers prayer and that it is a discipline which helps to grow the faith of those engaged in it. He had asked the Roman church to pray for his impending visit to Jerusalem for just this reason, knowing that he would face difficulties: *<<I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judæa, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company>>* (Romans 15:30-32).

Many in church leadership can take heart in the way the great apostle Paul can call upon ordinary church members to take on the responsibility for such

works. Most people feel valued to be asked to do things by their leaders and will respond to the call. Leadership is about equipping and releasing people. All believers have a number of spiritual gifts that they should be encouraged to use in their work for God. However, all of them are equal in the sight of God when it comes to asking him to help the work of the church locally and globally.

That God will open to us a door for the word. In spite of his imprisonment and difficult circumstances, Paul asks the Colossians to pray that he will have opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ: <<*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak*>> (Ephesians 6:18-20), and: <<*Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:1). Christians should pray for missionaries and church leaders around the world.

An open door is a metaphor for evangelistic opportunities: <<*But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries*>> (1 Corinthians 16:8-9), and: <<*When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord*>> (2 Corinthians 2:12). Jesus confirmed that God will provide such opportunities to those who ask: <<*So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened*>> (Luke 11:9-10).

Such an open door could simply refer to the preparation of the Holy Spirit in people so that their hearts and minds are ready to hear and receive the Gospel when it is proclaimed to them. Part of this preparation are the prayers of the person bringing the word, with a key part being the prayer of the church that such a person will be suitably equipped for the task and that those listening will be receptive to it. Prayer is a partnership of mutual obligation within the church.

Paul had never met the majority in this church but because he has been praying for them, and he now believes that they will be praying for him, then he knows that a real bond will form the relationship of trust and love that is essential for the church to truly flourish.

To declare the mystery does not refer to something mysterious or to a secret ritual. Rather, Paul is speaking of God's unfolding plan for the world and, above all, his plan of redemption through Christ: <<*and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ*>> (Ephesians 3:3-4), and: <<*To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*>> (Colossians 1:27).

For which I am in prison. Paul, like Jesus, was never convicted of any criminal offense. It was Asian Jews in Jerusalem that had initially gotten him arrested:

<<When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd. They seized him, shouting, 'Fellow-Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place'>> (Acts 21:27-28). Although they had presented their case before governors Felix and Festus in Caesarea, they made no representation at his eventual trial before Nero four or five years later, which resulted in Paul's eventual release.

To cover up his crime of burning the city of Rome to make way for his new building programme, Nero blamed the Christians, who were subsequently persecuted with thousands of them dying. Although details of their arrest and trials are vague, it is accepted that both Paul and Peter were victims of Nero during this time, both being executed in the mid-60's.

So that I may reveal it clearly. It is not a secret Gospel and must always be declared clearly and publically. Nothing is to be hidden: <<Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret'>> (John 18:20).

⁵ Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

Colossians 4:5-6

Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders. The word outsiders generally refers to non-Christians: <<For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside. 'Drive out the wicked person from among you'>> (1 Corinthians 5:12-13), and: <<But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one>> (1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12). Therefore, Paul encourages the Colossians to manifest a powerful and attractive testimony to non-Christians. In rabbinical use, however, it may include believers who stand outside correct teaching. Perhaps Paul has both groups in mind, including those persuaded by the false teachers along with the lost of the world, since the ministry of evangelism includes both. Moreover, he would have been especially concerned about the negative effect immature believers have on the lost.

Let your speech always be gracious. Paul may have mentioned grace to link human graciousness, a characteristic of effective communication, with divine grace. In this sense, the Gospel of God's saving grace will find its audience through a Gospel ministry characterised by a generous civility: <<As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience>> (Colossians 3:12). The spiritual triumphalism that some evangelists exemplify today not only fails to edify the church but fails to attract an unsaved audience as well.

Seasoned with salt. This statement echoes the teaching of Jesus when he called his disciples to be the salt of the earth: <<*You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot*>> (Matthew 5:13). To be seasoned with salt, which is a preservative, is to add flavour to food. When applied to conversation, the metaphor suggests speaking in an interesting, stimulating and wise way. Paul's comments assume that the Colossian believers are vitally involved in the local community and have ample opportunities to interact with **outsiders** in a way that would commend the Gospel to them.

The meaning of the final phrase: **so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone**, depends on whether it expresses the result of 'gracious and salty' proclamation or describes its occasion. Probably the latter option fits this context best. The believer who makes the most of every opportunity finds a 'gracious and salty' answer for every sincere query or malicious challenge facing the church.

VII. Colossians 4:7-18 - Final Greetings and Benediction

After commending the letter carriers to the Colossians, Paul extends greetings to this church from the ministry associates who are with him during his imprisonment.

VII.a Colossians 4:7-9 - Remarks about the messengers carrying the letter

Paul extols the virtues of Tychicus and his travelling companion Onesimus, providing the reason for their visit.

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow-servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts;

Colossians 4:7-8

Tychicus was a native of the Roman province of Asia who had become a Christian and was a member of Paul's ministry team: <<*He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, by Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, by Gaius from Derbe, and by Timothy, as well as by Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia*>> (Acts 20:4). He would carry this letter, as well as those to the Ephesians and Philemon, bringing them news about Paul and his situation.

Will tell you all the news about me. The journey by land and sea from Rome to Colossæ via Ephesus would have been both arduous and adventurous. Yet Paul is confident that Tychicus will bring news of the situation in Rome rather than dwell on his own stories. After all, Paul was their apostle and news of his perseverance during a time of trial was of far more benefit to the church, as Paul describes in **I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts.**

⁹ he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

Colossians 4:9

Onesimus was Philemon's converted bondservant whose story is revealed in Paul's letter to Philemon. It is also confirmed that he was a native of the region, i.e. who is one of you. As with the comments about Tychicus, Onesimus will also report on the situation in Rome, which will help to strengthen the bond that Paul has already established with his request for their prayers in v.3.

VII.b Colossians 4:10-14 - Greetings from Paul's associates

Paul offers the greetings from those who are with him in Rome as he writes this letter to the Colossians. Why Timothy is omitted is not known but Paul does refer to him in the opening verse of the letter.

¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow-prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you, welcome him. ¹¹ And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

Colossians 4:10-11

Aristarchus was a Macedonian: <<He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, by Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, by Gaius from Derbe, and by Timothy, as well as by Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia>> (Acts 20:4), who was caught up in the Ephesian riots: <<The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travelling-companions>> (Acts 19:29). He travelled with Paul from Caesarea to his Roman prison: <<Embarking on a ship of Adramyttium that was about to set sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica>> (Acts 27:2), and was either arrested or chose to remain with Paul as if he too were a fellow-prisoner for the Gospel. He was also referred to by Paul in the letter to Philemon: <<Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers>> (Philemon 23-24).

Mark the cousin of Barnabas is actually the nephew of Barnabas and is the same person as John Mark, who had accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey and suddenly departed: <<Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem>> (Acts 13:13), and over whom Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement: <<The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus>> (Acts 15:39). Paul's perspective of Mark has decidedly changed, probably corresponding to a change in Mark himself. Now Mark has been reconciled to Paul and is ministering to him and on his behalf.

Mark is the accepted author of the second Gospel, which he wrote probably on behalf of Peter, having worked as his secretary in Italy: <<Your sister church in

Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark>> (1 Peter 5:13).

Concerning whom you have received instructions. It is not known what these instructions were or how they were communicated to the church. It could have been written in a different covering letter or possibly by way of verbal instruction.

If he comes to you, welcome him. It seems that it had not yet been decided if Mark should make the journey with this letter, or perhaps a separate visit was in the planning stages. By the time that Paul was again in prison then Mark was probably in Ephesus with Timothy as can be seen in 2 Timothy 4:11, referenced again in the comments on Luke in v.14.

Five of the people mentioned in these greetings are the same five that Paul mentions in Philemon 23-24, with the addition here of Jesus who is called Justus, about whom nothing else is known.

The last three are identified as men of the circumcision, indicating that they are Jewish Christians. These men must have been of particular comfort to Paul for he had faced such venomous opposition from the Jews wherever he went, and even those who had come to faith held views of the Gospel that were often radically different to Paul's. To have men that both understood the traditions of Judaism and the true freedom that is now found in Jesus the Messiah would have offered strong support and comfort for Paul, relieving some of the isolation he must have felt during his time of imprisonment and the persecution by his own countrymen.

Bishop Tom Wright concludes: 'It is a comfort to him. Paul was not, as people often make out, an arrogant man, cocksure in his own rightness. He was deeply human, and this mention of one comfort of this sort reminds us just how many conflicting emotions he must have had to cope with, living the life he did and facing new challenges and dangers every day'.

¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. ¹³ For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

Colossians 4:12-13

Epaphras was discussed in the comments made on Colossians 1:7 and in Philemon 23 is described as a fellow-prisoner. Epaphras' love and prayers for the Colossians and Christians in its nearby cities is an example for all believers. The phrase who is one of you confirms that he was a fellow Colossian.

A servant of Christ Jesus. Paul acknowledges that Epaphras, like Tychicus and Onesimus (vv.7-9), held a similar status of servanthood to his own: <<***Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God***>> (Romans 1:1), as well as others: <<***Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries***>> (1 Corinthians 4:10), and: <<***Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus***>> (Philippians 1:1a). This was a similar

position held by the other NT writers as well: <<*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings*>> (James 1:1), <<*Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ*>> (2 Peter 1:1), and: <<*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ*>> (Jude 1).

He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf. Although Epaphras was in Rome, his heart and his spirit were with the church in his home region. The language used by Paul shows that his prayers were much more than a cursory thought for their well-being, but formed a sustained call on God to strengthen and grow the regional church according to his will, i.e. so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. Paul authenticates this with his personal testimony to the commitment of Epaphras.

Laodicea and Hierapolis were neighbouring towns to Colossæ in the Lycus Valley. Laodicea was discussed in comments made on Colossians 2:1.

Hierapolis, which is modern day Pamukkale, boasts a large mineral spring, famous also in Paul's day. However, much of what visitors see today dates from the rebuilding and expansion that occurred under Domitian (AD81-96) and later.

Hierapolis was known for the worship of Apollo, Leto and Pluto; yet inscriptions in the ancient cemetery also point to a Jewish presence.

According to church tradition, the apostle Philip, one of the twelve original disciples of Jesus, was martyred along with his family in the city for refusing to walk through the Domitian Gates, which would have acknowledged Domitian as his lord.



The Domitian Gates - Hierapolis

One of the important points to take from this model of sharing between different church groups is the idea that they are not expected to work in isolation but should come together in prayer for one another. This is often seen with churches that are established in multiple locations, but it should be encouraged to work just as well across denominations in the same locations. After all, Christ is the head on one church in many locations around the world.

¹⁴ Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.

Colossians 4:14

Luke, the beloved physician is the author of one of the Gospels and the Book of Acts. He is mentioned by Paul in other letters: <<*Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry*>> (2 Timothy 4:11), <<*and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers*>> (Philemon 24). He accompanied Paul on some of his journeys, as recorded in the 'we' sections of Acts, e.g. <<*We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived*

*with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind was against us, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone>> (Acts 27:7), and was apparently with Paul throughout his two-year imprisonment in Cæsarea, followed by his two-year Roman imprisonment and what was probably his second and final Roman imprisonment that ended in Paul's execution. The fact that Luke is not identified among <<**the only ones of the circumcision**>> (vv.9-11), confirms he was a Gentile.*

Lamentably, Demas later followed worldly pursuits and deserted Paul: <<**for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica**>> (2 Timothy 4:10a).

VII.c Colossians 4:15-17 - Greetings to the Christians in Laodicea

Paul offers his greetings to the nearby church in Laodicea, asking that this letter be passed on to them as well.

¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Colossians 4:15

Nympha and the church in her house. Early Christian churches, since they were small and since Christianity was not recognised as a legitimate or legal religion, met in homes: <<**Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue**>> (Acts 18:7), and: <<**Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house**>> (Romans 16:3-5a). There is extensive archæological evidence from many different cities showing that some homes were structurally modified to hold such churches.

¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.

Colossians 4:16

When this letter has been read among you. Public reading in the churches points to the authority of Paul's letters and also assumes that they were written to be understood by all believers, not just the church leaders.

Have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans is another indication that the Gospel and its subsequent teaching is meant to be shared with others and not just held within individual gatherings.

The letter from Laodicea. Although some have thought this might be a reference to Ephesians, understood to be a circular letter, with Laodicea as one of its destinations, or a letter from the Laodiceans to Paul, it is probably best to take it as a reference to a letter Paul wrote to Laodicea that is now lost.

¹⁷ And say to Archippus, 'See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.'

Colossians 4:17

Archippus may have been the son of Philemon and Apphia: <<*To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house*>> (Philemon 1b-2).

See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord is never expanded on in scripture but it is clear that the local church knew what Archippus had been called to do and is called here to account to ensure it is fulfilled. Timothy had received a similar instruction from Paul: <<*Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders*>> (1 Timothy 4:14).

VII.d Colossians 4:18 - Letter closing

Paul concludes this letter with a personal touch, as he so often did.

¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Colossians 4:18

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. If Timothy has so far been functioning as Paul's secretary to whom he dictates the letter (1:1), Paul now takes the stylus and signs the letter personally, as he does elsewhere: <<*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand*>> (1 Corinthians 16:21), <<*See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!*>> (Galatians 6:11), and: <<*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Remember my chains. Paul ends his letter by asking the Colossian Christians to remember his Roman imprisonment before the Lord, not necessarily asking for his release but using it as an encouragement to others for faithful service.

Grace be with you is perhaps one of the greatest blessings anyone could wish upon other people or the church generally. Paul used it elsewhere too, including: <<*Grace be with all of you*>> (Titus 3:15b); as did the author of Hebrews: <<*Grace be with all of you*>> (Hebrews 13:25).

Many of the manuscripts that have been recovered have the subscript 'Written from Rome to the Colossians by Tychicus and Onesimus'. However, these may well have been copies of the original made either in Rome before they travelled to Asia or once they had arrived. Copies would normally be made in order to share them around as many house churches as possible.

The greetings at the close of Paul's letters, and there are more here than in some probably because Paul did not personally know the Colossians and wanted to be sure to bind them in love and fellowship, serve as constant reminders of what the Gospel is all about. Three things stand out:

1. The Gospel is not about abstract ideas but about people.
2. In Jesus the Word became flesh.
3. The God who is the main subject of the Gospel is known supremely as the God of love.