

COLOSSIANS

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

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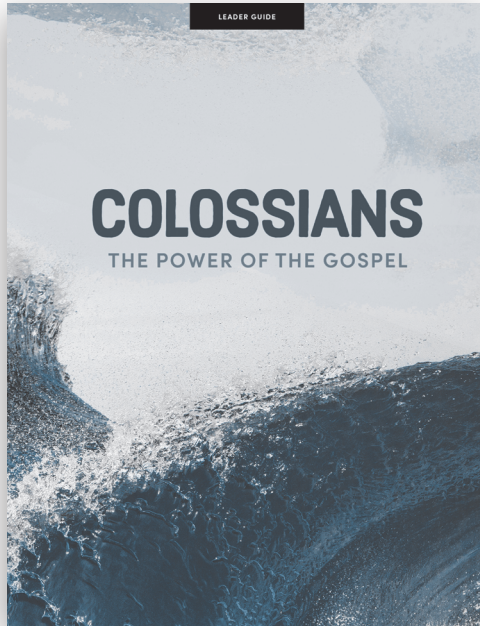
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ALSO AVAILABLE

Colossians: The Power of the Gospel Leader Guide (005853827).

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INTRODUCTION

A Colossian Disappointment

In the fall of 2022, I had the opportunity to take a biblical study tour of Turkey. We followed Paul's footsteps on his mission journeys and visited the sites of the Seven Churches of the Book of Revelation. If I had a wish for all of you, it would be that all of us experience both a mission journey and a study tour of biblical sites, because both are spiritual catalysts that help you see the context of Scripture and how big God is all over our world.

As part of our study tour, we visited the Lycus Valley, about 100 miles inland from the famous New Testament city of Ephesus. The Lycus Valley is home to three cities from the pages of Scripture—Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colossae. Our tour started before dawn the first morning there, as we took a hot air balloon ride of the valley to get a bird's eye view of the area. The first few hundred feet were spectacular. However, by the time we reached our “cruising altitude” of 3,000 feet, I got all kinds of vertigo. In the professional picture taken from the balloon at that altitude, my weak grin clearly says: “Get me down!”

Our next stop was Laodicea. With my feet back on terra firma, I enjoyed this site a lot more. We got to see the magnificent ruins, the remains of the Jewish synagogue there, along with the famous pipes that brought lukewarm water into the city as pointed out in the book of Revelation.

Our final stop that day in the valley was the site of Colossae. As far back as I can remember, I've loved the book of Colossians. It's been an important book in my spiritual growth, and my wife's “life verse” comes from 3:13: **“Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive.”** We hopped off our bus, hiked up the hill and we were disappointed to discover . . . a pile of dirt. They know exactly where the city used to be, as indicated by the sign. But the

city has been considered of so little importance from an archaeological standpoint up to this point, they haven't even bothered to excavate it!¹

Destroyed by one of the devastating earthquakes common to the region in AD 60, all that remains is a large hill with an odd concrete-type bunker from some later date on one side. Unlike its two more illustrious neighbors, Colossae was never rebuilt. This also explains the probable reason why the Colossian church was not included in Jesus's letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2-3. By the time John was exiled on the island of Patmos near the end of the first century, the city no longer functionally existed, and the church had likely scattered to join others in the region.

As we stood there standing on a pile of dirt that is all that remains of a once-proud city, we pulled out our Bibles and we read the book of Colossians in a circle, each of us taking several verses at a time. As we read these timeless passages of Scripture, it dawned on me—sure, I was a bit disappointed to not play “Indiana Jones” exploring this site as we did the others—but this gospel is what it's all about. One day, if Jesus tarries, our achievements and physical buildings and even our bodies—will be nothing but dirt and dust. What endures is Christ and His good news. The city might be gone, but the Word of the Lord our God lasts forever (Isaiah 40:8). The only legacy to us of this once thriving city is Paul's letter to Colossian Christians—but what a legacy it gives us.

1 Since my visit in 2022, the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism has recently announced that excavations will begin at Colossae in 2025 for the first time, carried out on behalf of Pamukkale University. <https://www.archaeologs.com/n/first-excavations-begin-at-colossae-in-2025>. Accessed on October 3, 2025.

A Colossian Discovery

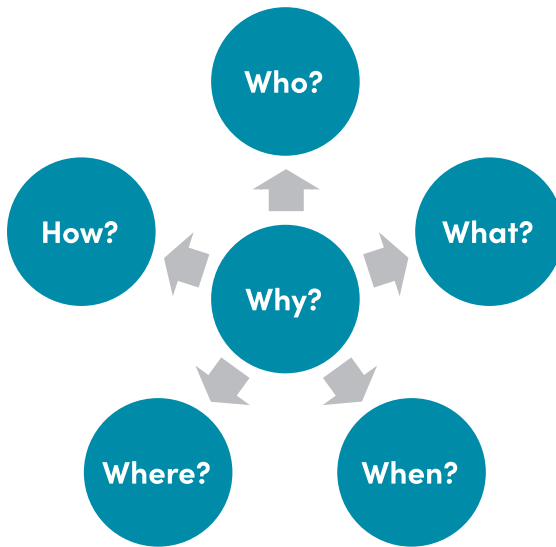
As we'll see in this study, "the miracle of the little church in the Lycus Valley" gives us both theological truths to build on and practical application to order our lives. For example, we'll learn:

- The gospel is the most powerful message to ever be proclaimed. Its message of grace and peace from God the Father provides true hope (1:5) and lasting spiritual transformation (1:6).
- Jesus Christ is not merely prominent; He is the preeminent God over both creation and new creation, the church. He is before all things and by Him all things hold together (1:17).
- We can find joy even in suffering (1:24) because we have the privilege of declaring the "mystery" of the gospel, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27).
- We can guard ourselves against false teaching and train our hearts to spot false gospels because they cannot compare to the *fullness* of the gospel of Jesus Christ (2:8-9).
- If we are "in Christ," then we have experienced spiritual resurrection and been given a new heart. We can put to death sin and put on Christlike love (3:1-3,12-14).
- If Jesus is first in all things (1:18), then He transforms our everyday lives—including our marriages, our parenting, and our vocations (3:18-4:1).
- While we wait for the glorious return of Christ, our priorities are driven by our faith. We devote ourselves to prayer, and we always seek for open doors to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others (4:2-6).

The book of Colossians is not long, but it's powerful. As you work through this study, read it over and over again—around your dining room table, before bed, and first thing in the morning. Reorient yourself and your life around the supremacy of Jesus. As you do, like Paul, no matter your circumstance, your heart will overflow with grace and peace, with gratitude, and with lasting fruit!

A Colossian Compass

Before we dive into our study, we need to be equipped with the context of the book of Colossians. If we were to excavate the biblical site of Colossae, we would use important tools: shovels, pickaxes, sifting boxes, and so on, to help us do the work. In a similar way, every student of the Word of God needs a set of tools to help them unearth the timeless truths found in Scripture. Whenever we start a new book study, I like to equip our church with a “context compass.” Note that unlike a traditional compass, ours has five points instead of four, all designed to clarify for us what is the middle: why our sovereign God inspired these words to be written and preserved for His people.



Who? Paul is the author. Paul claims to be the author of this letter (1:1,23; 4:18), and external testimony to Paul’s authorship is consistent as well. Colossians does use fifty-five Greek words that don’t appear in Paul’s other letters, but Paul had a wide-ranging vocabulary and unique references and responses to the Colossian heresy account for many of these words.

What? Paul wrote a “pastoral letter.” A report reached Paul in Rome about the spiritual condition of the church in Colossae. Paul writes this letter from Rome to a church in a small town to address a big theological problem—the heretical teaching that Jesus isn’t really God but some sort of “divine emanation.” The nature of the false teaching can only be inferred from Paul’s references in his refutation, but it seems to have combined elements of Greek speculation (2:4,8-10), Jewish legalism (2:11-17), and mysticism, perhaps local pagan folk religion (2:18-23). In response, Paul delivers some of the highest Christology in the entire New Testament.

When? Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians in AD 60–61. Along with Philippians, Philemon, and Ephesians, Colossians is one of Paul’s four “prison epistles” written during his first Roman imprisonment (house arrest). It was likely spurred on by Philemon’s need to reconcile with Onesimus (see 4:9), and it’s likely that Philemon was a member of the church at Colossae.

Where? Paul wrote to the church at Colossae. As we’ve noted, at this time, Colossae was a minor city about 100 miles east of Ephesus, located in the fertile Lycus valley. Colossae was once a more populous center of commerce, famous for its glossy black wool, but by the time of Paul’s letter, it had been eclipsed by neighboring cities Laodicea and Hierapolis. When a well-traveled highway through the valley was rerouted, Colossae began to decline, much like communities in our own country that the interstate system bypassed. Apart from this letter, Colossae exerted almost no influence on early church history. Paul never visited this church in person, which was probably founded by Epaphras (1:4-8; 2:1), who likely came to follow Christ during Paul’s three-year ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10; 20:31).

How? Paul gave the Colossians Church practical theology. Typical of Paul, after his greetings, the first half of the letter contains more theology while the second half of the letter provides more application. Chapters 1 and 2 are focused on the supremacy of Christ, with a doctrinal emphasis on who Christ is and what He did for us. Chapter 3 and 4 are focused on how we live out our identity in Christ and what He does through us.

Why? Paul wrote Colossians to declare the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ in all things. Many theologians appeal to this simple but vitally important “formula” for grasping the unique and exclusive nature of the gospel: Jesus + Nothing = Everything. Paul agrees!

Christology matters. Knowing about Jesus isn’t enough. If He is King of kings and Lord of lords, then we need to know Him. Jesus pressed His own disciples to answer this question: **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is? [. . .] But you [. . .] who do you say that I am?”** Simon Peter famously answered with his confession: **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”** (Matt. 16:13-16). For two thousand years, there’s been a universal curiosity and appeal about Jesus. This means that people “say” He’s a lot of things: great moral teacher. Long-haired revolutionary. Personal good-luck charm. Some have even dared call Him their “homeboy,” as popularized on a shirt worn by celebrities and young adults in the 2000s. Many have attempted to shape or fashion a Jesus in their own image or liking rather than having to adjust their lives to the true Jesus revealed in Scripture. In the book of Colossians, Paul gives us some of the clearest and highest Christology in the New Testament so we can rightly exalt Christ in our worship, grow in our sanctification as His disciples, and fulfill our mission to make the true Christ of Scripture known to both our neighbors and the nations!

Now that we have our context in place, we’re ready to dive in. Paul is personally being “squeezed” by his circumstance of being under house arrest, but what comes out of Paul during this time is remarkable—a care and concern for the church, even those that he doesn’t know personally. As we take up the letter, we see Paul didn’t directly attack the Colossian heresy (as he did with the Galatians) but began instead with a tone of encouragement and enthusiasm. The letter opens with Paul “overflowing” with grace, gratitude and a focus on the gospel.

1

POWERFUL GOSPEL

COLOSSIANS 1:1-14

Seeing the Powerful Gospel with Fresh Perspective

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the unique bond that is given to us with Christian brothers and sisters from all over the world. Revelation 7:9-10 powerfully reminds us that the true church is a **“vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language.”** It’s always a joy to meet a believer from another culture and to be encouraged by how God is at work all over the world. These resilient followers of Jesus give us fresh eyes to see our own culture.

Several years ago, we hosted a Christian leader from the Asian nation of Nepal named Raj. Our church was hosting a worldwide conference on adoption and orphan care, and we agreed to serve as a host home for visiting internationals. We have an adopted son from Nepal as well as deep ministry connections to this beautiful but tiny nation, so Raj was matched with us for the week.

Because I was his transportation for the week, Raj got to be one of the family. He rode with me as I took the kids to school, to soccer practice, as we went to the grocery store, and to church. It was daily routine for us, but he seemed to enjoy it. As a first-time visitor to the United States, he didn’t hesitate to ask questions. *All of this grass you have, who plants it all?* While I’ve visited Nepal multiple times, before his question, it had never occurred to me that since Nepal is mountainous, seeing an abundance of grass would seem odd.

As I transported the kids to school one morning on a rural road, Raj asked: *What kind of animals live in your jungles? Do you have tigers?* No, but that would make the drive to school much more interesting!

Observing a typical suburban subdivision, he asked: *What do you call all these large homes here? In my country, we have a word for this. I believe the English word is “mansions.”* His perspective humbled us on things we simply take for granted—perspective matters!

Raj visited our small group Bible Study with us, and the host home had hosted a Cajun crawfish boil the day before. Raj tried a single crawfish. About twenty minutes later, he got very sick during the Bible study. I took him to the local emergency room. Nepal is hundreds of miles from the ocean. He had never eaten shellfish before. But even this uncomfortable experience didn't dampen his spirits. As they pumped him full of allergy medicine in the emergency room, he wanted me to take pictures every five minutes so he could show his friends back home. He told me: *It's like in the movies and television shows. I'm in an American emergency room—this is amazing!* Even swollen up like a cantaloupe, Raj joyfully smiled for his pictures. Thankfully, he recovered within a few hours and even wanted me to take a picture of him in his hospital gown!

Raj gave us the gift of perspective. For a week, we got to see our everyday experience through the eyes of man who lives in a culture that is very different from our own. Sometimes, we need to see our world through a different set of eyes. We need perspective. Often, when it comes to the person of Jesus Christ, we have been hearing about Him, reading about Him and singing about Him for much of our lives. If we're not careful, we begin to take the person of Jesus for granted, along with the power of the gospel that He gave us. We forget that it has the very power to save (Rom. 1:16) and that Christ has all of the spiritual power and abundance that we need. As we dive into the first chapter of Colossians, Paul wants the Colossians to see through his eyes—Jesus is all we truly need!

Paul's Greeting

The Power of Grace and Peace (1:1-2)

God's Grace in Paul's Calling

Paul's personal introduction to the church at Colossae follows the form of a typical letter greeting. Here, he introduces himself as “apostle,” which he did in several of his letters, but this is important here for two key reasons. First, he didn't know the Colossian

church personally, so it established his authority as one who had seen the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:7-9), who had received his message directly from Christ (Gal. 1:15-17), and who had been recognized among established church leaders (Gal. 2:6-9; Acts 9:27-28). Second, the church needed to know that Paul had the authority to address the serious issues of doctrines that were a threat to the church. Paul makes it clear that the use of this title isn't a boast. He calls himself an apostle "by God's will," making it clear that his role isn't about his personal striving or achievement. In these few words, we're reminded of Paul's entire testimony. Paul never got over the reality that Christ transformed him from "terrorist" to "apostle." And we should never get over the testimony that God has given us!

Speaking of perspective, it is not usually until it gets pointed out that modern readers realize just how bold the letter to the Colossians truly is. Paul is shockingly forward. He is writing to people he has never met but still has the audacity to write to them about their personal lives and faith, to instruct and even to challenge them. But by claiming authority as an apostle, he is being even more courageous in speaking in universal terms and truths. He sees the world in black and white, and towering over it all stands Jesus Christ.¹

Words of Affirmation

Identify someone to affirm in their faith and write their name here:

Circle the specific words that you would share with them to affirm their growth as a Christian.

Kind	Loving	Joyful	Strong
Courageous	Nonjudgmental	Forgiving	Generous
Loyal	Friendly	Hospitable	Gracious
Truthful	Faithful	Cheerful	Positive
Service-oriented	Hopeful	Focused	Patient

Other:

CHALLENGE: Share this page with your friend with a verbal explanation of why you selected each word.

God's Grace in Paul's Team

While it's tempting to see Paul as a "lone ranger," he didn't carry out his ministry alone. He credits Timothy here as his co-author, and while it appears that Paul did most or all of the writing, Paul is looking ahead to the day when he'll entrust the Ephesian church and thus oversight for all the churches in that province to the leadership of Timothy. Life and ministry are better as a team, and Paul knew this. People ask me all the time how in the world I can pastor a church in our era, with all the demands and pressures on our time. I'm quick to point out that first and foremost, it's the power of the Holy Spirit that keeps us on the same page, but a close second is an incredible team of men and women, both staff and lay leaders, who carry out the ministries of our church (Eph. 4:11-16).

God's Grace Makes "Shalom" a Reality.

The common Greek greeting in that era was "chairen!" which meant "greetings." But in Paul's worldview, he preferred to use the word for "grace" which sounded similar—*charis*—as a way to bear witness to the sufficient grace of Christ. In this grace, "peace" could become a reality. Even though he wrote in Greek, Paul would have been completely familiar with the Hebrew concept of "shalom," a word that doesn't translate neatly into either the Greek of the New Testament era or the English of our era. It is not simply the absence of hostilities. It is the settled and contented wholeness and flourishing that inevitably result from God's work in His world.² Remember that Paul is under house arrest in Rome, his freedoms limited. But Paul won't let his circumstances dictate his attitude. He is full of grace and peace!

Paul's Perspective

The Power of Gratitude (1:3-8)

Before Paul gets to his main concerns, he wisely builds relational bridges to a congregation that he has never met in person. One of the most powerful ways the Holy Spirit connects His church is through the power of prayer. This was the pattern of the early church—they were **"continually united in prayer"** (Acts 1:14). In those prayers, Paul is grateful for many of the signs of a healthy

church that have rooted the Colossian church in faith, love, and hope—three of Paul’s favorite words!

Gratitude for Faith and Love in Christ

Faith comes first, and Paul is quick to point out the object of their faith, which is “in Christ Jesus.” The Greek word for *faith* means “lean your whole weight upon,” and Paul is encouraged by what he has learned of the depth and strength of the Colossians’ faith. Their faith is apparent by their love for all the “saints,” or the other believers in that part of the world. The word used here is *agape*, or sacrificial love. Christ has demonstrated His love to us so that we can love others in the same manner—seeking to give, not to get—loving because Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Gratitude for Hope in Heaven and in the Word of Truth

Their strong faith is assured by their hope, and Paul points out two dimensions to their hope. First, because they are in Christ, their eternal destination is secure. They already have a “reservation” made for them in heaven, so they can be confident in this life because they know where they are going in the next. This kind of hope isn’t mere wishful thinking or shiny-happy optimism but rather substance and certainty. When we say we “hope” for something, we usually are expressing a longing—but with little confidence that it will come to pass. Our earthly hopes are shared in wistful phrases like, “I sure hope the weather is nice this weekend,” or “I hope my team wins,” or “I hope I’ll get a raise.” However, biblical hope is rooted in the very promises of God in Scripture. We don’t have to doubt that our future destination is secure if we are in Christ Jesus. He’s promised that He’s gone ahead to prepare a place for us (John 14:2-3). While there may be momentary doubts (see: Thomas), Jesus assures us that if we know Him as “the way, the truth, and the life,” (John 14:6), then we know the way to Father. Thus, we can live this life fully because we are confident of what is to come. The second dimension to this hope is that their hope isn’t just for the “sweet by and by,” it’s for their present moment as well—their hope is in the “word of truth,” which is a deliberate term for Paul to use that sets up a contrast with false teaching.

Gratitude for the Gospel

Paul says, **“You have already heard about this hope in the word of truth, the gospel . . .”** (v. 5). The Greek word, *euangelion* literally means “good news,” and it’s the root of our English word “evangelism,” which means “to herald” or “to declare.” The gospel, therefore, isn’t just a good idea; it’s good news that’s rooted in the sovereign plan of God to redeem a people through the death of Jesus on the cross and through His resurrection from the dead. Paul encourages them, that their commitment to this true gospel is “bearing fruit and growing all over the world,” exactly as God promised it would. Again, Paul is giving them perspective to see that if they remain true to Christ, God will keep His word. Our job is to be faithful. The results are up to God!

Gratitude for Epaphras

In celebrating with the Colossians, Paul also reminded them of how they had received the gospel. Acts 19 tells us that out of Paul’s three-year ministry in Ephesus, the gospel spread all over the Roman province of Asia. If you put it together, it seems very likely that Epaphras became a Christian under Paul’s ministry in Ephesus and then went back home (Colossians 4:12) to plant a church in Colossae and minister in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well (4:13). Paul calls him a “dearly loved fellow servant” and a “faithful minister of Christ on your behalf” (1:7). Epaphras was proud of his home church; Paul says, **“he has told us about your love in the Spirit.”** Paul always gave God the glory for raising up faithful servants, ministers, and missionaries to advance the gospel. As you give thanks to God for the gospel, like Paul, give thanks for faithful servants of the gospel as well!

Paul’s Prayer

The Power of Spiritual Growth (1:9-14)

“Overhearing” Paul’s Prayer

In Paul’s letters, he’s not only a Spirit-filled teacher but also a worship leader and a model for how we are to pray. Paul not only gives us sound doctrine, but in his letters, he often breaks into doxology or prayer as well. Remember that his pastoral letters were

originally read out loud to the entire congregation, so in essence, Paul wants the church at Colossae to hear the way he prays for them. It's compelling to hear how Paul prays for this church.

Paul asks for them to be filled with spiritual understanding.

Paul knows what kind of spiritual battle they are facing, one for the truth of the gospel. We'll dive into this more in the study, but the false teachers at Colossae seem to be espousing a form of "Gnosticism," a counterfeit gospel by which they believed they held a "secret knowledge" that was superior and could thus help Christians attain a "deeper spirituality." In our day, there are similar subtle (and not so subtle!) distortions of the gospel that take root and damage our witness and diminish the spiritual health of our churches. Paul knows that what the Colossians truly need is not some complicated system of blended beliefs that would undermine their confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is why Paul prays specifically that they would be "filled"—not with esoteric and demonic spiritual nonsense but with the "knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (1:9). Paul models for us what it means to pray very specifically for others, not in vague terms, but in intentional and careful intercession.

Prayer for a Congregation

In the space below, draft your own prayer for your church or another congregation that you know can use your prayer. Use these prompts as a guide to get you started on ways to intercede, but be specific with your intervention.

Faith:

Unity:

Growth:

Finances:

Perseverance:

A CLOSER LOOK

GNOSTICISM

The word for *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means “to know.” The Gnostics’ core belief was that physical or created matter was inherently evil. Conversely, the Christian worldview teaches that God’s creation is good (Gen. 1:31) but corrupted by the fall into sin and awaiting redemption. Thus, Gnostic teaching gives rise to a wide spectrum of heretical beliefs. Since Colossians is focused on the nature of Christ, for example, the Gnostics believed that Jesus couldn’t really be God since He also was fully man. Instead, they developed the convoluted proposition that God created numerous “little gods,” each of whom was a little more distant from Him, so that finally there was one so distant, He could touch matter. Thus, Jesus was not really God—meaning He was not enough to save! To get to God, the Gnostics built a system by which one could begin with Christ and work one’s way up the spiritual “ladder” back to God. To perform these works to get themselves to God, it appears they borrowed from all kinds of religious practices—extreme forms of Jewish legalism, secret passwords borrowed from Eastern mysticism, concepts from astrology, and elements of Christianity. Does it sound complicated? It is! The gospel is so much more straightforward and satisfying. In place of these complicated systems and secret passwords, you could simply say that “Jesus + Nothing = Everything.” The gospel is simple enough that a child can understand it and deep enough that we can spend a lifetime going deeper and never plumb its depths!

Paul asks for them to be strengthened and empowered.

Paul knows how difficult it is to fight spiritual deception and darkness on a continual basis. He prays that they will not only know the truth, but that they will live out the truth—“so that you may walk worthy of the of the Lord” (Col. 1:10). This takes great endurance and patience, traits that are in short supply if we are living in the flesh. This is why Paul reminds us that it’s not us but God who

“enables” and empowers us to share in this calling. He ends this prayer with a reminder of the victory that Christ has already won on our behalf—that He rescued us from the “domain of darkness” and has transferred us to the kingdom of Christ, who has won our redemption!

The Best Job in the World

Without a doubt, it was a difficult calling for this small church in a small town to not only hold to the truth but to refute the false teachers. We need to remember that not only was there the threat of heresy from inside the church, but there was pressure from the outside as well: The Roman Empire already had their “gospel” that declared “Caesar is Lord” and that demanded allegiance and sacrifice. But Paul’s gratitude and prayer gave them perspective and fueled their hope.

It reminds me of the summer that I was working for an inner-city sports ministry. In the midst of a long, hot summer, I got a stomach bug that I couldn’t shake. One Saturday in particular, I woke up both sick and tired and was feeling pretty down. Then the mail came, including encouragement cards from kids attending other sports camps. One girl’s note was pretty typical until I got to the P. S.—“I think you have the best job in the world because you get to tell others about Jesus every day.” It was the perspective I needed to get me through that tough stretch of summer mission work. Sharing the gospel isn’t a burden—it is a privilege and a joy. If we are in Christ, then each of us has that same honor: We get the privilege of sharing, defending, and spreading the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ. It really is the best “job” in the world!

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. From time to time, we all need fresh perspective. When you are feeling spiritually apathetic or burned out, where do you turn for spiritual renewal?
2. Paul wisely begins his letter expressing his gratitude to God for the faith of the Colossian church, the hope of the gospel, the fruit it is bearing, and specifically for Epaphras, their minister. Where do you see God at work in your church, what gospel fruit do you see, and who in your church is God using right now? Express gratitude to God for these good things and spend some time encouraging each other with your answers (see Heb. 3:13).
3. False teachers were a threat to the church in the first century, and they are a threat to the church today. Like the Gnostics, what streams of the counterfeit gospel do you see making inroads in the church today? How is the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ the antidote?
4. Paul prays for the Colossian church to be strengthened in specific ways, such as endurance, patience, and joy. How does your church need to be specifically strengthened today?