

SLOW PAUL: THINKING THROUGH COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

Introduction

What exactly is *Slow Paul* trying to do? The Antarctic explorer Edward Wilson, who died with the other members of Scott's expedition in 1912, was a deeply thinking Christian man who took his New Testament with him to the South Pole and while on board the *Discovery* used to read it in the crow's nest high up on the mast in the early morning. He wrote to his sister: 'I believe my early morning readings are the secret of my own happiness in life. Read chiefly the NT ... *and write out what you think each verse means in your own words as you read it*' (George Seaver *The Faith of Edward Wilson* p14, italics mine).

This practice of recasting scripture freely in one's own words starts alarm bells ringing with some, but it has a long and honourable place in the Jewish tradition of *midrash*, where the writer (often fancifully) imports their own thoughts and ideas into the sacred text. I don't pretend to know much about the various genres of *midrash*, far less to have read any in the original. But they seem to have been a mixture of translation, paraphrase, commentary and meditation, while often preserving the persona of the original writer and trying to get at what was going on in that writer's own mind.

Thus *Slow Paul* attempts a loose, free-range recasting of the original text which tries to get at the mind of Paul by reproducing his thought processes as if in his own words. It seeks to bring to the surface the imagery latent within his words, the assumptions he may have been making and the logical steps in his argument he may be suppressing. This has involved stretching out the letter to many times its original length, and often departing from the strict and narrow path, rather like an off-piste skier cruising off the main track and exploring the countryside around while never quite getting completely lost.

There are anachronisms and phrasing that Paul couldn't possibly have used, though I have tried to hold these in check. Most of the imagery is derived from the picture-language explicit in the text or latent in Paul's mind. There are spasmodic cross-references to other parts of the Bible, including passages in Paul's letters that hadn't yet been written. It is an attempt to think with the grain of scripture; to bring out and make plain the underlying drift of meaning, without replacing scripture itself.

As for outside help, I ought to acknowledge that though I have tried to think through these chapters without consulting other works beforehand, I may consciously or unconsciously have drawn upon writers and teachers such as Dick Lucas (BST 1980), Tom Wright (1986 Tyndale commentary, 2004 *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*), John Barclay (2001), Ben Witherington III (2007), G K Beale and D A Carson (*Commentary on the NT use of the OT* 2007) and others. Needless to say, none of these should be held responsible for any distortions or misinterpretations in what follows. Since the letter's authorship, date and provenance cannot be universally agreed, the traditional view (that it is by Paul, writing from Rome in the early 60s AD to a church he had not personally visited) has been adopted; as to the 'Colossian heresy' that is being addressed, it is not the precise nature of the error, but the Christ-centred solution offered by Paul that is of abiding value.

The text of the *New International Version* (revised 2011) is printed at the head of each section for ease of checking back to an authorised translation. Those who have the original Greek may wish to refer to that. Section headings have been inserted, not to break the flow but to allow readers to catch their breath. If study questions are required, the reader is referred to the TISCA website (*Slow Food: Colossians and Philemon*) or to *TISCA News and Views* no 41, January 2007 for Colossians on its own.

Slow Paul versions of *Romans*, *Galatians* and *Ephesians* may be found elsewhere on the TISCA website.

THINKING THROUGH COLOSSIANS

1 ¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ² To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

1:1-2 A letter from God

[1:1-2] Dear believers in Christ Jesus at Colosse (and at Laodicea, if this letter gets to you as well – if not, there should be another missive doing the rounds),

Greetings from Paul and Timothy! Yes, God seems to want me (Paul) to carry on with this apostolic work I'm doing for Christ, and he's given me Timothy to help me out and provide Christian companionship in my imprisonment here. I can't get over how we are one great family, brothers and sisters together – we may be hundreds of miles apart, us in Rome and you in Asia Minor, but we're united by our faith in Jesus as Lord and King, and by our determination to live for him wherever we are.

I said it was Paul and Timothy greeting you, but of course it's much better than that. This is a letter from God himself, to whose family we have the privilege of belonging. It's only our Father who can steadily and consistently give you all the spiritual blessings you need: grace to cover all your sin and to enable you to persevere in your service for him, and peace to keep you reassured of the open access you have to his presence and love. This should save you (and us) from being anxious about anything whatsoever.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people – ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

1:3-6 Outflow of thanksgiving

[1:3] So it's to God the Father that Timothy and I direct my constant outflow of thanksgiving for you, the same God who heard and answered the prayers of his Son Jesus when he was on earth. We pray for you every day, now that Epaphras has told us all about you. [1:4] He's brought us news of the way your faith in Christ has become rock-solid, not just demonstrating a cold unfeeling orthodoxy, but brimming with warmth and practical tenderness towards each member of your fellowship and indeed to other groups of believers in your area. [1:5] Where has this faith and love come from? It must stem from the gospel preaching you received right from the beginning – when Epaphras stood up in your market-place and started talking about the kingdom of heaven, and how Jesus was God's Messiah and King, and how his death and rising to new life has guaranteed an eternal inheritance for us all. This was exactly the message you needed, and its ring of truth carried conviction to your minds and hearts.

[1:6] This is happening all over the place. You plant a single little seed and you get a whole orchard of fruit, and that orchard turns into a magnificent palace garden like the ones here on the Palatine Hill that I'm longing to be able to stroll through. I may not be able to travel very far at the moment, but the gospel is spreading like wildfire and taking root in more and more distant places, on its way to the ends of the earth. That's the news my visitors keep bringing me, and it's incredibly encouraging.

And I thought, you people in the Lycus valley, you're such fertile soil for God's grace to grow and spread. You know the difference between good and bad fruit in the market, you know the genuine article when you see it, and God has touched you and you've responded wholeheartedly. Praise him!

⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

1:7-8 Dependable go-between

[1:7] Well, as I said, this dear man Epaphras, your gospel-teller, is with me here and has been helping me in all sorts of ways. He is the Lord's totally dependable go-between bringing you and me together. [1:8] He tells me I'm not allowed to thank you for this gift you've lovingly sent me, so instead I'll thank the Holy Spirit for telling you exactly what I needed and for touching your hearts in such a practical way.

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,

1:9-11 A stream of precious gifts

[1:9] So you won't be surprised when I say that from the moment we heard your wonderful news, Timothy and I have been hard at work praying for you, badgering God to release a stream of precious gifts back in your direction. Don't think I'm issuing a set of strict commands under the guise of these requests. God is an all-or-nothing God. We think, oh, all I need is the occasional bit of help with the Christian life when I can't do it under my own steam. OK, says God, I'll stand back while you get on with it – and we fail miserably. The secret is to let him do everything from the inside. For instance....

Finding out what he wants us to do. This isn't a question of deciphering some mystical code or making a long pilgrimage to an oracle in the desert; it's getting topped up every day with his Holy Spirit, who is the Lord Jesus living in you and supplying you with all the wisdom you need. I'm not talking about human wisdom – you may be bright as buttons intellectually, shrewd financiers, political experts, whatever, but all that's useless in the spiritual realm. We are total novices in heavenly matters; we are completely dependent on the understanding that God alone can give, and the interesting thing is that my prayer support for you (and yours for me) is a vital part of God's supply-chain.

Quality of life

[1:10] The next thing is living a Christlike life. You will be hearing stories about Jesus being constantly let down by the blundering behaviour of his first disciples. Well, you're not going to do any better than they did – unless the Lord lives his life in you, and that's another of his priceless gifts. Jesus always did what brought a delighted smile to his Father's face. He longs to go on doing this in your daily life. The secret, then, of pleasing God is for him to give you his own Son's quality of life. I'm asking that for you.

Next, being a positive force for good. Imagine a bunch of travellers who've been trudging through a waterless desert for days and they come upon a delightful oasis where there are all manner of water-springs and fruit-bearing trees. You, members of Christ's church in Colosse or wherever, are that oasis. You will increasingly realise that the society you live in is mortally sick. It is here in Rome, I assure you! Well, God wants to give his people as means for healing and helping their communities. I'm asking him for you to be his oasis, his royal orchard, for the hungry and thirsty travellers all around you. Feel inadequate? You're meant to!

So I also want you to be growing. There's always more of God to discover. Just as a fruit-tree steadily extends its roots downwards and its branches upwards and outwards, enabling it to have more and more fruit-bearing capacity, so may you be deepening your appreciation of the love of the Lord Jesus,

ever more vividly realising the wonder of his divine grace and growing closer to him in the delight of his intimacy. This is the true wisdom, and it takes time, and he's promised it to us.

More heavenly resources

[1:11] Then the gift of strength. When you join Jesus' army you make deadly enemies. You are invading an alien kingdom and you are going to need capability in attack and in defence. This capability isn't going to come from yourselves, it's supplied to you by the invincible and inexhaustible God, whose heavenly resources are always available. You may feel completely outnumbered and powerless, but that's the name of the game. In reality you can draw upon the limitless armoury and treasury of the Sovereign Lord.

Because one day overwhelming victory will be yours. And this is my last prayer (not my last ever!), that you will be able to hang in there until the battle is finally won. The enemy is going to fling everything at you. People will tell you you can claim total triumph in the name of the Lord, and of course you can, but the fighting is often seriously grim and may seem as if it's never going to come to an end. Don't give up! Stay steady in spite of everything, and if you experience loss and hardship, don't allow yourself to become embittered. There – I'm sliding into commands, but it's all prayer territory, because these gifts of endurance and large-hearted patience don't come from us, they come from him. And they bring a deep and settled joy, even while it's all going on. Because we have an unbreakable promise from an unbeatable King, and we're going to win.

Stop and say a prayer of thanks with me. Thank you, heavenly Father, for your gifts of wisdom, Christlikeness, fruitfulness, divine knowledge, strength and endurance, for these dear people in the front line at Colosse. They need you today. Please don't let them down.

¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

1:12-14 Light and darkness

[1:12] Of course, there's so much more to be thanking God for. I've been thinking a lot about light and darkness recently. Prison cells aren't exactly noted for the quantity of daylight streaming in – in fact you're lucky if there's a window at all. When I want to write a few more lines I have to wait for Timothy to bring his oil lamp; and once it's been lit and its little flame gains strength and forms a yellow pool around us, I think, 'We're saints in the light!' Well, that's what you are.

Whatever your earthly lot may be, and I know life is difficult for many if not most of you, you have joined the huge and ever-growing company of God's family people and you have entered into a fantastic inheritance, with much, much more to come. This isn't something you've qualified for by your exceptional goodness – and those of you who are Gentiles won't make the characteristically Jewish mistake of thinking it's anything to do with your birthright. The full inheritance awaiting you, and the first instalment which is already yours, is a gift from God our Father to everyone in whom he sees the flicker of faith in his Son.

[1:13] Just as light banishes darkness, so Jesus has come into our prison cells with his wonderful light, and has personally escorted us out into freedom. Precious freedom! I'm here thanks to the (normally) just and fair process of Roman law; but there's an unseen empire which has spread its dark and tyrannical regime over the souls of human beings and reduced us all to helpless slavery, and which would still be dominating us but for another King who has at one stroke made us members of his kingdom of light and love.

The mystery of the cross

[1:14] Yes, I've got onto my favourite subject, the cross of Christ. People ask me, how could a Father who loves his Son allow him to go through the agony and shame of physical crucifixion? But they've underestimated the greatness of God's love. God didn't stop loving Jesus on Calvary, he extended his love still deeper and broader by including us! We were traitors, willing (or reluctant) tools of a usurping power, and there's no escaping the death-penalty for that crime. Unless someone could die our deaths for us and release us from the lethal grip of sin. The cross of Christ is still a deep mystery to me, I freely admit, because how could a few hours of horrendous torture get a whole race absolved and forgiven? It all depends on who it was dying there in the darkness: the Light of the world himself was snuffed out, but instead of that being the final knell of all goodness whatsoever, it was the victory stroke that set every captive free. Once sin had cornered Jesus (who never once sinned in his whole existence), it lost the right and the power to corner us.

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

1:15-17 Jesus' greatness and majesty

[1:15] I'll probably come back to that in a while, but now I want you to catch a glimpse of the sheer greatness and majesty of that suffering King. When you see Jesus, you see God. I don't mean physically, because God isn't physical, he can't be apprehended directly by our senses; all down our history we have tried to portray God in visible form (we should have known better!) – so eventually he says, 'All right then, I'll come in the person of Jesus, I'll be right here with you, and you can see me, hear me, touch me.' Jesus is the essential character of God expressed in human shape – that's the nearest I can get to it.

So when was Jesus created? When did he start, as it were? He wasn't and he didn't. He was always there, just as God was always there. Life produces life; eternal life produces eternal life. For us who live inside time, things like family trees have to be arranged in chronological order; but the Father generates the Son from eternity to eternity.

The whole point of the universe

[1:16] So what about the created universe, which may (and does) include beings with far greater capabilities than we humans ever had? Does that have a separate existence from God? No, because Jesus is the whole point of the universe and any other universes which might exist. Our greatest minds have tried to plumb the depths of the created order, to fathom not only what light makes visible to us but what remains shrouded in darkness; to investigate spiritual forces, astrological influences, elemental powers and higher authorities that may or may not control our lives here on earth; in short, to get to the heart of ultimate reality. But I have to say that if they leave out Jesus, their conclusions are meaningless.

In the beginning the Father says to the Son, 'We're going to do this together; the whole system is going to be designed, crafted and built by you and for your delight. [1:17] It is not going to be the sum total of what you are, any more than a play is the sum total of its author. You are more important than anything you make, and any significance or purpose it has comes from your pre-existent being. The physical and mathematical laws that are going to hold the entire thing together are the expression of your mind and will, so that if and when you decide to let this creation fall apart, fall apart it must.' 'Or become something different and more enduring,' says the Son. 'That too will be centred upon you,' says the Father. There are literally no limits to the creative imagination of love.

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

1:18-20 What about the church?

[1:18] So what about the church? Has Christ left it to struggle on as best it can? Is it like some decapitated corpse, kicking for a few moments then lying lifeless on the ground? Not a bit of it! It is his continuing body upon earth, organically connected to him as its head, having its life and purpose and intelligence ceaselessly dependent upon him. He is its beginning, so that its birth-date is outside time and history; when he rises out of the grave that Easter morning, the first event of the new age, he is bringing the whole church up from the dead with him. And it is through the church that he is taking up the position of supremacy that he has always had, but which now needs to be established through time and space with all beings acknowledging his Kingship.

Full expression of God

[1:19] I can't emphasise enough how Jesus really is the full expression of the God who fills heaven and earth. Do you remember when Jesus was being baptised, how God's voice sliced through the clouds and declared Jesus 'my own beloved Son, in whom I have always taken total delight'? In Jesus God took up residence on earth. He is the sum total of God with nothing left over. He had to be, and I'll tell you why.

[1:20] It wasn't just a Divine visit, or an official inspection, or part of a tour round his universe. Something had gone badly wrong on planet Earth, and he came to put it right. (Actually, it had gone wrong at the centre of operations, but I'll come to that in a moment.) The human race had turned round and slapped their Creator in his face. They had scrawled a large 'No!' over all his reasonable requirements and were now his implacable opponents, hell-bent on establishing their own republic run entirely by themselves. They would happily crucify anyone who came to them in the name of their hated ex-Master, and this they proceeded to do when Jesus arrived.

You would think that when Pilate and Caiaphas teamed up to pin God's Son to a public notice-board under a sign saying 'Your King', with blood streaming from every wound in his body, that would be it for the human race. How could they possibly be friends with God after that? Religion and politics had demonstrated in God's own headquarters upon earth, Jerusalem the Holy City, that his rule was over. All God had to do was to say 'We'll see about that,' and send in the angelic legions on a demolition job.

But he didn't. There was a deeper politics and a more universal religion at work, unifying and healing (at tremendous cost to the Peacemaker) this splintered and dying world. Because the human rebellion only mirrored a cosmic apostasy that had started before time and had infected the whole creation. Was this the only way God could do it? We may never know; but we do know that he did it on a Friday afternoon on a rubbish-tip outside Jerusalem. Result: peace has broken out.

²¹ Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – ²³ if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

1:21-23 Permanent peace treaty

[1:21] So where does that leave you Colossians? You've been members of the Roman Empire for so long that it's difficult to conceive of a time when you were hostile tribes outside its boundaries,

implacably opposed to its rule and indulging in all kinds of outlandish practices that no civilised nation would tolerate. Well, that's how you (and I) were until the other day with regard to the reign of the Sovereign God.

[1:22] But now it's all different. You've been conquered, not by force but by love. This God who has been your enemy (as he was mine, though I thought I was on his side) has come to you in the human guise of Christ, extending the hand of friendship and reconciliation – and as he comes closer you realise it is a nail-marked hand, because you had wanted him dead. It is only now by virtue of that death that a permanent peace treaty can be signed.

What is it all for, you may ask? The terms of the treaty are unconditional surrender. Don't get me wrong: you haven't got to present perfect credentials before you can enter the palace of your new King and Lord – otherwise you would have to wait on the threshold for ever. The credentials you possess are already won for you by the Lord Jesus himself. He has made you his holy people when you were exiles in the land of sin. He has shouldered the blame for all the things you deliberately did to spite him. He has torn up all the legitimate charges against you. Jesus himself escorts you through the torn curtain into the Holy of Holies. Is it so hard to give him your total allegiance?

Not a walk in the park

[1:23] 'Is that all we have to do?' you ask. Yes. Stay faithful and hopeful. But don't imagine it's going to be a walk in the park. You're going to be like a city under siege, whose walls are being pounded by powerful battering-rams and whose foundations are in danger of being secretly undermined by devilish mechanisms. There are going to be enemy agents who appear in the guise of charming and reasonable friends suggesting that you compromise just a tiny bit here or move the goalposts ever so slightly there. Well, all you have to do is to stay put. Build on the rock.

Keep asking yourselves, what could be better than this wonderful news I've heard, of a God who has offered us complete acceptance and eternal life with him, thanks to the death of his own Son? It's not as if I've invented all this, or been the only one to receive a possibly distorted message. No, the same gospel has been ringing out loud and clear throughout the civilised (and uncivilised) world! Over land and sea, in town and countryside, the news of God's love in Christ has come by the mouths of many messengers. I'm just one of these – so bear with me while I tell you a bit about my commission from my Master.

²⁴ Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – ²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

1:24-27 Taking the flak

You may think I'm going through a torrid time in my imprisonment here and must be thoroughly miserable. In fact it's quite the opposite: I'm full of joy and contentment. How come? Because it's all part of what God is doing for you and the other churches. I see it like this: none of us can add anything to what Christ suffered on the cross to take away our sin; but if he were still upon earth he would inevitably come into bruising conflict with this sinful world. Well, we are standing in for him in this war. We are taking the flak intended for him. And he's right there with us. When his church suffers, he suffers. So if things get tough at times, I know it's for him. And for you as well.

[1:25] You know how a large household needs servants who are going to keep the place clean and warm, fill up the water jars from the well and so on? That's what God is asking me to do as my life's work, and it's what I'm doing at the moment for you – sloshing the water of life into your jars,

keeping you topped up with the living word, cleaning out all the gunge that tends to collect in odd places.

²⁶ *the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints.*

²⁷ *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.*

1:26-27 Precious secret

[1:26] It isn't easy, this business of opening people's eyes to what's been there in scripture all along. For generations our ancestors have been blind to the plain import of God's word, because they've preferred their own ideas about how to interpret it. But you've been given the privilege of understanding what it really means. It's his gift of the Holy Spirit that has made all the difference.

[1:27] Through the Spirit you have become God's holy people. You've been let into his most precious secret – not because you're special in any way, but because that was how he decided to do it. It's a wonderful secret that unlocks an inexhaustible resource bank to you impoverished and excluded Gentiles; and what's more, it isn't complicated or esoteric. It's just three little words. Christ – in – you.

I was once blind to this staggering truth that was staring me in the face. Even when the glory of Christ shone all around me, I had no idea what was going on until Ananias explained it to me, and the scales fell from my eyes – literally! He said that even though I had been God's bitterest enemy because I had persecuted his people and in fact tried to destroy his chosen Messiah-King, I was forgiven. What was more, the Spirit of Jesus wanted to live in me and fill my whole being. The rest is history. Now whatever I have to go through, the future holds unimaginable prospects; Christ has taken my past, my present and my future and made them his. I share time and eternity with him.

Yes, Paul, Colossian believer, Jew, Gentile, whoever and wherever you are, receive this royal seal, this password that opens all the doors in the kingdom of heaven: Christ with you and in you, your hope of glory now and for ever.

²⁸ *He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.* ²⁹ *To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.*

1:28-29 One-to-one ministry

[1:28] So what is my ministry? Timothy and I and all the others simply tell people about Jesus. Well, I say simply, but it's not just a matter of spraying a jet of living water in the general direction of people and leaving it at that. Everybody has got to feel that the Lord is speaking to them personally, putting his finger on their precise situation and addressing them as if there was nobody else in the audience. And after the preaching there's the follow-up. This one-to-one ministry is so essential. Let me tell you a bit about it.

We all need constant reminding, correcting, warning even. But everybody is slightly different. When I'm talking to someone (for instance after a sermon) I need wisdom to know their precise needs, and this kind of spot-on knowledge can come only from God. They might need telling the straight facts of the gospel; or need heading off from some course of evil they are planning; or guiding into the path of God's will for them. I look at it like this: it is only at the Last Day that we are all going to be fully perfected in the Lord Jesus, and my responsibility is to bring each soul I am given before the throne and say 'I present so-and-so as one who has grown totally into the image of Christ.'

[1:29] This is an incredibly demanding task, as you may imagine. I take it so seriously that it causes me acute pain, especially when someone goes off the rails after I've spent so much time loving them towards Christian maturity. The only thing that keeps me going is the persistence of the One who went through the cross to bring me to himself. His power lives on in me through the Spirit. I've got this kind of inner dynamo buzzing away inside me, giving me spiritual and mental and even physical energy. And if it's working for me, it can do the same for every single harvest-field labourer to the end of time.

2¹ I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. 2² My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, 3³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4⁴ I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. 5⁵ For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

2:1-3 Miracle and mystery

[2:1] I've been going on about my heroic wrestlings on your behalf and you must be wondering what I'm talking about. Here I am separated from you by half the Mediterranean, severely limited in my physical freedom – so how can I possibly enter imaginatively into your personal situation or agonise over your difficulties? Do we even know who each other is? There you are in Colosse or Laodicea or wherever this letter's being read, and though I do remember some of you quite well there are others whom I haven't ever met and who have no idea what I look like – so am I just fantasising rather pathetically, imagining that I'm single-handedly fighting a whole host of spiritual forces intent on taking over the province of Asia, in order to compensate for my total inability to help you in any way?

[2:2] Well, fantasy is one thing, but spiritual reality is quite another. Prayer (as I've already said) reduces physical separation to nothing. We're working at heart level here; and I am acutely conscious that this is where you're most under attack. I'm not talking about ordinary human emotions or the ups and downs of everyday life which we all have to go through. I'm talking about the life of faith you embarked upon when you began to follow Christ. It's in the 'heart' that we decide to believe and to keep believing; so I'm praying that when attacks on your faith come, as they surely will, you won't get discouraged and give up.

Similarly it's in the heart that we choose to love our fellow-believers; so another prayer of mine is that you won't take up cudgels against one another, but that you'll increasingly value each other's gifts and grow in the strength of your fellowship together.

[2:3] But above all it's in the heart that we experience the miracle and mystery of coming to know the Lord by faith. This is a miracle, because at the very moment we start believing, we receive Christ in his royal fulness, and he brings with him all the wealth of God's heavenly kingdom so that you couldn't possibly want for any spiritual blessing – but it's also a mystery (in the sense that it's something we get initiated into and then grow into by stages) because like any learning process we find out more and more about Christ as we go on. It's like a friendship where you get to appreciate the character of your friend ever more deeply, and in turn become more and more certain of their love and care for you.

It's like walking into a great library, whose shelves are loaded with the wisdom of the ages – you wonder where to begin, but as you handle the volumes and turn over their pages you are thrilled with the treasures of knowledge they reveal. Jesus Christ is God's storehouse of wisdom; all we need to know about God is locked up in him, locked only in the sense that we don't get given the key independently of him, we have to go to him for it – and he flings open the door and personally gives us a guided tour.

⁴ I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

2:4-5 Smooth talkers

[2:4] I'm making this point (as I shall make it even more emphatically in a few minutes' time) because I don't want you to get argued off course by smooth talkers, who will tell you that all this Christ stuff is far too simple and you need to graduate to real knowledge. [2:5] Anyway, back to my original point, which is that though I may be physically miles away without a hope of being with you for your next meeting, this letter is my voice coming through to you loud and clear – which means that in terms of spiritual reality I'm here in your midst, delighting in your fellowship and deeply appreciating the purposeful way you organise yourselves and the rock-solid quality of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I genuinely mean it!

⁶ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

2:6-7 The life of faith

[2:6] So what do I want you to do? Why, carry on as you began! Your first step in the journey was to sign up as a follower of Jesus Christ, which meant accepting him as Lord of your lives, as your Friend and Companion on the road. Keep walking the same way. Let Jesus be the air you breathe. Earlier in this letter we were thinking about what it means for him to be 'in' us and for us to be 'in' him. When I breathe, I am 'in' the air and the air is 'in' me; that's how it is with the life of faith. Christ is the atmosphere around me, the lifegiving breath in my lungs. I am that close to him, and he to me.

[2:7] Trees send down roots, houses need firm foundations. The taller we grow in Christ, the deeper we need to go downwards into him. The life of faith isn't like a fairground ride, two minutes of exhilaration and that's it for the day. It's like sitting at the feet of a wise and understanding teacher, drinking in lesson after lesson, building up our knowledge stage by stage. That's what gives us true joy and makes us bubble over with heartfelt gratitude and anticipation – sitting at the feet of Jesus, hearing his word, being reminded of all he has done for us and all he wants to do.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. ⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.

2:8-10 Foundations

[2:8] Now I'm going to post an emphatic warning: there are spiritual terrorists out there who are actively plotting to take you hostage and hold you to ransom. Sounds dramatic – but the way they do it is to persuade you that *their* scheme of thinking, *their* way of understanding how the world works,

is superior to anything you have been learning in the school of Christ. This is blatant deception. Examine their arguments and their worldview collapses like a house of straw.

Take, for instance, the claim of some so-called 'leading thinkers' that your real god is within and you will find personal fulfilment by getting in touch with your true self, perhaps by meditation or self-denial or mystical communion with spirit-guides. I have already demonstrated that Jesus Christ is the source of everything that exists and that the universe finds its true meaning in him. There can't be any truth outside him. Leave Christ out and you lose your way completely. Let me go over the foundations of your faith once again.

[2:9] The Jesus who has been walking the streets and countryside of Galilee and Judea is the one, true and only God in human form. He is the whole of God translated into visible expression. Jesus isn't a man who got promoted to divine status as a reward; he's always been God. Nor is he half man and half God – he's one hundred per cent of both.

[2:10] So if this makes sense to you and you've placed your life-hopes firmly in this one Person (our short-cut term for this, as I've suggested, is that you are 'in him'), you don't need anyone else. You don't need to keep looking around for some other philosophy to live by, some other power source to plug into. Jesus himself is superior to all other authorities, systems, programmes or life forces. He must be – he invented them! Any potency they have derives from him. Having him, you're fully equipped for the journey. Christ is not only the road, he's the legs you walk with.

¹¹ In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,

2:11-13 Dangerous nonsense

[2:11] Now let's apply this to the biggest problem any of us face, which is simply this: we've lost touch with home. Our sin – and by this I don't mean a few blips in our onward personal development, I mean our settled disposition to follow our own will instead of God's – has sent us into an eternity of exile. Your Jewish friends will tell you (and I'm a Jew myself, so I know what I'm talking about) that all you need to do is to get circumcised and hey presto! Abraham's your father and you're back among the people of God. This is dangerous nonsense, and all the more so because it's nearly true. Yes, you do need to get circumcised, but this isn't something physical that can be done with a knife (you may be relieved to hear), it's an operation only Christ himself can perform, because only he can deal with our disobedient human nature. And he's done that!

I'm now going to explain how at each of the key moments of Jesus' life – his circumcision, baptism, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension – you too were significantly involved. I'm so excited about this that I may race ahead of you, so stop and ask questions if you need to. (Your leaders must arrange an opportunity for this.)

You were there at Christ's circumcision. When the infant Jesus, only eight days old (as I was myself), went through that ritual, it symbolised his irreversible entry into membership of the people of God. The moment you put your faith in him, this happened to you too. You joined the people of faith, the family of Abraham the friend of God. You lost your old unbelieving nature (if it still seems to be there sometimes, large as life, remember it's only posing, because it's really dead and gone) and you took on Christ's obedient nature, which he has had in unity with the Father since the beginning.

[2:12] You were there too at Christ's baptism. When you were baptised (indicating that you had come to a personal faith in Christ), you joined the Lord Jesus at the moment when he went down into the water to be baptised by John in the river Jordan; you left your old self dead and drowned at the

bottom of the river, to enter into his own divine-human life. That's what baptism is all about: it means death to the old person and new life with Christ. Your public act of confessing your new faith isn't just signing up with the church, it's anchoring your whole hope in God the Father who has already acted in power to deliver a knockout blow to death and to lift Christ (and all of us) up out of the grave.

[2:13] Yes – you and I were there at Christ's resurrection on Easter morning! This isn't just some metaphor or parable, it's a spiritual truth; it's reality revealed, so that what happened once literally and within human history is simultaneously an event in which all believers and potential believers are involved throughout time and space. Nothing but Christ's resurrection could reach down and pluck you from the grip of death. Sin is lethal. Once we have gulped down its poison (and we've done that too many times to count) we're finished. Our whole character, which was meant to respond to God in joy and loving trustfulness, has become infected with the virus of wilful disobedience and proud creaturely independence. 'We can go it alone, thank you,' we crow as we career blindly towards the cliff edge. And over we go, helpless in the tow of downward force.

And Jesus joined us in our fall. He had no sin of his own to send him into perdition, but he died spreadeagled on a Jerusalem rubbish dump because he chose to be identified with us even if it meant total self-abandonment. He clung to us so tightly, for no other reason than his love for us, that when the Father summoned him back up out of death on the third morning, the Son said 'These are coming with me, because I'm not letting them stay down there.' So up we came with him into the endless dawn of a new day. Everything forgiven, sins left in the grave, walking with our Master in the freshness of Eden restored.

¹⁴having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

2:14-15 Two insoluble problems

[2:14] I've left the greatest wonder of all to the last. It is what Christ was doing as he suffered those six hours of physical and spiritual torture on the cross. Let's think about it as coolly and rationally as we can. There were two reasons why we had to die. The first was legal, consisting in a charge-sheet of laws we had broken, summed up in the double law of love toward God and neighbour. The second was practical, consisting in the overwhelming might of the enemies ranged against us, the powers of wickedness to whom we had surrendered our whole destiny and who were determined to annihilate us – and who had every right to do so. What chance had we, with God and the devil both implacably opposed to us? Well, Jesus dealt with both these problems that we had no hope of solving.

He dealt with the legal problem by taking our charge-sheet and pinning it over his own head on the cross. You will have been told that when Pontius Pilate fastened the notice 'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews' on the upright piece above Jesus, the religious leaders asked for it to be changed to 'self-proclaimed King'. Pilate simply said 'What I have written, I have written,' meaning there would be no second edition. Now, imagine that fluttering bit of papyrus was the account of your and my lifetime of selfishness. It has been written (or will be) and there is no changing it, no second edition possible. It is the account of why the death sentence has to be passed on me. Moreover it is public; it is written in large letters and in several languages so that anyone who passes by can see that justice has been carried out.

So do you see what Jesus has done? He's transferred the legal charge, the just and true account of why justice has to be executed on me and every single member of the human race, to himself. He stands condemned in my place. And he's done this totally publicly, in the religious capital of the world, so that no-one can be under any illusion about what has happened. I am legally free of all

charges against me, and so are you, and so is every person to the end of time, because Jesus has discharged my obligation to die.

[2:15] Now what about the other problem, the powers of evil to whom we have all surrendered – can't they still claim us, even if it's technically illegal? Answer: no, because their actual power to do so has been irretrievably shattered. They have been beaten on the open field of battle just as decisively as any foreign rebel against the power of Rome. The cross is a victory parade – not the devil's, but God's. Now that the great enemy can no longer rightfully claim a single soul as his own, he is himself a captive in Christ's triumphal procession. I'm thinking of those magnificent spectacles when the whole city turns out to see a great general such as Pompey or Caesar leading potentates and kings in chains along the streets. If only we would wake up to the fact that we are no longer under the domination of sin, because the shame of the cross has become the glory of the King enthroned upon it! (We ourselves are also captives in Christ's triumphal parade, but that's a different point.)

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

2:16-17 Preliminary sketches

[2:16] I have been trying to demonstrate that through the cross of Christ God has set us, who cling to that cross for dear life, radically free from the legal and behavioural demands of sin and selfishness. Is it not therefore quite extraordinary that some people (and you know quite well who I am talking about) are prepared to browbeat you into conformity with their formulas about what you should or should not eat or drink, or what religious festival you should be celebrating or how you should mark the first day of the month or the seventh day of the week.

[2:17] Yes, I know there are provisions for these in the Torah, the book of the Law, but they were never meant to be any more than preliminary sketches for the big picture to come. They are pre-echoes of the ultimate celebration of Christ's victory which was then still in the future, but which has now gloriously taken place! Here are you dancing in joyful abandon at the King's wedding-feast, and some self-important courtiers are insisting on the precise steps your feet should be performing. I ask you.

¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

¹⁹ They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

2:18-19 Spiritual pride

[2:18] I gather you are also getting stuck from the super-spiritual brigade who think you should be entering into voluntary self-abnegation in order to cleanse your soul from sin. They even describe mystical encounters with angelic beings who have impressive names and give them instructions from on high. This is all utter claptrap. It is entirely the product of their fevered imagination, fuelled by an overblown piety which masquerades as deep humility but is really an aspect of deadly spiritual pride. They have to elevate themselves into a position of godly eminence from which they can criticise everyone else. But they've missed the point about who Christ is and how he exercises leadership in his church.

[2:19] These people have lost their grip on the one thing – the one Person, I should say – who is utterly central and essential: the living Lord of the church. It doesn't matter who you are – apostle, pastor, evangelist, preacher, prayer leader, whoever – you are not the person who holds the church

together, Christ is. The Son of God (as I've already said) is the Master of the church, the supreme and sole authority for all we believe and do. He hasn't ordained intermediate authorities to do his work for him. Nor does he drip-feed instructions from a celestial platform way above our heads. He's in there with us.

We are Jesus' body on earth. A body works and grows through all its parts performing their proper function – limbs, organs, veins, joints and so on. It is interconnected by all kinds of links, each one under the direction of the brain itself. Every bit of the body (and that means you and me in our various roles) needs to supply its individual contribution to the whole organism. If you switch off the ministry of one part, or exaggerate the importance of one part at the expense of the others, the whole system is prevented from developing healthily as it should. But if you get it right, then the energy and freshness of God himself flows through the entire body and Christ's kingdom comes, gradually but surely.

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

2:20-23 Religious programme

[2:20] Let's keep the main point in full view. You and I don't belong to this world any longer. Once we may have subscribed to its principles and philosophies, which left Christ out of its reckoning, or relegated him to the sidelines; but we don't any more. We have thrown in our lot totally with Christ; we've entered into his death and resurrection and come through to a new and very different world, the age of freedom.

[2:21] I know how important they were once, those old rules about what you should or shouldn't eat, or what contact would make you clean or unclean, or how you should perform various rituals. They were designed to act in a supporting role for Israel's obedience to the one true God, like a handrail along a tricky and demanding mountain path. But now that Jesus Christ has come in the fullness of time, they aren't needed any more. We've emerged on the mountain heights, free to walk confidently in the friendship of God by faith.

[2:22] The old rules were given by God, yes, but they were only temporary, and besides they got mixed up with a whole load of extra traditions and rubrics that weren't in God's original word at all – they were invented by people who claimed to have a monopoly of access to God but who were really setting up their own religious programme as a substitute for God's.

[2:23] I expect you remember how Jesus had it in for these pseudo-holy posers. He exposed the hollowness of their self-proclaimed piety – their long and self-centred prayers, their exaggerated self-abasement, their actual facial disfigurement which drew attention to the severity of their fasting regime. They're still around! And he would denounce them in exactly the same terms today. The moment you set up a religious system as a substitute for faith in Christ, you turn off the source of power. Only Christ can save us from the sin and self-centredness which dominates our whole existence. These people don't realise what they're up against. They secretly think that they've cracked the secret of true godliness, while all the time they're feeding the deadliest enemy of the soul, which is spiritual pride. They are giving the glory to themselves instead of to God. And the flesh has a field day!

3¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

3:1-4 Pit thoughts or sky thoughts?

[3:1-3] Let's go back to what I was saying about us all being involved in Christ's death and resurrection and see something else that follows from that. I've been talking about the traditional rules and regulations that some of your teachers seem so keen on, and I hope you've grasped that you're finally free from that kind of legalism and self-justification. But there's another implication which affects our day-to-day behaviour as we live, as we all have to, in a morally compromised society.

I want to make it clear, in the clearest possible terms, that I am not advocating a 'clean yourself up campaign' or 'ten steps to a more disciplined life'. I've already told you why ascetic regimes, good as they are in themselves, can't cope with the subtle human pride and self-centredness that lie in wait to ambush our best efforts at moral self-improvement. Why? Because they leave out the cross and the empty tomb.

Let's imagine for a moment that you have fallen down a mine-shaft or a well that wasn't properly covered, and all your painful efforts to climb back out again have only left you depressed and exhausted. You realise you are going to die down there unless someone rescues you. And then, amazingly, a figure appears at the top and winds himself slowly down until he's reached where you lie on the floor of the pit or struggle in the muddy water, and he hoists you on his shoulders and with powerful help from above you both ascend on the rope till you reach safety. Sounds dramatic – but I've been there myself and I know what I'm talking about.

You were lifted out of the pit of sin and death when Christ rose from the dead taking you with him. You're now standing in the glorious daylight and the warm sunshine where you can really start living. How could you possibly ever want to go back down that stinking hole again? Christ Jesus is now where he always belonged, at home with his Father, in supreme charge of all things heavenly and earthly – and you are there with him. I don't mean you've literally 'gone to heaven,' because you are still firmly upon earth; but your whole future is now bound up with Jesus and all your longings and aspirations aren't down with your old life any more, they're up there with him. So why are you thinking pit thoughts instead of sky thoughts – if you are?

[3:4] Because he's coming back. We don't know when, but it can't be long. And anyway none of us has more than a few years on this earth. I'm talking about our physical mortality, because as I've said our real life, our faith life, is so intertwined with Christ that if he chooses to stay hidden from human eyes, we're by his side, patiently waiting for the great moment; when (not if) he and his Father decide on the grand denouement, you and I are going to be right there in his triumphal procession, attending the King, heads held high, resplendent in royal robes. I'm longing for that to happen as soon as possible. Are you?

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

3:5-8 Talking tough

[3:5] 'Well, of course I can't help saying Amen to all that – but the stark reality is that I'm not on cloud nine the whole time, I'm battling with a whole host of pretty obvious temptations down on earth, and

if I'm to be honest, I'm not exactly covering myself in glory.' You're not the only one! So let's talk tough with each other.

As I say, we've never met in the flesh; but if it's the flesh we're talking about, I can guess what you're up against. You find yourself wanting to sleep with certain attractive people (and given the chance, you easily might). You can't help looking at indecent pictures or at least running your own mental fantasy show. It's got a grip on you, this sex thing. Your thoughts go round and round in an endless loop, rehearsing the same encounters. You vow to have done with the whole thing, then five minutes later you're off again, can't get enough of it, plodding round the senseless treadmill. Whether or not you actually visit temples of illicit passion, you have set up shrines within yourself where you worship your own little shimmering idols.

[3:6] I said I was going to talk tough, and that's because when we dabble with evil, we find ourselves up against a God who is rock-solid goodness. He has consistently said, not only in the scriptures, but in the person of his own Son, that those who disobey his plain commands incur his settled displeasure. When you commit fornication, you're not just breaking the seventh commandment (that's bad enough), you're breaking a whole lot of others, including the very first one about loving the Lord supremely and not putting any other gods (or goddesses) in his place. What did you expect? You can't just pretend he hasn't noticed. Get real!

So what do you do about it? Talk tough with yourself, that's what. Take up your position under the cross of Christ and say, 'Lord, I choose to stay exactly where I am, with you. You know all these things have no power to claim me. I don't care what they tell me to think or do, you've given them the death treatment and I'm free to live for you.' Bring every longing to his feet and leave it there.

[3:7] It doesn't matter if your track record flashes up numerous affairs, moral failures, habitual weaknesses. The streets you walked around in, the atmosphere you breathed – these were the only life you knew. Now you're breathing kingdom air, you're walking the streets with Jesus – you've got a new moral dynamic, a second chance at life – so get out there and live it!

[3:8] And in case you think I'm obsessed with only one thing, let's broaden this to include a few snapshots of other sorts of 'normal' old-life behaviour. Here you are blazing with anger because you think your rights have been infringed. Or you've lost your temper with someone who hasn't quite understood what you wanted. Here's a playback of the dirt you dished on a former friend. Listen to the one-sided account you gave of this person's character. Or the frankly disgusting language you used to describe that person's private life. Yes, it all used to happen quite regularly; but it doesn't have to happen any longer. Make a break with the rotten past. Chuck those old clothes on the bonfire. You've got a new Jesus outfit to go around in.

⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

3:9-11 New suit of clothes

[3:9] Another area is truthfulness and honesty. It used to be second nature to put a spin on your account of a situation, to gain yourself some advantage or deliberately mislead the other person. I could go on, but I've probably given you enough examples. The point of all this is not to whip you up to a frenzy of moral self-improvement – something much more fundamental has happened to your whole nature. Taking up the way of Jesus is like putting on a brand-new suit of clothes, which means consigning the old ones to the tip and leaving them there. OK, you say, I'm beginning to realise how radical I've got to be in changing the whole way I go about things, but there are so many practical alterations I need to make – it's hardly an afternoon's work!

[3:10] Perhaps I can describe all this as the difference between *attitude* and *aptitude*. You can change your *attitude* in a moment; in fact, you did this when you responded to the call to repent, which is shorthand for doing an about-turn in your relationship to Jesus. It's rather like taking up a new sport such as archery or long-distance running: it only takes a few days or a few seconds to make the conscious decision to sign on, but it takes weeks, months, even years to develop an *aptitude* in the new sport, to understand what your trainer is telling you, shape your mind and body to the new regime, growing Jesus-likeness from the inside, as it were.

The point is that you've stopped trying to be the architect of your own life, and you've handed the job over to the One who made you in the first place. It's more than developing a new set of skills – it's like getting to know a new person who wants to share your life, or like moving into a new community, speaking a new language, adapting to a new society. [3:11] This community of faith which we call the kingdom of Christ is totally different from anything else on earth. You've been given a new passport which doesn't carry details of your race ('Jew/Gentile'), or your religion ('child of the covenant/other'), or your language ('unintelligible') or origin ('from the back of beyond'), or even your social status ('free-born, ex-slave, slave'). One could add age, gender, education. None of these counts for anything. Your passport is simply stamped with the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Your allegiance to him is all that matters. He is your nationality, your religion, your origin and status and identity.

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

3:12-14 Creative unselfishness

[3:12] So far so good. But it's not just a cosy relationship between you and your Lord we're thinking about. If he's your Lord, he's other people's Lord as well. This total makeover has a community dimension. If you think, 'I'm special, I've been picked for his team,' well, that's true, but just think why you've been selected and what membership of Christ's team is all about. Love and holiness. Forget why you're a Christian in the first place, and you grow proud and cold. Forget what kind of life he's called you to, and you get slack and messy – in fact, you mess up other people's lives too.

It's your relationship with those other folk that needs radically redesigning. (I needed to learn all this myself, so I'm simply passing on what I've taken on board painfully over the years.) It's the Jesus life in community. Christ's Spirit in you longs to reproduce the character and personality of the One who warmed up a cold world with his brief presence. His heartfelt compassion to those who'd got into trouble. His practical concern and proactive generosity. His utter lack of pomposity or personal pride. His willingness to forgo even basic human rights like privacy, comfort, respect. His amazing patience with really awful people.

[3:13] Yes, there may be some in your fellowship whom you simply can't stand, or who show such unforgivable attitudes or behaviour that you don't want to have anything to do with them. 'I just find it impossible to forget or forgive what he/she's done!' Well, maybe; but how much has the Lord had to forgive you for? There was all that stuff before you came to know him; and even after he started sharing your life, has everything been shipshape? [3:14] I'm not just talking about personal discipline in thought, word and deed – I'm thinking in particular of that unique quality called love. It's love that binds Father, Son and Holy Spirit together in perfect unity. It's love that makes an effective team out of very diverse and frankly unclubbable human personalities. What do the citizens of Colosse say about the church in their midst? 'Here is a bunch of people who put others' considerations before their own, who are so creatively unselfish that they put us to shame'? No? What are you going to do about it?

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

3:15-17 Springs of thankfulness

[3:15] What, for instance, do you do about the conflicts and differences of opinion, major or minor, that crop up from time to time in any fellowship of believers? Do you take them to the Lord to decide? In the athletic games, whenever there's doubt about who won a throw in wrestling or who came first in a foot-race, the umpire steps in, and his decision is final. Let me remind you of the moment when the risen Christ appears to his gathered disciples on the evening of the first Easter day. They have no idea whose lead they are supposed to follow – Peter, the 'rock' who has proved so fragile? James and John, who made such a blatant bid for primacy? Philip, Andrew and the others who simply ran away when danger threatened? Women like Mary Magdalene who apparently can't distinguish between fantasy and sober truth? None of them can be trusted to make any decision. Then Jesus turns up in their midst – and what is the first thing he says to them? 'Peace be with you.' He tells them he's got a job for them to do and they are to forgive each other. That kind of dynamic, creative peacemaking becomes the stock-in-trade of the early church.

Never stop thanking God for the risen Christ. He's still there in our midst (and that's true for any future readers of this letter too). [3:16] Not visibly, of course – that brief episode's now over – but through his Word and his Spirit. As he speaks to us through his faithfully interpreted scriptures, the reality of his presence floods into our hearts and overflows into our fellowship, and we quite naturally start singing, making music, foot-tapping. The old Psalms take on a radiant new meaning. Fresh songs get composed and become favourites because they express so well all that the Lord has done for us in his love and grace.

It's in the heart alive with God's peace that worship arises naturally. We don't mind if someone stands up and spells out the basics of the faith, or points out where we fall short, or galvanises us to greater effort – in fact we do it to each other the whole time, and we don't resent it, because we're so grateful for having such a wonderful God as our friend. [3:17] And this worship and joy overflows from our fellowship back into our everyday lives! Think of your regular, humdrum (or crucially important) daily work in home, office, workshop or wider sphere of influence; think of all the words you're going to say or write this week, all the people you're going to touch in one way or another. Now, because you've got the Lord Jesus living in you, your lives can take on his character. You're acting as his representatives wherever you go. He's sending you just as he sent those very first apostles, to bear his name and express his love for the world he's made and redeemed. So whatever happens to you (and life isn't always a bed of roses), keep a little spring of thankfulness bubbling away in your heart, inspired by the Spirit and singing praises to the One True God who delights to be called 'our Father'.

¹⁸ Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

3:18-21 Earthly families

[3:18-19] Now let's consider how our membership of this new kingdom family is going to affect our earthly families and households. If there is complete equality of male and female within the household of Christ, as indeed there is, does the wife have to put up any longer with social conventions like paying total submission to her husband and not having any independent rights

herself? You may find my answer to this question surprising. Yes, social conventions still apply; but they are to be interpreted according to the Spirit of Christ. If Christ is Lord of my life, I'm not at liberty to throw over the normal expectations of the earthly situation in which I find myself. If society stipulates that the man is head of the household, then Christian marriages should take the lead in displaying a loving cooperation in which neither side becomes domineering or overbearing. Mutual respect and mutual honour are wonderful qualities and set both partners free to be creative and appreciative.

[3:20] This will have an amazing effect on the children. Instead of being stropky and rebellious, they will grow up in a home which isn't a constant battleground with everyone defending their own corner. They will realise that their parents have made the Lord's will their top priority and are only trying to organise things for the good of the family as a whole; and they will want to cooperate in making the home run smoothly. [3:21] In turn, when you fathers can spare a few minutes after an exhausting day in the local council or a depressing review of the business accounts, you won't use all the quality time with your children finding out what they did wrong during the day or putting them down with sarcastic remarks. Instead, you will find that with a little praise and encouragement they can grow into confident and resilient characters, ready to play a responsible part in a changing world.

²² Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. ²⁵ Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favouritism. 4 ¹ Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

3:22-4:1 Transforming the workplace

[3:22] Some of you, I know, are slaves, and you will be asking the same question: if being in Christ means that old distinctions like 'slave' and 'free citizen' are done away with, do I need to go on taking orders from my master or mistress? Again, the answer is 'yes, you do, but with a totally transformed attitude.' Let me illustrate (Onesimus has filled me in on the slave's point of view). I hope, by the way, that these remarks will help not just slaves but anyone in an employee/employer situation.

First and foremost, settle it in your minds who you are actually working *for*. Is it for human masters, or is it for the Lord himself? If you are a 'horizontal' employee, just slaving away for the boss, just part of the system, you will be tempted to work hard while they're watching you but when they're not, to get away with blue murder. If however you're a 'vertical' employee, working first and foremost for the kingdom and its King, you've got a different motivation. It isn't a question of who is watching you or who you are trying to impress – it is simply and solely that you love the Lord Jesus and you would do anything for him, seeing that he's done so much for you. Inevitably, people will say, 'Oh, you're just afraid that Big Brother is watching everything you do'; but it isn't that kind of fear. It's more like a deep and constant awareness that what you do for your earthly outfit is an expression of the honour and respect you want to show to your heavenly Father.

[3:23] 'Respect' is an inadequate word because it can imply a kind of looking-over-one's-shoulder-the-whole-time attitude; when it's Royalty you're working for, you take a kind of fierce pride in the quality of your work. You put your heart and soul into everything you do. You don't take short cuts. You don't adopt a shop-window mentality. You look to please the Lord Jesus first and foremost, and this will shine through your human service, without you having to say a word about it.

[3:24] You often hear members of the work-force complaining that they aren't paid as much as they deserve, or nobody thanks them when they go the extra mile. I'm not saying that you shouldn't campaign for higher rates of pay or better working conditions, when the current arrangements are clearly unjust or unsatisfactory. But having a heavenly, 'vertical' perspective changes everything. The

ultimate reward you are looking forward to is your inheritance beyond time and space, of eternal life with your Master. Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying, and could never say, that your salvation depends on the work you do on earth – that would be to contradict the gospel we preach. It's just that we know our final and perfect satisfaction lies in Christ, and no reward on earth is remotely comparable to that.

[3:25] So if I do shoddy or superficial work down here on earth, or, more seriously, start dipping my hand in the till or compromising morality in some other way, will the Lord simply pat me on the head and say 'Don't worry, you're special, just look forward to all those heavenly lollipops'? No, he most certainly won't! It doesn't matter who you are, whether you're a big noise in your church, whether you've been used to bring hundreds of people to Christ – if you start bending the rules and playing around to please yourself, you've got it coming to you, don't be under any illusion about that. Your Master has no favourites, and that's the long and the short of it.

[4:1] Which reminds me to say a word to those of you who run households or businesses and are therefore responsible for telling others what to do and for providing for their livelihood. You may (as far as the law allows) have more or less absolute power in your own little domain, but you are not the boss cats of the universe. Don't deny anyone the justice that is the right of every human being. Don't shortchange your employees. Don't favouritise some at the expense of others. Now that you've put yourselves under the lordship of Christ, you are responsible to him for the way you run your show. Keep a heavenly perspective in your earthly enterprises. One day soon you are going to account to him for the quality of your service, and his 'Well done!' is worth everything.

² Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

4:2-4 Watchmen on the wall

[4:2] A couple more things before I round off this letter. The first is about prayer (I talked about this earlier) which I'm sure is a feature of your life in Christ. If it isn't, get on with it! But we all become insensibly slack in spiritual things, and our prayer life may need a bomb under it. God has appointed you as watchmen upon your city walls, because there are enemies out there, and if you go to sleep you can be sure they'll take the opportunity to wreak havoc. Human nature and the physical state of our bodies tend to militate against a disciplined prayer regime, so it's never easy. I try to make a point of mixing thanks and praise with my prayers, and I recommend this as a way of oiling the engine of prayer and keeping fresh and alert. If I drowse off here in my prison, the rats running over my feet will jerk me awake – so I thank God even for them!

[4:3] In fact I have far more congenial human companions here in my place of confinement, about whom I'll write in a moment. Our single most important task, as always, is to serve Christ in proclaiming the gospel; and this is where your prayers can really make a difference. I was talking earlier about the knowledge of Christ being a 'mystery', in the sense that it is only God who can give non-believers that inner illumination of the heart and mind which causes them to know the Lord Jesus for themselves. But there's also a wholesale ignorance of the gospel here, together with a thoroughgoing resistance to it. Telling people the story of Jesus is like hammering on a thick, ironbound oak door; it never gives an inch, and you wonder if anyone on the other side has even heard your knocking. There's also the factor that everyone knows I'm in prison because of my obsession with this weird Messianic message, and if they show an interest they might get hauled off and interrogated. So could you please besiege the throne of grace and ask God to swing that oak door wide open, and to keep it open. It's happened elsewhere and it can happen here too. [4:4] Another prayer you can offer up is that when I have an opportunity to speak, individually or publicly (my

trial will be coming up sometime soon), I will be able to keep it clear and compelling. I'm a bit out of practice and words don't come as easily as they ought.

⁵ *Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.* ⁶ *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

4:5-6 Healthy commonsense

[4:5] Not all of us are called to deliver long speeches, but each of us can witness to Christ in our own way. We need a bit of healthy commonsense about this. As we go about our daily business, we are bound to come across people who, for whatever reason, haven't accepted (or even properly heard) the Christian gospel. We shouldn't charge in like a bull in a china shop; but all the same we should be on the lookout for those little opportunities that crop up from time to time – rather like someone hunting for bargains in the marketplace. [4:6] Words can be gracious or ungracious, witty or humourless, appropriate or insensitive. Each person we meet is a unique individual and there are no set formulas for how we should handle their often disconcerting questions or pointed comments. Just let the Spirit give you that inner knowledge of the right thing to say. He wants to get through to them far more urgently than you do!

⁷ *Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.* 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.* ⁹ *He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.*

4:7-9 Two incredible Christians

[4:7-8] I could go on to give you a whole heap of personal news, but that's best done through the bearers of this letter. Tychicus and Onesimus are two incredible Christians. You may not have met Tychicus before, but he and I have shared so much in the way of spiritual things and it will be a wrench losing him. He has been absolutely consistent in the practical help he has given me, and he and I have formed a close partnership in the service we have been able to do for the Lord. He'll give you a detailed and reliable account of the ups and downs of life here; in fact he may help to dispel your gloomier forebodings about my situation (the bit about the rats was a humorous exaggeration, incidentally).

[4:9] And of course you all know Onesimus. Yes, he's coming back, as a soundly converted and fully dedicated Christian. He's taking a letter to his master which may just save his life. Anyway, as I said, these two will give you a verbal account of everything that's been happening here.

¹⁰ *My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)* ¹¹ *Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me.*

4:10-11 Wonderful friends

[4:10] The loss of these two wonderful friends is made more bearable by having so many others around me. They're all insisting on sending their greetings! First there's Aristarchus, who has been travelling with me for the past few years and who has voluntarily shared my imprisonment here. Then there's John Mark, Barnabas' cousin; whatever instructions you've had about him, and whatever differences we might have had, all that's over, so give him a hug when you see him and welcome him into your fellowship. [4:11] To complete the trio of Jewish folk here, there's Jesus (for

obvious reasons he prefers to be known as Justus). I have to say that not many of my fellow-countrymen have chosen to associate with me in gospel work for the kingdom, but these three have, and that's been an enormous encouragement to me.

¹² *Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.* ¹³ *I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.*

4:12-13 A prayer warrior

[4:12-13] Epaphras sends a friendly wave. He's missing you acutely, but he's on Divine service for his Master, and he's making up for not seeing you by praying all day and every day like a man possessed! 'Lord, please help those folk at Colosse to grow into mature and fully-formed servants of yours; Lord, show them the wonder of your love; Lord, lead them and guide them in all that they do; Lord, show each one of them your will today' and so on. He's got all your names on his prayer-list, and not only you but everyone at Laodicea and Hierapolis as well. I can't help overhearing him sometimes, and quite honestly he hammers so hard on the doors of heaven you'd think they would collapse before his onslaught.

¹⁴ *Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.* ¹⁵ *Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.* 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.*

4:14-16 More greetings

[4:14-16] I haven't finished yet, because Dr Luke sends his love; so many people including me are deeply grateful for his medical skill and personal care. Greetings too from Demas. Now here's a wave to you folk over in Laodicea, especially Nympha and the group that meets in her house. I don't suppose I need to say this, but please you people at Colosse make absolutely sure that you don't hog this letter to yourselves; when you've finished devouring it, send it over to Laodicea – and you may find there's another one that's doing the rounds and is meant to come on to you from Laodicea. I intend to keep the postman – and you my readers – busy!

¹⁷ *Tell Archippus: 'See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.'* ¹⁸ *I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*

4:17-18 Distinctive scrawl

[4:17] What else? Oh yes, a special message to Archippus. Rumour has it that you're finding it hard to concentrate on the work the Lord has given you, and you may even be leaving essential things undone or only half done. Take a good hard look at your commission before the Lord, and ask him what he wants you to do and for the energy to do it all. He's put you there for a purpose, and one day you'll find out how important it was for you to be faithful.

[4:18] There's one more word of greeting. It's from me, Paul. As you probably realise, a good friend has been writing this letter down for me, but he wants to remain anonymous. Now here is my distinctive scrawl so you can know it's genuinely from me. It's a bit shaky but let's just say it's because of these fetters I have to wear the whole time. (This may be another exaggeration, but that's so you can remember to pray for me.)

Grace be with you. Whose grace? Do you want me to start all over again?

THINKING THROUGH COLOSSIANS: CROSS-REFERENCES

References are listed in biblical order. *Possible OT allusion. There are no direct quotations from the OT in Colossians, unlike Ephesians. Many of the references below are to the 'Prison Letters' (Eph, Phil, Col, Philem). If, as the traditional account has it, all these letters come from the two or three years Paul spent under guard after arriving in Rome in cAD 60, it is not unreasonable to refer to similar expressions of ideas he had in his mind at this time.

1:1-2 *Another missive doing the rounds* Col 4:16. *He's given me Timothy* 1 Th 3:2, Phil 2:19. *To live for him wherever we are* Phil 1:27. *The privilege of belonging* Gal 4:5-6. *All the spiritual blessings you need* Eph 1:3. *Access to his presence and love* Eph 2:18. *Anxious about anything whatsoever* Phil 4:6-7.

1:3-6 *Constant outflow of thanksgiving* Eph 1:15-16. *Jesus when he was on earth* Jn 11:42. *Believers in your area* Acts 19:10. *Spreading like wildfire* Mt 13:23, 32.

1:7-8 *Ephras is with me here* Col 4:12, Philem 23.

1:9-11 *Hard at work praying for you* 2 Thess 1:11. *We fail miserably* Jn 15:5. *All the wisdom you need* Eph 1:17, Jas 1:5. *God's supply-chain* Eph 6:18. *A delighted smile to his Father's face* Jn 8:29. *Feel inadequate? You're meant to!* 2 Cor 2:16. *He's promised it to us* Heb 8:11 qu Jer 31:34, 2 Pet 3:18. *Fling everything at you* Eph 6:13.

1:12-14 *Fantastic inheritance* Acts 26:18. *Escorted us out into freedom* 1 Pet 2:9. *Never once sinned* 1 Jn 3:5.

1:15-17 *The nearest I can get to it* Jn 1:18, 1 Jn 1:1-2, Heb 1:3, Jn 14:9-10. *From eternity to eternity* Heb 7:3, Jn 1:1, Prov 8:22. *Do this together* Jn 1:1, Prov 8:30. *More enduring* Isa 65:17.

1:18-20 *Acknowledging his Kingship* Phil 2:11. *Fills heaven and earth* Jer 23:24, 1 Ki 8:27. *Total delight* Mk 1:11. *On a demolition job* Mt 26:53.

1:21-23 *I thought I was on his side* Acts 26:9. *Into the Holy of Holies* Mk 15:38, Heb 9:24. *Commission from my Master* Eph 3:2.

1:24-27 *Joy and contentment* Phil 4:11. *How to interpret it* Mk 7:7, 2 Cor 3:14-18. *Scales fell from my eyes* Acts 9:17-18. *Made them his* Phil 1:21.

1:28-29 *Leaving it at that* Ps 19:11, Acts 20:20, 31. *Into the image of Christ* Eph 5:27, 2 Cor 11:2. *Inner dynamo* Phil 4:13.

2:1-3 *As I've already said* Col 1:3. *More about Christ as we go on* 2 Pet 3:18. *God's storehouse of wisdom* Isa 11:2, 1 Cor 1:30.

2:4-5 *Smooth talkers* Rom 16:18.

2:6-7 *Carry on as you began* 1 Thess 4:1. *Trees send down roots* Jer 17:7-8. *Downwards into him* Isa 37:31, Jer 17:8. *Sitting at the feet of Jesus* Lk 10:39.

2:8-10 *Blatant deception* Eph 4:14. *I have already demonstrated* Col 1:16. *God in human form* Jn 1:14, 1 Tim 3:16. *He's always been God* Jn 1:18, Isa 9:6. *You don't need anyone else* Eph 3:19.

2:11-13 *Lost touch with home* Lk 15:13. *I'm a Jew myself* Phil 3:4. *Only eight days old* Lk 2:21. *As I was myself* Phil 3:5. *Friend of God* 2 Chr 20:7, Isa 41:8. *At Christ's baptism* Lk 3:21-22. *Sins left in the grave* Rom 4:25.

2:14-15 *Powers of wickedness* Eph 6:12. *I have written* Jn 19:22. *In several languages* Jn 19:20. *My obligation to die* Rom 7:4, 1 Tim 2:4. *Victory parade* Ps 68:18. *Triumphal parade* 2 Cor 2:14.

2:16-17 *Browbeat you into conformity* Rom 14:3. *Preliminary sketches* Heb 8:5, 9:23.

2:18-19 *Mystical encounters* Jude 8. *Fevered imagination* 1 Tim 1:7. *Deadly spiritual pride* Jude 16. *As I've already said* Col 1:18. *Through all its parts* Eph 4:16. *Whole organism* 1 Cor 12:12.

2:20-22 *Load of extra traditions* Mk 7:4. *Substitute for God's* 1 Tim 4:3. *Self-proclaimed piety* Mt 6:1. *Turn off the source of power* 2 Tim 3:5. *Instead of to God* Lk 18:11.

3:1-4 *Death and resurrection* Col 2:12-13. *Already told you* Col 2:20-23. *Stinking hole again* Ps 40:2. *There with him* Eph 1:3. *Few years on this earth* Ps 90:10-13. *For the great moment* 1 Cor 15:52, 1 Jn 3:2.

3:5-8 *Little shimmering idols* Ezek 8:12. *Settled displeasure* Ezek 18:20, Lk 13:3, 5, Rom 1:32. *He hasn't noticed* Prov 5:21. *Free to live for you* Jn 8:36, 1 Pet 4:2. *Walking the streets with Jesus* Prov 3:26. *To go around in* Eph 4:21-24.

3:9-11 *Mislead the other person* Lev 19:11, Eph 4:25. *Call to repent* Acts 2:38. *From the inside* Rom 8:29. *Made you in the first place* Eph 2:10. *Name of the Lord Jesus Christ* Eph 1:13. *Status and identity* 1 Cor 1:30, Phil 3:9.

3:12-14 *Jesus life in community* 1 Jn 4:17b. *Got into trouble* Mt 9:36. *Personal pride* Mt 11:29, Lk 22:27b. *Proactive generosity* Jn 19:26-27. *Really awful people* Mt 9:10-13. *What he/she's done* Gen 50:20. *In perfect unity* Jn 17:23. *Put us to shame* Phil 2:20-21.

3:15-17 *Peace be with you* Lk 24:36. *Forgive each other* Jn 20:21-23. *Foot-tapping* Ps 98:4-6. *To greater effort* Heb 10:24. *Jesus living in you* Col 1:27. *Very first apostles* Jn 20:21. *Our Father* Mt 6:9.

3:18-21 *Families and households* Eph 5:22-6:9. *As indeed there is* Gal 3:28. *In which I find myself* 1 Cor 7:20. *Creative and appreciative* Rom 12:10, Prov 31:10-31.

3:22-4:1 *Done away with* Gal 3:28. *Slave's point of view* Philem 10-13. *Kingdom and its King* 1 Cor 7:22. *Do anything for him* 2 Tim 2:21. *Has no favourites* Num 20:12, 1 Cor 9:27. *Worth everything* Mt 25:23.

4:2-4 *Talked about this earlier* Col 1:9-12. *Upon your city walls* Isa 62:6. *With my own prayers* Col 1:3. *Being a mystery* Col 1:27, 2:2. *Keep it open* Rev 3:7. *Can happen here too* Acts 14:27, 1 Cor 16:9. *Sometime soon* 2 Tim 4:16.

4:5-6 *Pointed comments* 1 Pet 3:15-16.

4:7-9 *Met Tychicus before* Acts 20:4, Eph 6:21-22. *May just save his life* Philem 1:10.

4:10-12 *My imprisonment here* Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2. *Into your fellowship* Acts 15:38, Philem 10, 2 Tim 4:11.

4:12-13 *Epaphras* Col 1:7-8, Philem 23.

4:14-16 *Dr Luke* Acts 16:10. *Demas* 2 Tim 4:10. *From Laodicea* Eph 1:1.

4:17-18 *Archippus* Philem 2. *To be faithful* 1 Cor 4:4, 15:58, 1 Th 5:24. *Distinctive scrawl* 2 Th 3:17.

SLOW PAUL: THINKING THROUGH PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this reconstruction, it is assumed that *Philemon* was sent from Rome with *Colossians*. Philemon and his wife Apphia were hosts to a church meeting in their house, though the actual leader of the church may have been their son Archippus. Far from being a scribbled last-minute addendum to *Colossians*, *Philemon* has all the marks of a carefully worked-out and delicately phrased appeal whose success or failure may have meant the difference between life or death for its main subject, Onesimus, an escaped slave of Philemon who had taken refuge with Paul at Rome and had been converted to faith in Christ. Paul was under no obligation to send Onesimus back to his master, but (for reasons unstated) he has decided to do so, even though the Roman law prescribed harsh measures for runaway slaves. As well as being a little gem of ancient literature, the letter is a beautiful illustration of the grace of God in Jesus Christ and of fellow-Christians' love for each other.

Most commentaries on *Colossians* include a section on *Philemon*. A set of study questions may be found on the TISCA website on the *Slow Food* page, or obtained from the TISCA office.

¹ *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker –*
² *also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier – and to the church that meets in your home: ³ grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

1-3 A personal letter from Paul

[1] My dear Philemon,

Greetings from an old lag!

Yes, it's Paul writing, and I'm still in detention here. Life's not too bad. I may not be free to walk the streets or preach in local centres, but at least they've allowed me writing materials (pen, ink, parchment) and I've had a little bit of time to think about what I want to say to you.

Why am I here? Well, of course it's for Jesus, my Messiah and King. If he has chosen in his divine wisdom to close the door on one form of service (travelling, evangelising, freely preaching the gospel), then he's released me for another form (letter writing, one-to-one ministry, and simply enduring for his sake). So every time the key turns in the lock of my door, it's not a human hand

turning it, it's the Lord himself, closing one door only to open another. I'm also Christ's slave for the best reason of all: he's paid the price to set me free and I've gladly chosen to be at his disposal as long as life lasts.

Timothy's here with me, sharing my burdens like a true brother, helping in all kinds of practical ways and sending his greetings with mine. There are others here too, whom I'll mention in a few moments.

This letter is a personal one to you, Philemon. I love you so dearly as a brother; we've shared mission-field battles together, we've pulled together in the same yoke of oxen, we're fellow-servants of Christ.

[2] But of course it's also for Apphia, whose faith has been a constant inspiration to me. It's for Archippus too, who has fought alongside me and knows the realities of discipline and suffering for the gospel. And it's for every member of that family of Christian believers who meet in your house and enjoy your hospitality, worship together and hear the scriptures read and expounded.

[3] So – my traditional benediction – may you be rejoicing daily in the love and strength that flow abundantly from our heavenly Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ who is both enthroned at his right hand and who lives amongst us by his Spirit. May you be knowing his peace of heart and mind that will keep you steadily serving and witnessing. With such a God, who can lack anything?

⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

4-7 Thanksgiving and prayer

[4] One thing there's time for in prison is thanksgiving and prayer! They flow out naturally whenever I think of you. God is here, closer than breathing, continually inspiring and reminding me. [5] But I also get news from folk like Epaphras who tell me about the sacrificial work you yourself are engaged in, proactively meeting the needs of the church members, with a love which springs from your deep dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ.

[6] For instance, I gather that you are spending time with people, individually and in little groups, opening up the scriptures together and exploring the full riches of Christ in the gospel. I have always majored on this myself and I can't think of anything more profitable for you to be doing. The knowledge of the Lord is caught rather than taught, I know, but this kind of personal sharing does both at the same time. It keeps us all accountable to each other and builds everyone up in Christ. So I pray constantly that every moment you spend on this type of ministry may be abundantly fruitful, and may result in lives energised and kept in daily first-hand touch with the Lord.

[7] This is such a precious pastoral gift that you have. I've experienced it myself at your hands and it has caused me an uplifting of spirits and a personal consolation that I have valued very highly. Your love for the Lord, and your genuine concern for your fellow-believers, means that you can enter emotionally into their lives and share their deepest joys and sorrows with them. You are a true brother to so many of us and we appreciate you.

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

8-11 Breaking the news

[8] Which brings me to the main point of my writing to you. Please don't get the idea that I am

bringing you instructions from on high or any such thing. I know that as Christian brothers we can expect or even require each other to act in certain ways because our common faith demands it; but that's not the case here. [9] The ground of my appeal to you is love pure and simple: the Lord's redeeming love to us all, and the friendship and respect that you and I have for each other and for all those who belong to Christ. It's this love that has sustained me in the Lord's service in my advancing years (yes, I'm rather an old man now!), and has kept me hopeful and patient during these frustrating months in detention.

[10] You see, while I've been kicking my heels waiting for my trial before the Emperor, I've given birth to a new Christian soul right here in prison, and his name is – Onesimus. As you know, I haven't any natural children, but I've a large spiritual family consisting of all those who have come to Christ through my ministry, and Onesimus has become one of them. I know this will surprise or even shock you, and if so I apologise – I've been trying to break the news as gently as I could.

[11] Onesimus is a changed man. I know he has let you down badly. When he took the 'Christian' name which means 'I'm an asset' he could hardly have anticipated what an 'ass' he was going to make of himself subsequently. But now he's absolutely determined to make up for all that. He wants to return to your service and demonstrate how useful he really can be. He's made a good start by his practical helpfulness to me here in prison and I could give you many instances of that.

¹² I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for ever – ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

12-16 Heart-searching

[12] In fact I've grown incredibly fond of this lad. As I write this the prospect of losing him is causing me considerable grief and heart-searching, as well as Scripture-searching. But I've bitten the bullet and made up my mind. He's got to go back to you. [13] I can't pretend he's mine any longer. I would dearly like to have kept him all for myself, justifying it with the thought, 'If Philemon were here in person, he'd be attending to my needs in his usual thoughtful way, making life tolerable enough for me so that there's some chance for the gospel to flourish even in these (not really) Godforsaken prison quarters – so why can't Onesimus stand in for him?' [14] But that's not the Lord's way. Even when he's stood in for us all on the cross, he doesn't force his way into anybody's life (though he would have every right to); he waits for us to come to a free and considered decision. That's why I want to discuss everything with you. If you are to act in accordance with the generosity of your nature, it must be free and unconstrained. [15-16] Maybe the way to look at it is as follows: God's providential hand has been in this all along – you have been bereaved of Onesimus for a short time, but painful as this has been, you are being given him back for eternity; and it isn't just the old Onesimus, with his old slavish mentality and his reluctant, lazy demeanour – he's a completely new model, a slave of Christ, my brother and yours, whom you can love and respect as your spiritual equal in the sight of God. I said he's my brother, but of course he's yours in a double sense: he's a part of your family household here on earth, and he's a member of the Lord's household of faith to which you and I also belong.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self.

17-19 Payment of debts

[17] So here he is, standing before you (I imagine Tychicus or whoever acts as courier will have given you the letter to read before bringing Onesimus into your presence) and I want you to imagine that it's not a small, shamefaced slave at all – it's really me, Paul. Just as we used to hug each other like old friends and colleagues, you could give this lad – maybe not a friendly hug, which I realise could be asking a bit much, but at least a welcoming handshake – the kind of unconditional acceptance you would have given me. Again I can't help thinking of Jesus and his cross, and how this very cross isn't a 'Keep out!' sign, it's a 'Come on in!' sign for absolutely anyone. Jesus has paid the full ransom-price for everyone in the world, no matter how much wrong they've done to him or how big a debt they've run up where God is concerned.

[18] Which reminds me to say that if there's anything (and I know there probably is) that he owes to you, whether through rules broken, or offence caused, or actual money stolen, then you are not to impose a swingeing programme of reparation on him; rather, you're to put it on my bill and I'll make sure you're generously repaid. I can hear you saying, 'But of course I wouldn't hear of such a thing!'

[19] I really mean it, and to demonstrate my absolute commitment to this promise, in the absence of an official document of transaction, I'm seizing the pen from my secretary and scratching my own distinctive scrawl at this point: I CONTRACT TO PAY ALL ONESIMUS' DEBTS TO HIS MASTER PHILEMON, SIGNED PAUL. There!

And if you still refuse to honour your side of the bargain, and insist that the full rigour of the law has to be visited upon this lad, perhaps you've forgotten a very considerable debt you owe to me. I'm not talking in financial terms now, but in respect of a currency that's far more precious than gold or silver: the value of a soul rescued from the pit and won for an eternity with God. I'm talking, dear friend, about the time when you heard the story of the Lord Jesus from my own lips, and you produced your litany of objections to the Christian faith – and then by some miracle (because I felt I'd lost every argument) you fell silent and asked me to pray with you as you received Christ into your life. I know I was only the midwife in your spiritual rebirth, but was that such a small thing? Don't you at least owe me something in return?

²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

20-21 Overflow of love

[20] Well, dear friend, I wish I could see your face as you read this! I can imagine what you must be feeling, as your dignity as a Roman head of household wrestles with that pastoral instinct I mentioned earlier, the gift you received when your heart was made new by Christ. Please, please include me in the overflow of love that must surely win this struggle. I so need a deep kingdom ministry right now. My whole being is dried up and withered by what I've been going through, and I just long to stand under a waterfall of Christian compassion and mercy, to know the rich refreshment of the Lord through the benediction of his servant people.

[21] There! I'm going to stop worrying (though it's not that easy). I trust you to do the right thing. I wouldn't have written this letter if I couldn't rely on your commitment to the Lord's will where the work of Christ is concerned. In fact I have a shrewd suspicion that far from doing the basic minimum in response to my pleas, you are going to go way over the top, such is the generosity of your nature.

²²And one thing more: prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

22-25 Final request and greetings

[22] I've got one more request. That spare room of yours and Apphia's: could you make sure it's free, the sheets freshly laundered and turned back on the bed, the windows open to the hills? I'm expecting to visit you once this business is over and done with. Otherwise what's been the point of all your heartfelt petitions, not only the two of you but the gathered church? You see – I've never lost hope, and I know the power of prayer. If it happens, it will be by his grace and his alone. With God nothing is impossible.

[23] Now there are some folk here with me who want to pass on their warm and heartfelt greetings to you personally. Epaphras, of course, who has voluntarily shared my imprisonment, because, as he says, 'we're both the Lord's prisoners-of-war.' This man never ceases to amaze me. Then there are other folk like Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, who help to organise the meetings I hold here and are a key part of my gospel ministry. I couldn't begin to operate without them.

[24] Finally, my own benediction to you, dear friend, and those with you. The grace of Christ be with you, assuring you of the forgiveness he won for you, and of the limitless resources he pours into your life. Love undeserved and free! You may be citizens of earth, but in your spirits you are kingdom people: may the Lord Jesus himself walk with you today and bless you in all you do.

THINKING THROUGH PHILEMON: CROSS-REFERENCES

There are no quotations from or allusions to the OT in this letter. Those suggested below may be clues to Paul's thinking. In particular the Torah injunction at Deut 23:15-16 about not handing over escaped slaves may be 'the elephant in the room' for both Paul and Philemon, as well as Onesimus. There is no agreement about what v6 refers to or means, but the interpretation adopted may find scriptural support.

1-3 *Only to open another* 1 Cor 16:9, Col 4:3. *Chosen to be at his disposal* Exod 21:2-6. *Archippus* Col 4:17. *Suffering for the gospel* 2 Tim 2:3-4. *Who can lack anything?* Rom 8:32, 2 Cor 9:8.

4-7 *Opening up the scriptures together* Deut 6:6-7, Mal 3:16, Col 2:6-7, 3:16a. *Have always majored on this myself* Acts 20:20, 32, 2 Tim 3:14-17.

8-11 *Come to Christ through my ministry* 1 Cor 4:15, Gal 4:19. *How useful he really can be* 2 Tim 2:21, 4:11.

12-16 *As well as Scripture-searching* Deut 23:15-16, Hos 6:6, Mt 9:13, 12:7. *Stood in for us all on the cross* 1 Tim 2:6. *The Lord's household of faith* Gal 6:10, 2 Tim 2:20-21.

17-19 *Come in sign for absolutely everyone* Mk 15:38, Eph 2:14-18. *How big a debt they've run up* Mt 18:27.

20-21 *Made new by Christ* 2 Tim 1:6. *What I've been going through* Ps 63:1, 84:6. *Rich refreshment of the Lord* Isa 28:12, Mt 11:29, Acts 3:19, 1 Cor 16:18, Philem 7. *Epaphras* Col 1:7, 4:10. *Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke* Col 4:10, 14.

22-25 *The gathered church* Acts 12:5, 12. *The power of prayer* Phil 1:19. *Nothing is impossible* Mk 10:27, 14:36. *The meetings I hold here* Acts 28:30-31.

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