

Colossians 4:7–18

PAUL'S FINAL GREETINGS / 4:7–18

Paul often closed his letters by sending personal greetings from himself and others with him to individuals in the church to whom he wrote. After studying the intricacies of Paul's letters, we come to his final words and remember that he was writing to real people with real struggles. The names of various believers who helped and encouraged Paul give us an outline of Paul's relationships and his widespread ministry. Paul, as energetic and well known as he was, did not operate alone. Many men and women served the Lord by helping Paul in his ministry of spreading the gospel. Do you try to minister alone? How much better to use others' gifts and abilities to help get the job done.

4:7 **Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord.** Tychicus had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the collection for the church there (Acts 20:4). He later became one of Paul's personal representatives. Paul sent him to Ephesus a couple of times (Ephesians 6:21–22; 2 Timothy 4:12), and he sent him to Colosse with this letter for the Colossian church. Tychicus also may have been sent to Crete (Titus 3:12). Tychicus would give the believers news about Paul that Paul did not include in this letter. Paul trusted Tychicus, making good use of his freedom and faithfulness to continue the ministry of the gospel while Paul was imprisoned. As Paul had called himself a servant (1:23), so he called this brother a *fellow servant in the Lord*. Both men had the same Master and the same ministry.

GREAT LEADER, GREAT FOLLOWER

Joshua Chamberlain was one of the most respected soldiers in U.S. history. A professor of rhetoric and religion, he was wounded six times and cited for bravery in action four times. He received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his command of the Twentieth Regiment, Maine Volunteers, at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863. Yet he was only a colonel, not a general. Chamberlain followed as many orders from superiors as he gave to subordinates.

Paul cited Tychicus for leadership skills, or were they "followship" skills? Tychicus followed well—with love, faithfulness, and a servant's heart. He was a team player who made an impact, but not by independent action. Like Tychicus, be as eager to follow and to serve as you are to lead.

4:8 **I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.** In spite of the fact that Paul had never been to Colosse, he and the believers there had a bond because of their unity in Christ. This letter, bearing important information needed by the church in Colosse, was entrusted to a brother who would be sure to deliver it and ensure that its contents were understood. Paul's imprisonment had theological significance; the Colossians needed to understand that what happened to Paul and to the gospel should assure them of God's sovereignty and care. Paul also sent Tychicus to tell the believers how he was doing in prison and to *encourage* them. This personal letter and Paul's continued faithfulness to spread the gospel in spite of his imprisonment would encourage and strengthen the Colossian believers.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Nobody moves an inch by standing still and pondering the future. Life offers opportunities, risks, and challenges—but if you’re too afraid of losing or getting hurt, you’ll probably never get in the game.

Encouragement, which seems to be the chief mission of Paul’s emissary Tychicus, requires a leader willing to say, “Get going! Get moving! Follow me! Follow Christ! Keep it up! You’re doing a great job. Don’t lose heart!”

People all around you have potential to do more, and to be more, than they are. In Christ, who can set the limits? Perhaps your encouragement will fuel them with courage to try.

4:9 He is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here. Onesimus was a native of Colosse. He was a slave who had run away from his master, Philemon (an elder in the church at Colosse), and was saved through Paul in prison. The letter to the Colossians and the letter to Philemon were written at the same time and carried by these men back to Colosse. Paul referred to Onesimus as a dearly loved brother both here and in Philemon 16. Onesimus would accompany Tychicus and also bring news of Paul’s circumstances. Tychicus probably provided moral support to Onesimus as Onesimus returned to his master in hopes of being restored. He was also returning to the church, not merely as a fellow Colossian, but also as a fellow Christian.

4:10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you. Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and had accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey. He had been arrested, along with Gaius, during the riot at Ephesus (Acts 19:29). He and Tychicus were with Paul in Greece (Acts 20:4); Aristarchus had traveled to Rome with Paul (Acts 27:2). Paul also called Epaphras a “fellow prisoner” in Philemon 23, but it is likely that his words there may have simply been a metaphor of warfare or “captivity to Christ.” That Paul called Aristarchus a *fellow prisoner* may mean “captivity to Christ,” or it may mean that Aristarchus was in prison with Paul.

GRACE UNDER FIRE

Strength and loyalty are the virtues behind this quick greeting from Aristarchus. He had gone to jail with Paul for Christ’s sake, had stood up under the danger of riot at Ephesus, and had sailed with Paul to Rome to face imprisonment. Others might plea-bargain or claim that they acted under duress. Aristarchus would bear the cost of discipleship with cheerfulness and hope.

Faith that cares for others, that greets people never met, that sticks close to friends in trouble—because of Jesus—is worth finding, a treasure brighter than diamonds and just as tough. Jesus promises that we’ll find faith that stands firm under riots and threat of prison when we give him our whole heart.

As does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him. Mark (also called John Mark) was not yet well known among the churches, although apparently Barnabas was (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13). Mark had started out with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25), but had left in the middle of the trip for unknown reasons (Acts 13:13); he had returned home to Jerusalem. Barnabas was related to Mark, so when Paul refused to take Mark on another journey, Barnabas and Mark journeyed together to preach the Good News (Acts 15:37–41). Mark also had worked with Peter (Acts 12:12–13; 1 Peter 5:13). Later, Mark and Paul were reconciled (Philemon 24; see also 2 Timothy 4:11). Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. The words *concerning whom* refer to Mark. Apparently Paul wanted the Colossians to know that he had confidence in

Mark; instructions concerning Mark had already been conveyed by someone (what these instructions were is unknown). Apparently Mark was making good efforts to show himself to be an effective and productive worker. In any case, the Colossians were to welcome Mark if he were to arrive at their church.

4:11 **And Jesus who is called Justus greets you.** *Jesus* was a common Jewish name, as was the name *Justus* (which means “righteous”). But the phrase, *who is called*, serves to distinguish this Jesus from others with the same name.

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. It may be that Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus were the only ones among Paul’s fellow workers who were Jewish (as the niv translates this). Or the meaning could be more vague—that these men were “from the circumcised,” referring not to ethnic background, but to a special group of Jewish Christian missionaries called “the circumcision party” (see Acts 10:45; 11:2; 15:1–5; Galatians 2:12). Since Paul severely criticized the circumcision party, his words here may mean that these men came from that background. When they had joined with Paul in the ministry of the gospel, they had kept their zeal to reach the Jews for Christ.

SERVING ACROSS BORDERS

Jesus Justus was a Jew. Apparently he had kept up the mission to reach Jews, but still was supporting Paul, who reached Gentiles. Any good Jew of Paul’s day regarded Gentiles as lowlifes, dogs, dirt. Jews did not associate with those Gentiles. It was not proper. To like them was to be a pervert. The same could have been said at one time about Jews in Europe or blacks in the South or Indians on the western frontier. “Good people” kept their distance. Yet Jesus Justus was both a coworker and a comfort to Paul.

Who are your equivalent outcasts today? It’s “incorrect” to have any, but most people don’t live in the perfect social world of political correctness. Christ changes everything. In Christ, we love across boundaries and minister to people with habits and lifestyle preferences quite unlike our own. That’s how the church grows.

Could God be calling you to love and serve people you once abhorred, as Paul did the Gentiles? Might God want you to work at friendships with those not of your background or school of thought?

These men had proven to be *a comfort* to Paul. The word for “comfort” (*paregoria*) is used only here in the New Testament. It means comfort, relief, or consolation. Paul had been called as a missionary to the Gentiles, yet he had kept his concern for the lost of his own nation, Israel. Yet Paul’s very mission to the Gentiles had alienated him from many of his fellow Jews; thus, the hard work on behalf of the gospel by these faithful Jewish Christians was especially comforting to Paul.

4:12 **Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you.** Like Onesimus (4:9), Epaphras was *one of you*, that is, a Colossian. Epaphras may have been converted in Ephesus under Paul’s teaching, for Paul had stayed in Ephesus for three years, teaching and preaching (Acts 20:31). Epaphras, then, had returned to Colosse, his hometown, where he had founded the church there and probably the churches in Hieropolis and Laodicea as well (1:7; Acts 19:10). Later, he apparently visited Paul in Rome, perhaps to get the apostle’s advice on dealing with the false teachers. His report to Paul caused Paul to write this letter. Like Paul (1:23) and Tychicus (4:7), Epaphras was *a servant of Christ Jesus*, who had been responsible for the missionary outreach to these cities.

He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. Epaphras was a hero of the Colossian church, one of the believers who had helped

keep the church together despite growing troubles. His earnest prayers for the believers show his deep love and concern for them. The word for *wrestling* is the same word used in 1:29 and 2:1. It describes physical striving and conflict, as with an athlete in an arena. Just as Paul was struggling for the church in ministry, so Epaphras was struggling in intercessory prayer. Such descriptions indicate that prayer was not a one-time event, but a long-term labor requiring complete energy. Although away from the church, his ministry was always before him as he prayed for the congregation. He was doing what Paul had taught in 4:2–4. Epaphras’s prayers focused on the Colossian believers’ growth in the faith—that they would *stand mature* (“complete”) spiritually (as in 1:28; 2:2; 3:14) and be *fully assured* (filled with everything that is God’s will). We have already been filled with Christ, but we must go on to fulfill what has been given us. Such strength and assurance of faith will help believers of any time period stand against false teaching.

4:13 For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Epaphras wrestled in prayer, not only for the believers in Colosse, but also for those in the other cities in the Lycus Valley. Laodicea was located a few miles northwest of Colosse, also on the Lycus River, and was a stopover along the main road from the East to Ephesus. The city was named for Laodice, queen of Antiochus II. Hierapolis was about five miles north of Laodicea. Epaphras was truly a zealous missionary in this particular portion of the Roman Empire.

PRAYER WARRIOR

If you think prayer is too passive for such an energetic person as yourself, think of Epaphras, the prayer warrior.

If you think prayer is too isolated and individualistic for such a social creature as yourself, think of Epaphras.

If you think prayer accomplishes little more than venting frustrations to some cosmic ear, think of Epaphras, who wrestled in prayer.

This strong leader spent energy in prayer for people he loved, and God enriched their lives as a result.

Your prayers count. Don’t ignore the Christian’s unique invitation to address the heart of almighty God to pray for others. Pray often. Pray with passion.

4:14 Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. Luke had spent much time with Paul. He had accompanied Paul on most of the third missionary journey. He also remained beside Paul through this imprisonment, as well as Paul’s final imprisonment (see 2 Timothy 4:11). The good doctor certainly had helped with Paul’s health (especially after the beatings Paul received during his travels, as well as other ailments that plagued Paul in prison). Luke was also a prolific writer, authoring the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Since Paul had explained that the only three Jewish Christians with him were Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus, it has been assumed that Luke was a Gentile or a Greek-speaking Jew.

Apparently Demas was faithful at this time (see also Philemon 24), but later he deserted Paul “because he loved this world” (2 Timothy 4:10 niv).

4:15 Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. Paul turned his attention from sending everyone else’s greetings to sending his own. He asked that the Colossian church relay his greetings to the church (that is, to the *brothers and sisters*) in Laodicea (ten miles to the west). This gives an interesting sidelight to church life in the first century—it seems that the churches had fellowship with one another, as the sending of greetings and sharing of letters would indicate (4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). Another sidelight is the picture of believers meeting in private homes. It wasn’t until the middle of the third century that churches began to own property and build public places of worship.

So during this time, individual believers opened their homes for worship services. Here Paul greeted those who met in Nympha's home. In Colosse, the believers met in Philemon's house (Philemon 2). Lydia opened her home to the believers in Philippi (Acts 16:40). Gaius offered his home to the believers in Corinth (Romans 16:23). Aquila and Priscilla, a husband and wife team, opened their home while they lived in Rome (Romans 16:5) and in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19).

This verse has posed some interesting questions. The first question focuses on Nympha's name. The sex cannot be determined from the Greek form of the name, but scholars conclude that Nympha probably was a woman because the feminine pronoun *autais* ("her") appears in some ancient manuscripts. However, if Paul were greeting the brothers and sisters in Laodicea (thus, the church there), and if the church had been meeting in Nympha's house, why would he make a point to greet the church in Nympha's house? This would have been greeting the same people twice.

One answer is that within any particular local church, there were several smaller assemblies of believers meeting in various homes. Paul thus may have been greeting the entire church in Laodicea and then singling out one person (Nympha). This would be important as he laid the groundwork for a relationship with these believers whom he did not know. It is significant that the only other letter in which Paul named various believers in this manner is the letter to the Romans—also a church that Paul had not visited.

4:16 After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. After this letter had *been read* to all the believers in Colosse in a worship service, they were to send it on to Laodicea. Apparently the heresy was a problem for that church as well, and they needed Paul's advice and encouragement. This is another interesting sidelight to the life of the early church. At this time, no New Testaments had been assembled—indeed, most of the New Testament books were still being written. So the churches circulated these letters from Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:27), Peter (1 Peter 1:1), James (James 1:1), and other key Christian leaders.

The Colossians, in turn, were to read *the letter from Laodicea*. This was not a letter written by the Laodiceans; rather, it was a letter written to them that they were to pass on to Colosse. Most scholars suggest that the letter may have been the book of Ephesians because the letter to the Ephesians was to be circulated to all the churches in Asia Minor. It is also possible that there was a special letter to the Laodiceans, which we do not have. Paul wrote several letters that have been lost (for example, we know that there were probably four letters to the Corinthians, only two of which appear in the Bible). Or the letter may not have survived to be included in the New Testament because the church in Laodicea was later chastised for being "lukewarm" (Revelation 3:14–22). In any case, the important point is that Paul intended his letters to carry his apostolic authority. Thus they were carefully kept and eventually compiled with the complete New Testament.

4:17 And say to Archippus, "See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord." Paul's letter to Philemon is also addressed to Archippus (Philemon 2), where Paul called him a "fellow soldier." Archippus may have been a Roman soldier who had become a member of the Colossian church, or he may have been Philemon's son. In any case, Paul called upon the members of the church to encourage Archippus to complete some task that he had been given. Archippus may have been ministering to the church in Epaphras's absence and needed special encouragement in the job as he dealt with the false teaching. He may have been ministering in some specific capacity and needed to be nudged. Or he may have been involved in the acceptance of Onesimus on this newly converted slave's return to Philemon's household. In any case, Paul singled out Archippus for making sure his job was completed. Paul saw nothing wrong in challenging believers to attempt more in ministry and to go beyond their current level of achievement.

GET IT DONE

Paul encouraged Archippus to make sure that he completed the work he had received in the Lord. There are many ways for us to leave our work unfinished. We can easily get sidetracked morally, we can become exhausted and stop, we can get mad and quit, or we can let it slide and leave it up to others. We should see to it that we finish God's assignments, completing the work we have received.

4:18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Paul usually dictated his letters to a scribe, and he often ended with a short note in his own handwriting (see also 1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; Philemon 19). This assured the recipients that false teachers were not writing letters in Paul's name (as apparently had been a problem, see 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 3:17). It also gave the letters a personal touch, especially to this congregation Paul had never visited.

Remember my chains. Paul asked that the believers continue to pray for him during his imprisonment (see also 4:3, 10). This reference also reminded the believers that the letter had been written to them while he was in prison. Paul had been remembering them; he wanted them to remember that he was a prisoner for the gospel's sake, a gospel he would not stop preaching regardless of his chains. Indeed he had to continue, for his calling and apostolic authority would not allow him to stop. Paul was in prison because he refused to set aside one iota of his faith; he hoped that the Colossian believers would remember that when they encountered the false teachings.

Grace be with you. Just as Paul had begun his letter with "grace" (1:2), so he ended it with the benediction that the believers would continue to experience God's unmerited favor. Ultimately, God's grace would strengthen and defend the church.

To understand the letter to the Colossians, we need to realize that the church was facing pressure from a heresy that promised deeper spiritual life through secret knowledge. The false teachers were destroying faith in Christ by undermining Christ's humanity and divinity.

Paul makes it clear in this letter to the Colossian believers that Christ alone is the source of our spiritual life, the Head of the body of believers. Christ is Lord of both the physical and spiritual worlds. The path to deeper spiritual life is not through religious duties, special knowledge, or secrets; it is only through a clear connection with the Lord Jesus Christ. We must never let anything come between us and our Savior.

Life Application Bible Commentary Barton, B. B., & Comfort, P. W. (1995). Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (pp. 235–239). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.