

## Introduction

Grab your Bibles and open them up to Colossians 4...the end. Today we finish the Book of Colossians, our first complete book since we became a church. I will end the same way I started, by reminding you that this is a letter, written by a real person: Apostle Paul, at a real time: about 60 AD, to real people: the church at Colossae. Now the reason why this is important is because today we are going to hit one of those stretches of Scripture that have lots of names, personal details, and it is very easy for us to just skim past this stuff to get to the meat. But in the same way that the introduction to the letter gave us the foundation that we needed to understand the rest, the closing will produce for us a clearer picture of the context that this letter was written. I am hoping that today we can bring alive the people who made up the first century church.

## CLOSE

But we'll start at the end. The very last verse of the book reads:

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

Paul ends the same way he started, by identifying himself. And wishing them grace. Because if we know anything about Paul, it is that everything in his life flows from the grace of Jesus Christ. In everything that he says, whether it be issuing a command, describing himself, even in calling out false doctrine...his words are layered with the fact that God is everything. God has done everything. *I am the worst of sinners*, he says, yet *I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me*. The grace of God is the plumb line of His life. It is his constant (for Lost fans). It's where he begins and where he ends: GRACE BE WITH YOU.

He adds two things.

1. Paul says: I WRITE THIS GREETING IN MY OWN HAND. This shows his affection for these people. This is not some form letter that he is putting his name to. This is a personal letter directly from his desk of the Apostle Paul.

I remember when I was a kid and I had to write a letter to the president about something (I don't remember what the issue was). And I was so excited to get a letter back. The president had sent ME a letter. He even signed it with blue ink on the bottom so that I knew it was real. Until my brother also got a letter and the signature was exactly the same and in the same place, I knew it wasn't. That changed it. It no longer meant what it had before. It had been this special, personal note, meaning that the president had taken time out of his busy schedule to focus specifically on me. Now, I was just a form letter recipient. This was just a sheet of paper that MAY have at one time been somewhere in the vicinity of Washington DC. Paul says, this is from me directly!

2. Paul says: REMEMBER MY CHAINS. Paul is writing this letter from prison. He is actually, from what we know about Roman imprisonment, probably chained to a Roman guard as he writes. But his call for them to remember does not come from a desire for them to honor the great sacrifice he has made. He is not desiring that they become so focused on what he is doing, on his chains, that they fail to do their part. Instead, as he has done over and over again, he is connecting his chains to the suffering of Jesus Christ AND to the people the church. He is calling them to:

*share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.*

Remember my chains, the sacrifice that I made to spread the gospel, and then DO LIKEWISE. Join in the work. Do your part. Let the grace of God so permeate your life that you are chained to Jesus Christ, clinging to His cross desperately. Not fearing the chains of this world.

Now Paul gets to this ending after a long description of people who are sharing in the suffering for the gospel. He lists and describes people, some in Rome with him, some spread out, who have experienced grace and joined in. we are going to spend a few minutes looking at these people. Because this is a very interesting collection of characters. They come from different places, they have completely different gifts, they serve very different roles within the first century church, BUT they are united. They are the body of Jesus Christ. Arms, legs, eyes, and colons...they are all serving their function, doing what needs to be done for the sake of the mission. Here is Paul's description of a healthy ministry:

### **The cogs in the machine**

*Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*

*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see*

*that you also read the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."*

So who are these guys:

**Tychicus: beloved brother; faithful minister; fellow servant (2 Timothy 4.12)**

The fact that he is described by so many names makes sense. We see this man popping up here and there in the New Testament, and it seems like every time he is doing something different.

1. He serves as Paul's right hand man for a time, but steps back when Paul needs to focus energy on training someone specific: Timothy, Titus.
2. He is offered as pastoral support. In both the book of Timothy and Titus we see him being sent so that these men can come to Paul. He stays in Ephesus and Crete so that those men are freed up to visit Paul in prison.
3. in this case we see that he is a messenger. He is the man tasked with transporting this letter from Rome to Colossae.

Now put yourself in this guys shoes for just a moment. From what we know he has served faithfully and without desire for gain. For years. He watched other brothers, men that he loved and served with put into positions of power and respect. And Tychicus kept on serving. And now, he is nothing more than a messenger, a guy tasked with carrying a letter.

I mean, traveling was not as simple as packing a bag and having a ticket. People died... often. It would require crossing much of Italy on foot and then sailing across the Adriatic Sea. Yet here is a guy who has been traveling with Paul, who shipwrecked a few times himself, and is now being sent all over the known world to be intern pastor and glorified postman. But from what we see of his character, this is not a problem. He is faithful. And God will bless his faithfulness by allowing him to be the one who transports THE WORD OF GOD.

Sometimes those things that seem like menial tasks aren't. Those roles in the church that seem like secondary are actually being used by God as something much greater. Paul says that he is specifically being sent to bring encouragement to their hearts, and I know that the people in my life who have the character of Tychicus have brought me more encouragement than I can express. There are people in this church right now who have the gift of being encouraging servants for the Lord. Your work may not always be recognized, but it is always necessary.

**Onesimus: faithful and beloved brother; one of you (Philemon 15-16)**

We know a lot about because he is the a main character in the book of Philemon (which would have been carried by these men at the same time). Onesimus was a slave who served Philemon. He ran away, he committed some sort of a crime, fled to Rome for hiding, met Paul, and was no being sent back to Philemon. His return was not as a slave, but as a brother.

In Onesimus we see the power of the gospel to change someone. His life is a mirror of the gospel. He was once was a slave, not just to a master (Philemon) but also to his sinful desire. Now, he is returning on equal footing. No longer as a slave in this world, but also free from the shame and torment of his former life. He is part of the fellowship, a fellow heir, A BROTHER.

The church needs to experience continual transformation. We need to have people who are having their lives changed dramatically, so that we can all be reminded of what the heart of the gospel really is. So that we can view the small, slow changes in our life with the excitement and awe with which we experience people being changed for the first time.

**Aristarchus: fellow prisoner (Acts 19.29)**

The first time we here of this Aristarchus, he is being dragged by an angry mob. In Acts 19, Paul is in Ephesus and is preaching against false religion including the worship of idols. But false religion is, much like today, big business. A metalworker, named Demetrius, a man whose wealth is suffering at the hands of Paul's teaching, starts a riot. Paul escapes, but we see poor Aristarchus caught and dragged into the theater. Usually when Christians are brought into a theater, it isn't to hear a sermon preached. The intent was death. And he avoids it.

Aristarchus is not done suffering. He stays by Paul's side and now we read that he is imprisoned with Paul in Rome. He continues to follow, even as the going has been tough. It is almost as if he has taken a vow similar to what we do in a marriage ceremony: in rich and poor, in sickness and health, you could add in times of joy and times of suffering.

The church needs co-sufferers. People who do not see their own struggles as their own. People who are happy to carry their burdens alongside their brothers and sisters. People who take seriously the unity that we share as a redeemed family. Believing as Paul declares in **1 Corinthians 12**:

*if one member suffers, all suffer together (26).*

We know nothing of Aristarchus but that he suffered. And he suffered well.

**Mark: cousin of Barnabas (Acts 13.13)**

Mark, also known as John Mark, has a sorted past with Paul. In **Acts 13**, on the first missionary journey, we read that John Mark abandons Paul and Barnabus. This builds to a dispute between Paul and Barnabus that reaches a culmination in **Acts 15**, as they are preparing for their second journey.

*Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem.*

If you have been in church for any length of time, you have seen something similar to this. Mark had broken Paul's trust, but Barnabas was still committed to his cousin. So battle lines are drawn the two part ways, Barnabas and Mark head to Cyprus and Paul and Silas head to Syria. Usually, in churches that is the end of the story. If they happen to run into each other down the line, maybe shopping at Costco or getting coffee at Starbucks, there is that idle, cold-shouldered chit-chat that takes place.

How are things? Family good? I gotta go do something... Maybe you have been part of that in the past, maybe not. But there is certainly a strange dynamic between people who have been on mission together and then aren't. There is a strange animosity, not only to the person wronged, but also to anyone who happened to have drifted to that team. Paul's posse would have known who Mark is, and so he adds a further instruction: welcome him.

Mark had obviously reconciled with Paul. THAT IS THE GOAL for all who are in Christ. It would have been easy to stay on separate paths. To never feel the need to discuss the elephant in the room. To never go through the difficult process of restoring relationship. Instead, we see that Mark has, in whatever way, made peace with Paul. Their relationship has been renewed and Paul is urging all others in Colossae to also be reconciled to him.

The church is full of sinful people. We have wrong motives, say wrong words, we all mistakes. Some of those mistakes are easy to rectify, but sometimes they are not. Sometimes things happen within the church that drive a serious wedge between Christians. In those times, we need to be able to view our differences in the context of the cross. If Jesus Christ was able to, after a day of being beaten, spit on, and ridiculed, exclaim: forgive them; we can certainly make an effort to work through our differences, even if we may be right.

And it is strange to say that the church needs this...but we do. We need to have dysfunction, because it is in dysfunction that we are reminded that we are still suffering from the affects of sin; but as people who have risen with Christ, we also have the ability to respond to that sin in the appropriate way.

Justus (Jesus): **fellow worker for the kingdom of God**

It makes sense that a fellow worker with the name of Jesus would be called something else. You can imagine the confusion otherwise. Paul goes out of his way to describe Justus along with Mark and Aristarchus as the men of the circumcision, a good band name and a declaration that they were Jews. Paul was also Jewish, as a matter of fact he was the Hebrew of Hebrews, as he referred to himself. Paul was called to the very specific task, by Jesus Christ, to bring the Gentiles into the fold of God:

*he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel (Acts 9.15).*

But as Paul was to graft in the Gentiles, it was not at the expense of the Israelites. God did not tell him: I am going to move onto Gentiles now, I'm done with Israel. As we see Paul and his band of merry men traveling through Asia minor, we see them preaching to the Jews first, in the synagogues and then to the Gentiles. Now the reason I say all this is to make sense of why Paul would be singling out the Israelites among them. I believe it was because he derived a certain amount of comfort, in the midst of seeing thousands of Gentiles saved, that God was still with His people. Justus is a constant reminder to Paul that God is faithful. And in the church today, it is great to see new things happening. It is exciting to have new things happening, but there is something about those people who are comfortable. They have been there, they will be there, and they are a reminder that while God makes all things new, He also sustains!

#### Epaphras: **a servant of Jesus Christ**

Epaphras was the church planter of the Colossian church. So the people that Paul was writing to knew well who he was. He is now in Rome with Paul (a fellow prisoner in Philemon). He labors in prayer for them. The way that Paul describes Epaphras is similar to how Paul describes his own work earlier in Colossians.

Paul seems to view Epaphras with a great deal of respect. The way he talks about him, describes his ministry, and refers to him here and other places, Paul sees Epaphras as a faithful and loving pastor. A man who cares well for the flock that God has given him.

Sometimes what a leader of the church needs more than anything else is a co-laborer. A person who isn't necessarily giving a lot as an encourager, or taking a lot, but is simply working over there. Some of the people I have the most affection for in the ministry are not the people who are relationally closest to me, but the people who I don't feel like I need to keep close to me...as the old saying goes:

keep your friends close, and those you aren't sure about closer.

But that person over there is laboring hard for the kingdom of God, and every once and a while we get to sit down, relax and share war stories.

#### Luke: **beloved physician**

We know of Luke more as a writer than as a doctor. He was the author of two books of the Bible (Luke and Acts) and is known in his writing for intense focus on detail. It is this extreme attention to detail which made him useful to Paul as well. He traveled side by side with Paul as a personal physician. His job was to keep the Apostle alive and able to keep writing letters. He did not have to be a good preacher, just a good doctor.

The church NEEDS people who know how to do things. There are many tasks at the church that do not require a degree from seminary (including pastor, but don't tell). When it come to setting up the payroll, or building out the church space, or website layout, it requires people who know what they are doing. As the church, god has equipped each and every one of you. For some that may be a ministry of WORD, but for most it will be DEED. It is not any less of a service to the church to be serving the functional needs of the church. Rather than trying to fit your round self into a square hole: START WITH WHAT YOU KNOW HOW TO DO.

Demas:

Demas is an interesting case. He seems to be the one that got away. Here he is with Paul and in 2 Timothy we read:

*For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*  
**(2 Timothy 4.10)**

One of Paul's guys, one of his boys, has been sidetracked by the world. He has decided that the things of this world are more important than the mission of God. And every church has their Demas, or Judas (in the case of Jesus). It happens. It will happen to our church. Someone who we never expected, who seemed to be so centered on god will decide that it isn't worth it and move on.

Demas is certainly not given to us as an example, but as a warning. Much like Paul warned the Ephesian elders that wolves would arise from among the flock. People who seemed to be part of the mission will actually work against the mission. And when this happens, we need not be overcome with grief and wonder if God is really in control. Instead, we should wonder at the fact that God used a person who was not truly of the family to accomplish His work. So rather than God losing control of one who had been His, we understand that it is actually God having complete control, even of those who are not His.

Nympha: **church in her house**

This was a local expression of the church meeting in the house of Nympha. We know nothing about her, but Paul knew her. He must have stayed at her house at some point to have been familiar with this small church.

What we know about Nympha is that she had a house and that she shared it. She opened her doors so that fellowship could happen. Maybe they could have had church somewhere else, maybe not. Nympha is an example of how the blessings that we have been given by God can be leveraged for the sake of His kingdom. As Jesus remarked in **Luke 12.48:**

*Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required*

This verse is in the context of a discussion on stewardship. All Christians have been given much in Jesus Christ, but we have also been shown grace in this life in different portions. Some of you are rich...that is not a curse, but it is also not a right. It is a blessing to be used for the furtherance of the kingdom of God. Use your blessings to bless.

Archippus: **fellow soldier (Philemon)**

Archippus seems to be a local pastor in the region. He is someone that is actively involved in the ministry in the area of Colossae. Paul sends him not commendation, but a charge. He says:

*see that you fulfill the ministry that you have received from the Lord.*

This is really the charge for all of us. This same charge could be given to any of the other men and women that we have spoken of today. FULFILL THE MINISTRY THAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED FROM THE LORD. We all need to see ourselves as people who have received a ministry from the Lord.

This group of people was not just a list of 'people who helped Paul fulfill His ministry.' Instead, these are people who themselves were in ministry. See the difference. They were not part of Paul's team, they were part of Jesus' team who happened to interact with Paul. In the same way, every one of you are fellow soldiers. Every Christian has been made new so that they can work heartily for the Lord. Jesus takes our sinful broken lives, and he covers the bad parts, with Himself. He makes us righteous so that we can be His. And he transforms our sinful work into worship.

But in all of this changing, He doesn't make us all the same. He leaves those parts of you intact that He knit together in your mother's womb. And He empowers you, through His Spirit, to use those gifts for His glory. Just like we started Colossians, we are pointed to the fact that we no longer belong to this world. We have been purchased with the blood of Jesus, we have been given new identity, and we are now given a new mission to worship God by doing His work in this world. As Paul puts it in **I Corinthians 3:**

*For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*

The question is not can you do it? IT'S WILL YOU. Because I promise you that just as loving and trusting God gives us a return that far outweighs what we put into it, so does serving Him. Be an encourager. Be a fellow laborer. Be a servant. You have no idea how God can and will use you to affect the people, both Christians and non. What is your part in the kingdom? You don't have to look for some already existing position in the church, or take a test that tells you. BE WHO YOU ARE, WITH A HEART FOR HIM.