

THE DAILY QUIET TIME REFLECTIONS SERIES

COMPLETE IN CHRIST

*Reflections on the Books of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians,
and Colossians*

Eugene Han

Complete in Christ: Reflections on the Books of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians,
and Colossians

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CONTENTS

How to Use This Book.....	5
Introduction	8
Part One — Galatians: No Other Gospel	11
Chapter One — Galatians 1.....	13
Chapter Two — Galatians 2.....	16
Chapter Three — Galatians 3.....	19
Chapter Four — Galatians 4.....	22
Chapter Five — Galatians 5.....	25
Chapter Six — Galatians 6.....	28
Part Two — Ephesians: Every Spiritual Blessing	31
Chapter One — Ephesians 1.....	34
Chapter Two — Ephesians 2:1–10	38
Chapter Three — Ephesians 2:11–22	41
Chapter Four — Ephesians 3.....	45
Chapter Five — Ephesians 4:1–16.....	49
Chapter Six — Ephesians 4:17–32	53
Chapter Seven — Ephesians 5:1–20.....	56
Chapter Eight — Ephesians 5:21–33	60
Chapter Nine — Ephesians 6:1–4.....	64
Chapter Ten — Ephesians 6:5–24.....	67
Part Three — Philippians: Joy in Every Circumstance	71
Chapter One — Philippians 1:1–11.....	74
Chapter Two — Philippians 1:12–26.....	77
Chapter Three — Philippians 1:27–30.....	80
Chapter Four — Philippians 2:1–18.....	83
Chapter Five — Philippians 2:19–30.....	87

Chapter Six — Philippians 3:1–16	90
Chapter Seven — Philippians 3:17–21	94
Chapter Eight — Philippians 4:1–9	97
Chapter Nine — Philippians 4:10–23.....	101
Part Four — Colossians: Complete in Christ	105
Chapter One — Colossians 1:1–14.....	108
Chapter Two — Colossians 1:15–29	111
Chapter Three — Colossians 2:1–15	114
Chapter Four — Colossians 2:16–23	117
Chapter Five — Colossians 3:1–17	120
Chapter Six — Colossians 3:18–4:1	124
Chapter Seven — Colossians 4:2–18.....	127
Conclusion.....	131
Appendix — Daily Bible Reading Plan	133

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Reading, Reflecting, Together

This book was not written to be read in a single sitting. It was written to be read a little at a time, the way it was first written — alongside an open Bible rather than in place of one. The believers in Berea were commended not simply for their eagerness to hear the Word but for their habit of examining the Scriptures every day to see whether what they had been taught was true (Acts 17:11). That daily habit, sustained over years rather than compressed into a season, is the entire aim of this book and of the Quiet Time practice that produced it.

To help establish that rhythm, we have included, as an appendix at the back of this book, the same daily Bible reading plan we have used at dailyqt.org for well over a decade. It walks through the whole of Scripture in a year, a few chapters at a time, and it does not need to be started in January; you are free to begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there.

In most volumes of this series, each chapter of the book lines up with exactly one day on that plan. This volume works a little differently, and it is worth explaining why. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians are four of the shortest letters in the New Testament — together, only twenty chapters of Scripture, read across just eight days on the reading plan — but they are also four of the densest, packed line by line with doctrine and instruction that rewards slower attention than a single day's reading usually allows. Rather than compress a chapter like Ephesians 5 into one hurried reflection simply because the plan covers it in a single sitting, we have let each chapter of this book follow the

natural movements of the biblical text itself. The result is that most days on the reading plan will correspond to two or more chapters here rather than one. Each Part of this book opens with a note telling you exactly how its chapters line up with the reading plan's days, so you always know how much of this book belongs with how much of your Bible. Simply read every chapter that falls under a given day's assigned passage before moving on to the next day's assignment — whether that takes you fifteen minutes or, for the fuller days, a good deal longer.

Whether you are reading on your own or working through this book with a group like one of our own Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, we would suggest the following simple rhythm for each day, or for each session if you are meeting weekly as a group:

1. Begin and end in prayer. Ask God, before you open either Bible or book, to teach you something true about himself that day, and thank him, when you close both, for whatever he has shown you — even if it is smaller or slower than you expected.

2. Read the assigned Scripture. Using the reading plan in the appendix, read the day's passage directly from your own Bible before turning to our reflections on it. There is no substitute for reading the text itself first, in whatever translation you trust, and letting it raise its own questions before we offer our own.

3. Read the corresponding chapter or chapters in this book. Each chapter walks through a portion of that day's reading in the order Scripture presents it, drawing out its major movements and, where it seemed useful, the historical or theological background behind them.

Treat it as a conversation about the text you just read, not a replacement for it.

4. Answer the discussion questions. Every chapter closes with four questions sized to fill a forty-five- to sixty-minute group discussion, though they work just as well as slower journaling prompts for a reader working through the book alone. Some ask you to notice something in the text; most ask you to notice something in yourself.

If you are part of a group, we would encourage you to read both the day's Scripture and the corresponding chapter or chapters individually during the week, and then use your time together for the fourth step: praying together and working through the discussion questions as a group. This was, after all, how the material in this book first took shape — not in a study or a library, but in a room full of ordinary readers asking each other what a passage meant and why it mattered, week after week, for years. We hope it will do the same for you.

INTRODUCTION

The four letters gathered in this volume were not written together, and they do not share a single occasion. Galatians is likely the earliest surviving letter Paul ever wrote, composed in urgency and even anger, probably from Antioch of Syria before the Jerusalem Council had even convened, to defend a gospel under direct attack. Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians came a decade or more later, from the opposite condition entirely — not freedom but a Roman prison cell, where Paul sat under house arrest for two years awaiting the outcome of his own case, writing with a settled, meditative depth that only comes from a mind no longer able to travel, teach in person, or plant new churches, and so turned instead toward writing down, as fully as it could, what it had already come to know. Tradition groups the latter three together as Paul's Prison Epistles, along with the short personal letter to Philemon; we have grouped Galatians alongside them here because, different as its occasion was, it supplies the doctrinal foundation the other three simply assume. Before Paul could write to the Ephesians about the riches of every spiritual blessing, or to the Colossians about the sufficiency of Christ alone, he first had to win, and win decisively, the argument he makes in Galatians: that a person stands before God by grace, received through faith, and by nothing else.

Read together, in something close to the order they address, these four letters trace a single, developing picture of what it means to be in Christ. Galatians establishes the foundation: justification is by faith alone, apart from the works of the law, so that no achievement of ours, however sincere or however religious, can add anything to what Christ has already accomplished. Ephesians builds on that foundation to describe

the church — not merely a gathering of individually justified people, but a single new humanity, Jew and Gentile united in one body, chosen before the world began and destined to display God’s wisdom to every power in heaven and on earth. *Philippians* turns from doctrine to disposition, showing what this gospel produces in the actual texture of a life lived under real hardship: joy that does not depend on circumstance, because it was never rooted in circumstance to begin with, and a mind — the same mind that was in Christ Jesus — willing to set aside its own interests for the sake of others. And *Colossians* returns, in its own register, to the foundation *Galatians* first laid, defending the same gospel of grace against a different but related threat: not legalism exactly, but a subtler temptation to treat Christ as merely one valuable source of wisdom among several, rather than as the whole and entire answer to every human need.

That last theme gives this volume its title. “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,” Paul writes to the *Colossians*, “and in Christ you have been brought to fullness” (*Colossians* 2:9–10). We have come to believe that this single claim, more than any other, holds these four letters together. Justification by faith alone (*Galatians*) is possible only because Christ’s finished work is complete, requiring no supplement of law-keeping to make it effective. The church’s identity (*Ephesians*) is complete because every spiritual blessing already belongs to it in Christ, with nothing left to acquire elsewhere. Christian joy (*Philippians*) can remain complete regardless of circumstance because its true source, the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, is never actually at the mercy of circumstance to begin with. And *Colossians* simply says outright what the other three letters assume throughout: there is

nothing missing. Whatever a person might imagine they still need to find, add, achieve, or experience beyond Christ himself, in order to be fully right with God and fully alive to him, Paul insists across all four of these letters that it does not exist, because it has already been supplied.

We have arranged the four letters in the traditional order followed by most English Bibles — Galatians, then Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians — rather than by the more probable order of their actual composition, so that the volume moves from Paul’s most urgent defense of grace to his fullest, most settled reflections on what that grace had already accomplished. Each Part that follows opens with its own introduction to the specific circumstances behind that letter, and each chapter walks through a portion of it in the order Scripture presents it. Different as their occasions were, we hope reading all four together, in sequence, leaves you with something no single one of them could give alone: a settled, well-grounded confidence that in Christ, you already have everything you need.

PART ONE

Galatians: No Other Gospel

Galatians 1–6

Galatians is the most personal and the most urgent of Paul's letters. He wrote it, most likely, from Antioch of Syria, shortly after his first missionary journey and before the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 — which would make it the earliest of his letters to survive, written perhaps around A.D. 48 or 49, to the churches he had just planted in the southern region of the Roman province of Galatia (modern Turkey), among them Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. No sooner had Paul left than a group of Jewish teachers arrived behind him, insisting that these new Gentile believers could not truly belong to God's people unless they also submitted to circumcision and the Mosaic law. We call these teachers Judaizers, and their message, however sincerely intended, was in Paul's judgment not a supplement to the gospel but a different gospel altogether — one that, if followed to its logical end, would make the cross of Christ unnecessary.

That explains the letter's tone. There is no opening thanksgiving here, no warm word about the readers' standing before God, of the kind Paul offers almost everywhere else he writes. He is stunned, and he says so in the first breath after his greeting: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you..." (1:6). Everything that follows serves one governing purpose — to show that a person is justified, declared righteous before God, by faith in Jesus Christ and not by anything we do to earn or keep that standing, the law of Moses

included. Paul makes this case three ways across the letter: first from his own experience of having received the gospel by direct revelation, independent of human teachers (chs. 1–2); then from Scripture itself, showing that Abraham was justified by faith centuries before the law ever existed (ch. 3); and finally from plain logic, showing what it would mean, and what it would cost, to add anything to faith as the ground of our acceptance with God (ch. 4). The last two chapters turn from doctrine to life, because Paul was never content to leave truth in the abstract — if we are free from the law, he asks, then free for what?

Martin Luther loved this letter enough to call it “my Katherine,” after his own wife, and Christians across the centuries have called it the charter of Christian liberty. We come to Galatians first in this volume because everything Paul argues here — that we stand before God on the ground of grace alone, received through faith alone — is the foundation underneath the fuller vision of the church, the joy amid suffering, and the sufficiency of Christ that the letters to Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae will go on to build.

This part corresponds to two days on the reading plan. The first day’s reading, Galatians 1–3, is covered in Chapters One through Three below; the second day’s reading, Galatians 4–6, is covered in Chapters Four through Six.

CHAPTER ONE:

Galatians 1

Paul begins this letter the way he begins none of his others: with a claim to authority stated before anything else has even been said. He is an apostle “sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father” (1:1). Every other letter opens with some form of thanksgiving for the readers. Galatians has none. Instead, after the briefest of greetings, Paul moves straight to astonishment and alarm: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (1:6). The Galatians were not drifting slowly. They were being talked out of the gospel within months of receiving it, and Paul writes as a man watching a fire spread while there is still time to put it out.

What exactly were they turning to? Not, in their own minds, away from Christ — the Judaizers who had followed Paul into Galatia almost certainly presented circumcision and law-keeping as an addition to faith in Christ, not a replacement for it. But Paul will not let that distinction stand. Any gospel that adds a requirement to faith, he insists, is not really an addition at all; it is a different gospel, because it changes the very thing that saves a person from something Christ has fully accomplished into something we must still complete. That is why he can pronounce a curse — the word is genuinely that strong — on anyone, “even if we or an angel from heaven,” who preaches a gospel other than the one the Galatians first received (1:8–9). This is not Paul defending his own reputation. It is Paul defending the only thing that can actually save anyone.

To prove that his gospel carries this kind of authority, Paul spends the rest of the chapter establishing where it came from. It did not come from men, and he was not taught it by any human teacher; it came to him “by revelation from Jesus Christ” (1:12). His own biography makes the point better than any argument could. Before his conversion he was not a seeker circling toward the truth — he was its most committed enemy, persecuting the church “beyond measure” and trying to destroy it (1:13). And then, without warning, everything changed: God, Paul says, had set him apart for this calling “from my mother’s womb,” and in his own time simply chose “to reveal his Son in me” (1:15–16). Notice what Paul does not say. He does not describe a gradual dawning of conviction, the fruit of study or persuasion. He describes an unveiling — as though the truth of Christ had been present in him all along, awaiting only God’s chosen moment to be revealed. That is a striking way to describe conversion, and it tells us something about how Paul understood grace long before he sits down to argue for it directly: even his own coming to faith was, from first to last, God’s initiative and not his.

Paul closes the chapter by tracing the years that followed — three years before he even went up to Jerusalem to meet Peter, and then years more in Syria and Cilicia, largely unknown by face to the Judean churches, who only heard the report that “the man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (1:23). Their response was to glorify God because of him (1:24). The chapter that began in astonishment ends in praise — not praise of Paul, but praise of the God whose grace can reach even a man like Saul of Tarsus, which is exactly

the kind of grace the Galatians were now being told was not, after all, quite sufficient.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul distinguishes sharply between a gospel that is added to and a gospel that is replaced, insisting the two amount to the same thing. Are there ways, even subtle ones, that you have been tempted to add a requirement to simple faith in Christ as the ground of your own standing with God?
2. Paul's conversion was not the end of a search but an interruption — God revealing his Son “in” him at a time of God's own choosing, not Paul's. Does that description match how you came to faith, or does it challenge how you have told your own story?
3. The Galatian believers were being persuaded within months of first hearing the gospel. What voices or influences in your own life right now might be capable of moving you off the gospel just as quickly, if you were not paying attention?
4. Paul's changed life became evidence for the gospel before he ever wrote a word of argument for it. What does your own life currently give people reason to glorify God for?

CHAPTER TWO:

Galatians 2

Fourteen years after his conversion, Paul returned to Jerusalem — this time not merely to meet Peter, as in chapter 1, but to lay before James, Peter, and John the gospel he had been preaching among the Gentiles, “for fear that I was running, or had run, my race in vain” (2:2). It is worth pausing over how confident this sounds and how anxious it also sounds. Paul was certain his gospel was true; he was not naive about what it would mean if the pillars of the Jerusalem church rejected it. They did not. Even Titus, a Greek believer present with Paul, was not compelled to be circumcised (2:3), and the apostles, recognizing the grace at work in Paul’s ministry, extended to him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, asking only one thing: that they remember the poor, “the very thing I had already been eager to do” (2:10). It is not hard to notice the quiet irony in that request. The very believers who wanted to bind Gentiles to the law were, in the same conversation, receiving from those Gentiles’ apostle a promise of material generosity toward Jewish believers in need — a small preview of exactly the kind of unity across the ethnic divide that circumcision was being wrongly used to enforce.

Then comes the confrontation that gives this chapter its force. When Peter later came to Antioch, he ate freely with Gentile believers — until certain men from James arrived, and Peter, “fearing those who belonged to the circumcision group,” began to draw back and separate himself, taking even Barnabas along with him in the hypocrisy (2:12–13). Paul’s response was not private correction but public rebuke: “I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (2:11). The issue was not

merely bad manners. Peter's withdrawal from the table implied, whether he meant it to or not, that Gentile believers were still second-class members of God's family unless they lived like Jews. Paul's question to him cuts straight to the inconsistency: "If you, being a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" (2:14).

Out of that confrontation comes one of the great doctrinal statements in all of Scripture: "a person is not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ... because by the works of the law no one will be justified" (2:16). This is the hinge on which the entire letter turns. No one — not Peter, not Paul, not the most scrupulous law-keeper who ever lived — can be declared righteous before God by keeping the law, because no one keeps it well enough to be declared righteous by it. What follows is one of Paul's most personal statements of what faith in Christ has actually done to him: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20). Paul is not describing a change in his behavior so much as a change in his identity. The old self that once tried to earn standing with God through the law has died; what remains is a life no longer sustained by his own effort but by Christ living within him, received and continued the same way it began — by faith. And that leaves Paul with one final, unanswerable argument against anyone tempted to add law-keeping back into the gospel: "if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (2:21). If we could have earned this standing any other way, the cross would have been an unnecessary tragedy rather than the only sufficient remedy.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Peter's fear of a particular group's opinion led him to withdraw from Gentile believers he had eaten with freely just days before. What relationships or convictions in your own life are you most tempted to quietly compromise under social pressure?
2. Paul confronted Peter publicly and directly rather than avoiding the conflict. Is there a situation in your church or family right now where a loving but direct confrontation, rather than silence, is actually the more Christlike response?
3. "I have been crucified with Christ... the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God." How would you describe, in your own words, the difference between living by your own effort and living by Christ's life within you?
4. Paul says that if righteousness could be earned any other way, Christ's death would have been pointless. Where in your own thinking about your standing before God do you still quietly rely on your own performance rather than resting fully in what Christ has done?

CHAPTER THREE:

Galatians 3

“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1). Paul does not soften the opening of this chapter. He is baffled that people who began their Christian lives by receiving the Spirit through simple faith — not through any work of the law, since they had not even heard of the law’s demands when they believed — are now being told they must complete what faith began by adding the law’s requirements. “Are you so foolish?” he asks. “After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (3:3). It is worth noticing what Paul assumes here: that whatever the Judaizers were offering, they were offering it as a completion, a finishing touch, something the Galatians still lacked. Paul’s whole argument is that there was nothing left to finish. What the Spirit begins by faith, the Spirit also completes by faith, from first to last.

Paul’s first line of proof is Scripture itself, and he goes straight to the case every Jewish reader would recognize as decisive: Abraham. “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (3:6, quoting Genesis 15:6). Notice the order. Abraham was declared righteous centuries before the law was given at Sinai, and he was declared righteous by believing God’s promise, not by performing any requirement. Paul’s conclusion follows directly: “those who have faith are children of Abraham” (3:7) — not those who share his bloodline or keep his descendants’ law, but those who share his faith. The law, far from being the path to blessing, actually pronounces a curse on everyone who relies on it, “because it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who

does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law” (3:10). No one meets that standard. What the law could only curse, Christ redeemed: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (3:13), so that the blessing originally promised to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through faith in Jesus Christ.

Then Paul turns to explain what the law was actually for, if it was never meant to save anyone. He compares it to a guardian, or tutor — the household servant in the ancient world charged with escorting a child safely to school and enforcing discipline until the child came of age. “So the law was our guardian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (3:24–25). A guardian’s authority is real but temporary, built into the arrangement from the start to expire once its purpose is served. The law’s purpose was never to make anyone righteous; it was to reveal how far short of righteousness we all fall, and so to shut every mouth up to faith as the only remaining hope. Once faith has come — once Christ himself has arrived and been received by faith — the guardian’s temporary authority ends, not because the law was flawed, but because it had done exactly what it was always meant to do and no more.

The chapter closes on a note that must have stopped every Judaizing argument cold: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (3:28–29). The very inheritance the Judaizers were telling Gentile believers they still needed to earn through circumcision, Paul says, already belongs to every believer in Christ, without distinction,

because it was never earned by anyone to begin with. It was promised, and it is received the same way Abraham first received it — by faith.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul assumes the Galatians began by faith and were now being tempted to finish by their own effort. In what areas of your own spiritual life are you most tempted to think faith got you started but personal effort must now finish the job?
2. Abraham was declared righteous by believing God's promise, centuries before there was any law to keep. How does knowing that justification by faith is actually the older, original pattern — not a New Testament innovation — change how you think about it?
3. The law is compared to a guardian whose authority was always meant to be temporary. Can you think of other good and necessary things in your own life — rules, disciplines, seasons — that were meant to serve a purpose for a time and then give way to something greater, rather than becoming permanent burdens?
4. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile... you are all one in Christ Jesus.” What distinctions between believers — ethnic, social, economic, generational — do you still find yourself treating as more significant than this shared inheritance in Christ?

CHAPTER FOUR:

Galatians 4

Paul opens this chapter with a homely illustration drawn straight from household law: an heir who is still a child is no different, in practical terms, from a slave, even though he owns the whole estate, because he remains under guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. “So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world,” Paul writes, “but when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son... to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship” (4:3–5). What the Galatians were being offered as a step forward, into deeper maturity, was in reality a step backward, into the very underage condition Christ had come to end. And with adoption comes the Spirit, who enables every believer, Jew and Gentile alike, to cry out to God with the same intimate word Jesus himself used: “Abba, Father” (4:6). Paul’s logic is precise and pointed: “So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir” (4:7). There is nothing left to earn, because there is nothing an heir needs to earn.

That makes what comes next almost bewildering. Paul cannot understand why people who once did not know God at all — who “were slaves to those who by nature are not gods” (4:8) — would now, having come to know God, or rather having been known by him, want to turn back to “weak and miserable forces” by observing special days and months and seasons and years (4:9–10). It is worth sitting with the phrase “or rather are known by God.” Paul catches himself mid-sentence, as if to make sure no one credits their own knowing before

God's prior knowing of them. Their coming to God was, from the beginning, God's initiative, not their achievement — which makes their present drift back toward earning God's favor by ritual observance all the more tragic. Paul's fear for them is not academic. "I fear for you," he writes, "that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (4:11). And then he appeals to them not as an authority defending a doctrine but as a friend recalling a bond: he reminds them of the physical illness that first brought him to them, of how they received him "as an angel of God" and would have torn out their own eyes to give them to him if they could have (4:13–15). "Have I now become your enemy," he asks, "by telling you the truth?" (4:16).

The chapter's final movement is an allegory Paul draws from the story of Abraham's two sons — Ishmael, born to the slave woman Hagar according to the ordinary course of nature, and Isaac, born to the free woman Sarah as the result of God's own promise (4:22–23). Paul reads these two births as representing two covenants: Hagar corresponding to the covenant of law given at Sinai, which bears children into slavery, and Sarah corresponding to the free Jerusalem above, our true mother, who bears children of promise, as Isaac was (4:24–26). The Judaizers, in other words, wanted the Galatians to trade their birthright as children of promise for a return to the status of children of slavery — Ishmael's status, not Isaac's. Paul's instruction, quoting Genesis itself, is stark: "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son" (4:30). The point could not be sharper. Law and grace cannot share an inheritance. To choose one is, in the end, to give up any claim on the other.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul compares an underage heir to a slave, even though the heir already owns everything. Are there ways you live as though you must still earn what God has already given you as his adopted child?
2. Paul corrects himself mid-sentence — from “now that you know God” to “or rather are known by God” — to keep the emphasis on God’s initiative rather than ours. How does remembering that God knew and pursued you first change the way you think about your own spiritual growth?
3. Paul appeals to the Galatians on the basis of a personal relationship, not just doctrine, reminding them of how they once received him. Is there someone drifting from the truth in your own life who might be better reached by a reminder of relationship than by another argument?
4. The allegory of Hagar and Sarah presents law and grace as two ways of living that cannot ultimately be combined. Where in your own walk with God are you tempted to mix these two — trusting Christ for salvation but quietly relying on rule-keeping for your sense of standing before him day to day?

CHAPTER FIVE:

Galatians 5

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (5:1). This verse functions almost like a hinge for the whole letter, gathering up everything Paul has argued in chapters 1 through 4 and turning it into a command. Freedom, for Paul, is not a doctrine to admire from a distance; it is a ground to stand on and defend. And the danger he warns against is specific: “if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all” (5:2). This is a startling statement to make about a single ritual practice, until we notice Paul’s reasoning: circumcision, in the context the Judaizers were pressing, represented an entire system — accept this one requirement of the law as necessary for standing with God, and logically you are “obligated to obey the whole law” (5:3). At that point grace and law-keeping cannot coexist as two paths to the same destination; a person who seeks to be justified by the law, Paul says bluntly, “has been alienated from Christ” and has “fallen away from grace” (5:4). Justification is not a project two systems can share credit for. It belongs entirely to one or the other.

But Paul is equally alert to the opposite danger, and this is where the chapter turns from warning to instruction. Freedom from the law’s demands could easily be twisted into an excuse for self-indulgence, and Paul heads that off directly: “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love” (5:13). Freedom, rightly understood, was never meant to be freedom from all obligation. It is freedom for a new

kind of obligation — one rooted not in fear of the law’s curse but in love freely given. “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14). This is the answer to anyone who worries that removing the law removes all moral seriousness from the Christian life. The law’s true center was never abolished. It has simply been relocated, from an external code enforced by threat of curse to an internal reality produced by the Spirit and expressed through love.

That relocation is the subject of the rest of the chapter. Paul describes a real, ongoing conflict within every believer: “the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want” (5:17). This should correct any notion that becoming a Christian instantly grants the power to obey perfectly. It does not. What it grants is a new ally in the fight and a new direction for the will. “Walk by the Spirit,” Paul instructs, “and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16), and then he sets two lists side by side so that no one could mistake which direction that walk is meant to take: the works of the flesh — sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, envy, and more, none of which inherit the kingdom of God (5:19–21) — against the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, against which, Paul notes almost as an aside, “there is no law” (5:22–23). No law is needed to restrain what the Spirit himself produces. And Paul closes with a simple description of what it now means to live under this new arrangement: “since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (5:25) — not marching ahead under our own power, and not lagging behind in old patterns of the flesh, but walking, step by step, at the pace the Spirit sets.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul commands the Galatians to “stand firm” in their freedom rather than simply possessing it passively. What would it look like this week for you to actively defend your freedom in Christ against something that threatens to put you back under a yoke of earning God’s approval?
2. Freedom, for Paul, is freedom for loving service, not freedom from all obligation. Where have you been tempted to treat Christian freedom as an excuse rather than as a summons to serve others humbly?
3. Paul is honest that the flesh and the Spirit remain in real conflict even for believers, so that we cannot simply do whatever we want. Does this match your own experience of the Christian life, or have you expected a level of automatic victory over sin that Scripture never actually promises?
4. Look again at the fruit of the Spirit in 5:22–23. Which of these qualities do you most clearly see growing in your life right now, and which one do you most need to ask the Spirit to cultivate in you?

CHAPTER SIX:

Galatians 6

Paul closes his letter the way he has written the whole of it — moving without any real seam between doctrine and daily life, because for Paul the two were never separate categories. “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently” (6:1). This single verse contains an entire ethic of church discipline in miniature. The goal named here is restoration, not exposure; the method is gentleness, not condemnation; and the posture required of the one doing the restoring is self-examination, not superiority — “watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted” (6:1). Anyone who has ever tried to help a fellow believer out of sin knows how easily correction curdles into self-righteousness. Paul’s instruction guards against exactly that danger by reminding every restorer that they, too, stand only by grace. From there Paul moves to a broader principle that covers far more than church discipline: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). It is a striking phrase — not the law of Moses, which Paul has spent five chapters showing cannot justify anyone, but the law of Christ, fulfilled not by ritual observance but by shouldering what is heavy for someone else.

Paul then turns to a theme that runs through nearly all his letters but takes on particular weight here: sowing and reaping. “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (6:7). In context, this is not a general statement about karma; it is a specific warning about where a person invests their life. “Whoever sows to please

their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (6:8). And because this kind of sowing is slow, unglamorous, and easy to grow discouraged over, Paul adds one of Scripture’s most practical exhortations to perseverance: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (6:9). Every act of costly love, every burden carried for someone else, every quiet obedience that produces no visible fruit today is still, Paul insists, seed sown toward an eventual and certain harvest.

The letter’s final paragraph, written in Paul’s own large handwriting as a personal seal on everything a scribe had recorded for him (6:11), returns one last time to the Judaizers, and Paul does not soften his assessment of their motives: “Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ” (6:12). Even their apparent zeal for the law, Paul suggests, was partly self-protective — easier to boast in Gentile converts’ circumcision than to bear the offense the cross itself provokes. Paul’s own boast could not be more different: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14). Neither circumcision nor its absence counts for anything, he says; “what counts is the new creation” (6:15) — the very thing Christ has already accomplished in everyone who believes, apart from any work of the law. Paul signs off with a final blessing on “the Israel of God” (6:16), a phrase best understood as everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, who walks by this rule of grace, and with a last, weary appeal: “let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks

of Jesus” (6:17) — the scars of his own suffering for this gospel standing as more compelling proof than any argument he could still make. The letter that opened in astonishment closes, fittingly, in grace: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen” (6:18).

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul says restoration should be done gently, by those who are simultaneously watching themselves for the same temptation. When you have corrected or confronted someone else’s sin, has your own posture been more like gentle restoration or superior judgment?
2. “Whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” What are you currently sowing to — the flesh or the Spirit — in the ordinary, unglamorous decisions of an average week?
3. Paul suggests the Judaizers’ zeal for the law was partly about avoiding persecution for the offense of the cross. Are there ways you soften or avoid the offense of the gospel in your own life to make yourself more comfortable or acceptable to others?
4. Paul’s only boast is in the cross of Christ. What do you find yourself most tempted to boast in instead — your own effort, your own record, your own reputation — and what would it look like to let that go?

PART TWO

Ephesians: Every Spiritual Blessing

Ephesians 1–6

Paul wrote Ephesians from house arrest in Rome, most likely around A.D. 60–62, during the same imprisonment that produced Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians — the four letters tradition calls the Prison Epistles. Rome had brought Paul to the capital of the empire in chains, but it also placed him, however unwillingly, exactly where the risen Christ had told his disciples the gospel must eventually go: “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). While under guard, Paul received visitors and news from the churches he had planted across Asia Minor. Epaphras arrived with word from Colossae — good news that the gospel was bearing fruit there, and troubling news that a new teaching, part mysticism and part angel-worship, was creeping into the church. Present with Paul as well was Onesimus, a runaway slave whom Paul had led to Christ and was now sending back to his master Philemon, a member of the Colossian church, with a letter asking that he be received as a brother rather than punished as a fugitive. Tychicus was entrusted with carrying these letters home, traveling through Ephesus on his route — the city where Paul himself had ministered for roughly three years (Acts 19–20) and had not seen in person for several years since. Paul seized the occasion to write to that beloved church as well.

Unlike most of Paul’s letters, Ephesians was not written to correct a specific crisis. There is no false teacher being named, no scandal being addressed, no argument being refuted. It reads instead like a letter of

reflection rather than of urgent correction — closer in spirit to Romans than to Galatians or Corinthians — likely intended to circulate among the churches of the region rather than address the Ephesians' situation alone. That freedom from a specific occasion let Paul write with unusual scope. Where Galatians defended the gospel of grace against a specific threat, Ephesians simply unfolds what that gospel has actually accomplished: the eternal plan of God, decided before the world began, now being worked out in history through the creation of a single new people, Jew and Gentile alike, united in Christ as his body.

The letter falls naturally into two halves, and Paul himself marks the turn at 4:1: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Everything before that verse is doctrine — who God is, what he has done, and who we now are in Christ. Everything after it is application — how such people are actually meant to live, in the church, in marriage, in the family, at work, and in spiritual battle. Paul's consistent pattern, here and nearly everywhere else he writes, is to ground behavior in belief rather than the reverse. He never asks his readers to live rightly before he has first shown them, in exhaustive and worshipful detail, exactly who they now are in Christ. The two halves of this letter, taken together, are the fullest picture in all of Scripture of what it means that the church is not an afterthought in God's plan but its intended centerpiece — chosen before creation, purchased at the cross, sealed by the Spirit, and destined, in the end, to display the wisdom of God to every power in heaven and on earth.

This part corresponds to two days on the reading plan. The first day's reading, Ephesians 1–3, is covered in Chapters One through Four

below; the second day's reading, Ephesians 4–6, is covered in Chapters Five through Ten.

CHAPTER ONE:

Ephesians 1

No chapter in Paul's letters repeats a single phrase more insistently than this one repeats "in Christ" — ten times in thirty-one verses, by one careful count, along with its equivalents "in him" and "in the One he loves." Before Paul explains a single doctrine, he wants his readers to notice the pattern: every spiritual blessing they possess, they possess only because they are joined to Christ. Chosen in him before the creation of the world (1:4). Adopted through him (1:5). Redeemed and forgiven in him (1:7). Included in him when they heard the message of truth (1:13). Sealed in him with the promised Holy Spirit (1:13). There is no blessing described anywhere in this passage that exists for a believer apart from union with Christ. Nothing here is generic religious benefit; all of it is Christ's own inheritance, shared with everyone joined to him by faith.

The chapter's opening movement is a single, unbroken sentence in the Greek — Paul apparently too full of praise to pause for a period — moving from eternity past to eternity future without a breath. Before the world existed, God chose us in Christ "to be holy and blameless in his sight" (1:4), and in love he predestined us for adoption as his own children, "in accordance with his pleasure and will" (1:5). This is not a truth many readers find comfortable at first, because it removes any sense that God's choice was a response to something admirable he foresaw in us. It was not. It was, as Paul says three times in this passage alone, "for the praise of his glorious grace" (1:6), "for the praise of his glory" (1:12), and again "to the praise of his glory" (1:14). Our salvation, from its very first cause in eternity past, exists to magnify God rather

than to flatter us — which is, on reflection, the only kind of salvation secure enough to be worth having. If God’s choice depended even partly on something changeable in us, so would our standing before him.

That security only deepens as the chapter proceeds. Redemption comes “through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (1:7) — not a bargain struck but a debt fully paid. And once a person believes, they are “marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (1:13–14). A seal in the ancient world signified ownership and authenticity, carrying the full authority of whoever pressed it; a deposit guaranteed that the full payment would follow. Together, the images tell us that the Spirit’s presence in a believer’s life is not a vague spiritual feeling but a legal and relational certainty — proof of belonging, and promise of everything still to come.

The chapter closes with Paul in prayer, and it is worth noticing exactly what he asks for. He does not pray that the Ephesians would receive more blessings; he prays that they would understand the blessings they already have — “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (1:18–19). That power, Paul says, is nothing less than “the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead” (1:19–20), the very power that seated Christ far above every ruler, authority, and power, in this age and the one to come, with everything placed under his feet, and Christ himself given as head over everything “for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him

who fills everything in every way” (1:22–23). It is a staggering claim to make about an ordinary, struggling group of believers in a provincial city — that the church is nothing less than the fullness of the one who fills the entire universe. But this is exactly the vantage point from which Paul intends every believer to understand their own life from this point forward: not from ground level, looking up at their circumstances, but from the heavenly realms, looking down at a Christ already enthroned over everything that could ever trouble them.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul repeats “in Christ” or its equivalent ten times in this chapter alone. Which of the specific blessings named here — chosen, adopted, redeemed, sealed — do you most need to be reminded is true of you today?
2. God’s choice of us “before the creation of the world” exists, Paul says three times, “for the praise of his glory,” not because of anything admirable he foresaw in us. Does removing your own merit from the equation make God’s choice feel more secure to you, or does it unsettle something in how you have understood your own salvation?
3. Paul describes the Holy Spirit as both a seal, marking ownership, and a deposit, guaranteeing what is still to come. How does thinking of the Spirit’s presence in these legal, relational terms — rather than as a feeling to be chased — change how you look for evidence of his work in your life?

4. Paul prays not for more blessing but for clearer sight of the blessing already given. What is one truth about your identity in Christ that you know intellectually but need the Spirit to make more real to your heart this week?

CHAPTER TWO:

Ephesians 2:1–10

Paul does not ease into this chapter. He begins with the bluntest possible description of what every believer was before Christ: “dead in your transgressions and sins” (2:1), following “the ways of this world” and “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (2:2), gratifying the cravings of the flesh, and “by nature deserving of wrath” (2:3). It would be easy to read past these verses quickly, eager to reach the good news that follows, but Paul wants his readers to sit with the diagnosis first. Dead people cannot revive themselves. They cannot decide to seek God, understand the gospel, or exercise saving faith by their own unaided will, because death has no capacity for self-rescue. This is not a picture of people who were merely sick, weak, or handicapped in their pursuit of God; it is a picture of people who, apart from grace, had no pursuit of God in them at all.

That is exactly what makes the next word in the passage so striking. “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (2:4–5). Everything that follows in this chapter flows from that single conjunction. God did not find spiritually willing people and simply assist their efforts; he made dead people alive — the same kind of sovereign, one-sided act by which he first spoke light into darkness at creation. And what he did for us, he did with a specific future already in view: he “raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (2:6–7). Our salvation is not only a rescue from the past;

it is a display, unfolding across all the ages still to come, of exactly how kind God actually is.

Verses 8 and 9 gather this whole argument into the single most quoted sentence in the letter: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (2:8–9). Every word here has been fought over across the centuries, and rightly so, because the stakes are enormous. If any part of our salvation originates in us — our own effort, our own decision, our own contribution of faith generated by our own unaided will — then some sliver of boasting remains available to us, however small. Paul closes that door entirely. Salvation, from its beginning in grace to its reception through faith, is gift from first to last, precisely so that no one, ever, could stand before God and claim even partial credit for their own rescue. This is not a truth meant to make us passive. It is meant to make us grateful — and gratitude, rightly understood, becomes the deepest possible motive for obedience, far sturdier than fear of failing to measure up.

That is exactly where the passage lands: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (2:10). The Greek word behind “handiwork” is *poiema*, the root of our English word “poem” — we are, in some real sense, God’s own composition, crafted with intention. And notice the order once more: good works do not produce this new creation; this new creation produces good works, works God had already prepared before we ever took our first step in them. We are not saved by our good works, and we are not even, in the deepest sense, the originators of them.

We are saved for them, walking into a path God laid out in advance, doing works that were his idea before they were ever ours — so that whatever fruit follows in a believer’s life, the credit, like the salvation itself, belongs to God alone.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul describes our condition before Christ as spiritual death, not spiritual sickness or weakness. How does thinking of your former state as death, rather than merely difficulty, change how you understand what God actually did to save you?
2. “But God, who is rich in mercy... made us alive.” Can you recall the moment, or season, when you first became aware that God had done this for you? How does remembering it shape your gratitude today?
3. Ephesians 2:8–9 insists that even the faith by which we are saved is a gift, not a self-generated act, “so that no one can boast.” Does this understanding of grace increase or decrease your sense of security in your salvation, and why?
4. Paul says believers are God’s handiwork, created for good works he prepared in advance. Is there a good work you sense God preparing you for right now — something you did not plan or originate, but that seems to be opening up in front of you?

CHAPTER THREE:

Ephesians 2:11–22

Having shown what Christ has done for the individual believer, Paul now widens the lens to show what Christ has done between two entire peoples who had been separated for as long as either had existed: Jews and Gentiles. He begins by reminding his largely Gentile readers exactly what they once were excluded from — “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (2:12). This was not a minor social disadvantage. The covenants, the promises, and the hope of a coming Messiah belonged, in redemptive history, to Israel first; Gentiles stood outside looking in, with no claim on any of it apart from what Israel’s God might choose to extend to them.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13). The change Paul describes is not merely spiritual in the abstract; it had a literal, physical symbol in first-century Jerusalem. A stone barrier stood in the temple courts, separating the outer Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts reserved for Jews, inscribed with a warning that any Gentile who crossed it did so on pain of death. Paul almost certainly has that barrier in mind when he writes that Christ himself “is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14). What Rome could enforce with a death sentence, Christ dismantled at the cross, by setting aside “the law with its commands and regulations” — the entire Mosaic covenant that had, by God’s own design, marked Israel off from every other nation. His purpose, Paul

writes, was “to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (2:15–16). Notice what is not in view here: Gentiles being absorbed into Israel, or Israel being dissolved into a generic humanity. Something genuinely new was created — one new humanity, neither strictly Jewish nor strictly Gentile, united entirely in Christ.

The practical result follows immediately. Those who were once far away and those who were near now share equal access to the Father “by one Spirit” (2:18), because the same Spirit indwells every believer regardless of ethnic origin. “Consequently,” Paul writes, “you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household” (2:19). Paul then shifts metaphors from citizenship to architecture, describing this new, united people as a building rising from a single foundation — “the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (2:20). In him, Paul writes, “the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (2:21–22). This is a breathtaking claim for a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile believers in a minor provincial city to hear about themselves: that they, together, constitute nothing less than God’s own dwelling place, the successor to the temple in Jerusalem, indwelt now not by a localized presence behind a veil but by the Spirit of God himself, spread across every believing heart.

What was true of Jew and Gentile in the first century remains true of every dividing wall believers are tempted to rebuild today — ethnic, cultural, economic, generational. The cross that reconciled Jew and Gentile did not leave a partial peace behind, patched together and fragile. It created something genuinely new, and that new humanity, wherever two or more believers from different backgrounds now gather in Christ's name, is meant to go on demonstrating, generation after generation, exactly what Christ accomplished when he tore down the wall that no human effort could ever have removed.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul reminds the Gentile believers of exactly what they once were excluded from before reminding them of what they now have. Why might it matter for your own gratitude to remember clearly what you were separated from before Christ, rather than moving straight to your present blessings?
2. The dividing wall in the Jerusalem temple was a physical, visible barrier enforced by law. What are the modern equivalents of dividing walls — visible or invisible — that Christ's reconciling work should be tearing down in your own church or community?
3. Paul says Christ created "one new humanity," not simply a truce between two old ones. How does this distinction — genuine new creation rather than mere tolerance — change how you think about unity across cultural or ethnic lines in the church?
4. Believers together are described as God's dwelling place, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the

cornerstone. What would it look like for your own local church to live more consciously as though it really were the place where God's Spirit dwells?

CHAPTER FOUR:

Ephesians 3

Paul begins this chapter as though he is about to move directly into prayer — “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...” (3:1) — and then interrupts himself for eighteen verses before finally returning to that sentence in verse 14. What interrupts him is worth noticing: Paul cannot mention his imprisonment without immediately explaining why it was worth enduring, and that explanation becomes this chapter’s real subject, the mystery of Christ.

A mystery, in Paul’s vocabulary, is not something mysterious in our modern sense of the word, something puzzling or hard to understand. It is something previously hidden by God’s own design and now, in God’s own time, fully revealed. “This mystery,” Paul writes, “is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:6). The Old Testament had promised that Gentiles would one day be blessed through Israel, but it had not disclosed that they would become fellow members of a single body, on entirely equal footing, apart from the law of Moses altogether. That specific arrangement remained hidden “in other generations” and has “now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (3:5) — Paul included among them, though he takes obvious care to describe his own position with unusual humility, calling himself “less than the least of all the Lord’s people” (3:8), a man who had persecuted the church before he ever proclaimed it.

Paul then extends the purpose of this mystery beyond the church itself, into a realm most readers rarely consider when thinking about their own local congregation: “his intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (3:10). Whatever exactly is meant by these rulers and authorities — and Paul elsewhere identifies spiritual forces of evil among them (6:12) — the claim is staggering. An ordinary gathering of Jewish and Gentile believers, meeting in someone’s home in a minor provincial city, is functioning as a kind of display case for angels and demons alike, showing them a wisdom of God they could not have anticipated: that the very people meant to be permanently divided by history, law, and hostility have been reconciled into a single family through the cross. The unity of an ordinary local church, in other words, is not a merely human achievement worth admiring. It is cosmic evidence, visible to spiritual powers, of exactly how wise and resourceful God’s grace actually is.

Only after all of this does Paul finally return to his interrupted sentence and pray — not for the Ephesians’ circumstances to improve, but for their inner life to be strengthened: “that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (3:16–17). He prays that they, “being rooted and established in love,” would have power to grasp the full dimensions of Christ’s love — its width and length and height and depth — and to know a love that ultimately “surpasses knowledge” (3:18–19), a phrase that captures something true about every believer’s experience of God’s love: we can always know more of it, and it will always exceed what we currently know. The chapter closes

with one of the most soaring doxologies in all of Scripture: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (3:20–21). Notice where that glory is directed — not only to Christ in the abstract, but “in the church,” the very body of ordinary, once-divided people this entire chapter has just described.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. A biblical mystery is something once hidden and now revealed, not something puzzling. Are there truths about God’s plan that once felt confusing to you but have become clearer as you have grown in the faith?
2. Paul says the church’s unity displays God’s wisdom to spiritual powers in the heavenly realms. Does it change how you think about your own church’s unity, or lack of it, to consider that something beyond human eyes may be watching?
3. Paul prays that believers would grasp a love that “surpasses knowledge” — meaning there is always more of it to know. What is one way you have experienced God’s love more deeply this past year than you had before?
4. The doxology asks God to be glorified specifically “in the church.” How does your own participation in your local church — its unity, its worship, its ordinary gatherings — currently bring glory to God, and where might it fall short of that calling?

CHAPTER FIVE:

Ephesians 4:1–16

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (4:1). With this verse Paul turns from doctrine to application, and it is worth pausing over the word “then.” Everything commanded from this point forward in the letter rests on everything explained in the first three chapters. Paul never asks his readers to behave a certain way in order to earn God’s favor; he asks them to behave in a way that fits the favor they have already, freely, been given. That is the difference between law and gospel ethics in a single word: not “do this to become,” but “become this because.”

The chapter describes two distinct kinds of unity, and distinguishing them matters. The first is a unity believers are commanded to keep, or maintain, described in verses 1 through 6: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (4:3–6). This unity already exists the moment a person believes; it is the shared experience of salvation common to every Christian everywhere, and it is maintained through humility, gentleness, patience, and love (4:2), not created by human effort in the first place. The second kind of unity, described in verses 7 through 16, is one believers are commanded to pursue, not merely preserve — “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (4:13). This unity does not yet fully exist; it is a target, involving doctrinal soundness,

deepening knowledge of Christ, and genuine spiritual maturity, still very much in progress in every believer and every church.

Christ himself supplies what is needed to reach that second unity, distributing grace to each believer “as Christ apportioned it” (4:7), quoting Psalm 68’s picture of a conquering king distributing spoils to his people. The specific gifts Paul lists — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (4:11) — exist for one stated purpose: “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (4:12). The foundational offices, apostles and prophets, gave the church its authoritative teaching and, by their very nature as a foundation, were not meant to continue indefinitely; but the ongoing work of evangelists, pastors, and teachers continues to equip ordinary believers for ministry in every generation since. The urgency behind all of this equipping is stated plainly: without it, believers remain “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (4:14). Doctrinal immaturity is not a merely academic weakness; it leaves a person defenseless against manipulation, gullible toward whatever sounds emotionally compelling, and easy prey for anyone willing to exploit that ignorance.

The alternative Paul offers is memorable precisely because it holds two things together that are often pulled apart: “speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (4:15). Truth without love curdles into harshness; love without truth collapses into sentimentality that cannot actually correct anyone. Held together, they become the means by

which “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (4:16). The image is deliberately organic and communal — no single believer grows in isolation, and no single gift operates alone. The body’s growth depends on every joint and ligament doing its own small, largely invisible share of the work, so that the whole structure, over time, becomes strong enough to bear whatever weight is placed on it.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul distinguishes between a unity to be kept, which already exists, and a unity to be pursued, which is still in progress. Which of these two feels more like your current challenge — guarding a unity you already share with other believers, or actively pursuing deeper doctrinal maturity and knowledge of Christ?
2. Paul warns that doctrinal immaturity leaves believers vulnerable to being “tossed back and forth” by deceptive teaching. Where do you currently get most of your spiritual input, and how confident are you that it is equipping you toward maturity rather than leaving you exposed?
3. “Speaking the truth in love” holds two things together that are easy to separate. Do you tend to lean more toward truth without enough love, or love without enough truth, in your own relationships?
4. The image of the body growing through every joint and ligament doing its part suggests no believer’s contribution is too small to matter. What is your own “share” in the growth of your local church right now, however ordinary it may seem?

CHAPTER SIX:

Ephesians 4:17–32

Paul has just described the goal of the Christian life as speaking the truth in love and growing into maturity together. Now he describes, in unflinching detail, exactly what that life is meant to leave behind. “You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking” (4:17). It matters that Paul’s original readers were themselves largely Gentile converts; he is not contrasting Jew against Gentile here but former self against new self, describing the very culture most of his readers had only recently left. That former way of life, he writes, is marked by darkened understanding, ignorance, and a hardened heart (4:18), which in turn produces a total loss of moral sensitivity, “so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed” (4:19). Notice the order of causation: the problem begins in the mind, spreads to the heart, and finally surfaces in behavior. Wrong believing, left unaddressed, always eventually becomes wrong living.

Against that background, Paul reminds his readers what they were actually taught when they first came to Christ: “you were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self... to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:22–24). This is more than a call to try harder at avoiding certain sins. It is a call to an entirely new identity, marked by a genuinely renewed mind — because, as with the futility Paul just described, real transformation always begins in how a person thinks before it shows up in how they act.

The rest of the chapter turns that principle into a series of concrete, paired instructions, each one moving from a “put off” to a corresponding “put on.” Falsehood gives way to truthful speech, “for we are all members of one body” (4:25) — a reminder that lying is not merely a private moral failure but a wound inflicted on the whole community. Anger is permitted but bounded; believers are told not to let the sun go down on it, so that unresolved resentment cannot harden into something that “gives the devil a foothold” (4:26–27). Theft gives way not merely to honesty but to productive labor undertaken with a specific purpose: “so that they may have something to share with those in need” (4:28) — turning what was once an act of taking into a lifelong habit of giving. Corrupting talk gives way to speech that actually builds others up, benefiting whoever is listening (4:29), because unwholesome words, Paul warns, grieve “the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (4:30) — the same Spirit introduced back in chapter 1 as the seal and guarantee of every believer’s inheritance.

The chapter closes with two short lists that summarize the entire “put off, put on” pattern in miniature. “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice” (4:31) — every one of these, notice, describes some form of relational warfare, the corrosive residue of unresolved conflict left to fester. In its place: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (4:32). That last clause carries the full weight of the argument. Believers are not asked to forgive because forgiveness is generically admirable, but because they have themselves already received a forgiveness immeasurably greater than anything they will ever be asked to extend to someone else. The vertical forgiveness Paul described so

extensively in chapters 1 and 2 becomes, here, the entire basis and pattern for every horizontal forgiveness a believer will ever need to offer.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul traces a line from darkened thinking to a hardened heart to indulgent behavior. Where in your own life have you seen wrong believing eventually surface as wrong living, even if it took time to show up?
2. Each “put off” in this chapter is paired with a specific “put on” rather than simply a prohibition. Pick one pairing — falsehood and truth, theft and generosity, corrupting talk and building others up — and consider: are you actively practicing the “put on,” or have you only stopped at the “put off”?
3. Paul says unwholesome talk grieves the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who seals believers for redemption. Does thinking of careless or corrosive speech as something that grieves a person — the Spirit himself — rather than merely breaking a rule change how seriously you take it?
4. Believers are told to forgive “just as in Christ God forgave you.” Is there someone you are currently withholding forgiveness from? What would it look like to measure the size of that debt against the size of the debt God has already forgiven you?

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Ephesians 5:1–20

“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (5:1–2). Paul roots this entire chapter’s exhortation in a single relationship: children imitate their parents, and believers, as God’s dearly loved children, are meant to imitate their heavenly Father, above all in the shape of Christ’s own self-giving love. This is the same love traced throughout the letter’s first half — chosen in love (1:4), made alive because of great love (2:4), rooted and established in love (3:17) — now finally arriving at its practical destination: a love we are called to walk in, not merely receive.

Against that standard of self-giving love, Paul sets a contrasting list that would have described ordinary, unremarkable behavior in the pagan culture surrounding these Gentile converts: “sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed... obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking” (5:3–4). None of this should even be named among believers, Paul insists, not because such things are unfamiliar to fallen human nature, but precisely because familiarity with them was the very background most of Paul’s readers had only recently left. In their place, he commends something almost startling in its simplicity: “thanksgiving” (5:4). Ingratitude, it turns out, is often the soil in which coarse and self-indulgent speech grows; a heart genuinely satisfied in Christ has far less appetite for the kind of talk that feeds on discontent.

Paul then shifts to a second controlling image for the chapter, moving from love to light. “For you were once darkness, but now you are light

in the Lord. Live as children of light” (5:8). Notice that Paul does not say believers were once in darkness, as though darkness were merely an external condition surrounding them; he says they were darkness itself, contributing to it by their very presence. The change, then, is not simply a change of location but a change of nature: “the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth” (5:9). Light, by its nature, exposes; Paul instructs believers to “have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them,” while noting that some of what happens in secret is “shameful even to mention” (5:11–12). Whatever is exposed by light, though, does not merely become visible — it becomes, itself, a light (5:13), which is why the chapter can quote what appears to be an early Christian hymn or baptismal call: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (5:14). Believers are not simply illuminated from outside; once awakened, they become sources of light themselves, capable of exposing darkness in others the way they were once exposed and awakened themselves.

The chapter’s final movement turns to wisdom, urging believers to “be very careful, then, how you live,” making the most of every opportunity, “because the days are evil” (5:15–16). That phrase, “the days are evil,” names something believers in every era have had to reckon with: the general drift of popular culture, media, and ordinary social pressure tends toward folly rather than toward the wisdom of God’s will, so that living wisely requires real, ongoing effort rather than passive drifting. Wisdom, Paul says, means understanding what the Lord’s will actually is (5:17) rather than assuming it is obvious, and it means a specific choice about what controls a person’s life: “do not get drunk on wine, which

leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (5:18). Both drunkenness and Spirit-filling describe a person no longer entirely in control of themselves, governed instead by something outside their own will — the question is only which influence a believer allows to take the wheel. What that Spirit-filled life actually looks like in practice, Paul makes strikingly concrete: “speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit... always giving thanks to God the Father for everything” (5:19–20). Being filled with the Spirit, in other words, is not a mysterious inward sensation to chase after; it shows up, visibly and audibly, in a community that sings, encourages, and gives thanks together.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul roots the command to walk in love in the example of Christ’s own self-giving love for us. When you think about loving someone difficult this week, does your motivation tend to come more from duty or from genuine imitation of how Christ has already loved you?
2. Paul says believers were once darkness itself, not merely surrounded by it. Does this distinction — a change of nature rather than merely a change of location — match how you understand your own conversion?
3. “The days are evil” describes ordinary cultural drift toward folly rather than active persecution. Where do you feel that drift most strongly pulling at your own wisdom and priorities right now?

4. Being filled with the Spirit is described here in visible, communal terms — singing, encouraging, giving thanks together — rather than as a private, mystical experience. How present is this kind of Spirit-filled community in your own regular life with other believers?

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Ephesians 5:21–33

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). This single verse governs everything that follows — not only the instruction to wives in the verses immediately after it, but the entire household code that continues through the start of chapter 6, addressing husbands, children, and even the relationship between slaves and masters. Submission, in Paul’s vocabulary here, is a voluntary placing of oneself under another’s interests, undertaken out of reverence for Christ rather than compulsion, and it applies, in some form, to every believer — though Paul goes on to describe how that one principle takes different shape in different relationships.

To wives, Paul writes: “submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord” (5:22), grounding the instruction in a comparison to Christ’s headship over the church rather than in any claim about a wife’s inferior worth or ability. Four things stand out in how Paul frames this submission. It is voluntary — “submit yourselves,” not a submission compelled from outside. It recognizes a particular kind of authority — “as you do to the Lord” — without erasing the fact that Christ’s headship over the church is a headship of self-sacrificing love, which is precisely the standard Paul is about to hold husbands to. It is comprehensive — “in everything” (5:24) — not selectively offered only when convenient or when a husband happens to deserve it. And it finds expression in genuine respect (5:33), not merely outward compliance while harboring private contempt. Paul does not ground this instruction in the changing customs of first-century culture; he grounds

it in the fixed, unchanging pattern of Christ and the church, which is exactly why it has continued to be read as abidingly relevant rather than as a merely first-century convention, whatever tension modern readers may feel with it.

If wives are called to a demanding submission, husbands are called to something even more demanding, because Paul allows no reciprocity clause. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25). Notice the tense: not as Christ loves the church in some general, ongoing sense, but as Christ loved the church in that one decisive, historical act of self-sacrifice. Everything a husband does in loving his wife is measured against that specific, costly standard. Paul goes on to describe what Christ’s love accomplished for the church — making her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, presenting her to himself in splendor, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish (5:26–27) — and applies the same aim to a husband’s love for his wife: not merely affection or provision, though both matter, but active, patient investment in her spiritual growth and holiness, using God’s own word as the primary means. “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies... he who loves his wife loves himself” (5:28), Paul continues, appealing to the ordinary, instinctive way people nourish and care for their own bodies as a model for how a husband is meant to care for his wife.

Paul closes the passage by calling the whole comparison “a profound mystery” and clarifying exactly what he means by it: “I am talking about Christ and the church” (5:32). Marriage, in other words, was never merely a private arrangement for mutual companionship or social

stability, however real those goods are. From its origin in Eden — Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 directly, that a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, the two becoming one flesh (5:31) — marriage has functioned as a living picture, built into creation itself, of the still-greater union between Christ and his church. Every Christian marriage, whatever its daily texture of ordinary joys and ordinary friction, carries within it this larger purpose: to put the gospel itself on display, in miniature, to a watching world.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul roots wifely submission not in a claim about inferior worth or ability but in comparison to Christ's headship, and roots husbandly love not in reciprocity but in Christ's own self-sacrifice. Which of these two commands do you find more personally challenging to live out, and why?
2. Paul describes Christ's love for the church as active, aimed at her holiness, using the word of God as the primary means. If you are married, how present is this kind of intentional spiritual investment in your marriage right now, compared to other forms of care?
3. Paul says marriage is a "profound mystery" that pictures Christ and the church. Whether or not you are married, how does thinking of marriage as a living picture of the gospel — rather than merely a private arrangement — change how you view marriages around you, including your parents' or your own?

4. This passage is one many people find difficult in a modern context.
What has been most helpful, or most difficult, for you personally in reading Paul's instructions to husbands and wives here?

CHAPTER NINE:

Ephesians 6:1–4

Paul continues the household code with a third relationship, moving from husbands and wives to children and parents, and the same governing principle from 5:21 still applies: submission out of reverence for Christ, now taking the shape of a child's obedience. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (6:1). For children, submission looks like straightforward obedience — the same word, notably, used elsewhere of servants obeying their masters — grounded not in a parent's flawless wisdom but in the child's relationship to Christ. The phrase "in the Lord" matters: a child's obedience is meant to flow, ultimately, from their own knowledge of and love for God, not merely from fear of a parent's authority, however necessary that authority is in the meantime.

Paul then does something unusual for an ancient household code: he quotes the Ten Commandments, and specifically notes what makes this particular commandment distinct among them. "Honor your father and mother" — he is quoting Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16 — "which is the first commandment with a promise: 'so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth'" (6:2–3). This was the only commandment in the Decalogue attached to an explicit promise of blessing, and Paul's decision to carry that promise forward into a letter written to New Covenant believers suggests he understood the underlying principle — God honors households ordered by honor and obedience — to remain in force even after the Mosaic law's ceremonial and covenantal requirements had been fulfilled in Christ.

The chapter's final verse turns the instruction around, addressing fathers specifically, though the underlying responsibility for spiritual formation belongs to both parents together: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (6:4). The parallel passage in Colossians renders the warning slightly differently — do not embitter your children, "or they will become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21) — and together the two passages describe a single danger from two angles: a pattern of parenting, however well-intentioned, that gradually provokes a child toward resentment and eventually toward discouragement and lost heart. Scripture does not spell out every specific form this exasperation might take, which is itself instructive; the danger will look different from child to child and household to household, and wise parents are called to observe their own children carefully rather than applying a single rigid formula to every temperament.

What Scripture does specify is the alternative: training and instruction "of the Lord" — a phrase broad enough to cover not only direct religious teaching but the whole shape of a child's upbringing, viewed through the lens of God's purposes rather than merely worldly ambition or convenience. The word translated "training" carried, in the ancient world, the sense of an entire course of education and formation, not narrowly religious instruction alone. Paul's underlying conviction is that the primary responsibility for a child's formation belongs to parents themselves, not to any outside institution, however well-meaning. That does not mean every family must adopt identical methods; it does mean every believing parent bears a responsibility they cannot fully hand off to someone else, to raise children who know not only what to believe

but why, and who see that belief modeled consistently at home, in both instruction and example, long before they are ever old enough to test it for themselves.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul grounds a child's obedience "in the Lord" rather than in a parent's own authority alone. If you are raising children, how do you help them understand that their obedience ultimately connects to their own relationship with God, not merely to keeping peace at home?
2. The commandment to honor father and mother is the first one in the Decalogue attached to a promise. Whatever your current relationship with your own parents, what would it look like this week to honor them in some concrete way?
3. Fathers, and parents generally, are warned against a pattern that gradually provokes children toward discouragement. Can you identify, honestly, any patterns in your own parenting — or in how you were parented — that tended toward exasperation rather than encouragement?
4. Paul places the primary responsibility for a child's spiritual and moral formation on parents rather than any outside institution. However you are involved in the lives of children — as a parent, grandparent, or mentor — what is one specific way you could take fuller ownership of this responsibility?

CHAPTER TEN:

Ephesians 6:5–24

The household code that began at 5:21 reaches its final pair in these verses, addressing slaves and masters — a relationship that occupied a very different, and far more extensive, place in the ancient economy than it does in a modern one, but which Paul addresses with the same underlying principle that has governed every relationship in this passage: genuine service rendered “as if you were serving the Lord, not people” (6:7). Slaves are instructed to obey their earthly masters “with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (6:5) — not with eye-service performed only when being watched, but as those doing the will of God from the heart, trusting that the Lord himself will reward whatever good each person does, “whether they are slave or free” (6:8). Masters, in turn, are told to treat their slaves in the same way, and specifically to give up threatening them, “since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (6:9). Whatever a modern reader makes of the social institution these verses address, the underlying instruction is radical for its own time: master and slave stand as equals before the one Master in heaven, who shows no favoritism between them, and both are called to conduct themselves toward the other as though Christ himself were the one actually being served.

Paul then turns to the letter’s final and most vivid image: spiritual armor. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (6:10–11). Everything in the first three chapters of this letter

— chosen, redeemed, sealed, seated with Christ in the heavenly realms — has been building toward this moment, because Paul wants his readers to understand precisely what kind of conflict they are actually in. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (6:12). The believer’s ultimate opposition, in other words, is never simply the difficult person across the table or the frustrating circumstance of the day; it is an unseen spiritual reality that ordinary human categories cannot fully capture.

The armor Paul lists is drawn almost entirely from Isaiah’s picture of God himself as a warrior, now handed to ordinary believers as their own equipment: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, feet fitted with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, the shield of faith able to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, “which is the word of God” (6:14–17). It is worth noticing that every piece of this armor corresponds to something already described earlier in the letter — the truth Paul has been teaching since chapter 1, the righteousness that comes by grace through faith, the gospel of peace that reconciled Jew and Gentile, the salvation secured before the world began. There is, in other words, no separate arsenal a believer must acquire for spiritual warfare beyond simply knowing, believing, and standing firm in everything this letter has already described. And immediately after naming the sword of the Spirit as God’s word, Paul turns to prayer — “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests... always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people” (6:18) — as

though prayer were not a separate seventh piece of armor but the very posture in which all six other pieces are actually put to use.

Paul closes the letter as personally as he opened it, asking for prayer that he might make the gospel known fearlessly “as I should” even from his prison chains (6:19–20), and commending Tychicus, “a dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord,” to carry news of his circumstances to the Ephesians and to encourage their hearts (6:21–22) — the same Tychicus who, as we noted at the start of this part, was likely carrying this very letter alongside the ones to Colossae and to Philemon on a single journey through Asia Minor. The final words return, fittingly, to where the letter began: “Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (6:23–24). A letter that opened with every spiritual blessing lavished on the church closes with grace and peace extended once more — the same grace and peace with which nearly every one of Paul’s letters both begins and ends, because for Paul there was never, in the end, any other subject worth writing about.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul tells both slaves and masters to act “as if serving the Lord,” reminding both that they answer to the same heavenly Master who shows no favoritism. In your own work or authority relationships, how consciously do you serve, or lead others, as though Christ himself were the one you were ultimately serving?

2. Paul insists our real struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces. When you face conflict or frustration with another person, how often do you actually consider the possibility of a deeper spiritual dimension to the struggle, rather than seeing only the human opponent in front of you?
3. Every piece of the armor of God corresponds to a truth already taught earlier in the letter — there is no separate arsenal to acquire. Which piece of the armor feels least secure in your own life right now, and which earlier truth from this letter might strengthen it?
4. Paul treats prayer as the posture in which the armor is actually used, not as a separate piece of equipment. How central is prayer to your own daily spiritual defenses, compared to how central you know, in principle, it ought to be?

PART THREE

Philippians: Joy in Every Circumstance

Philippians 1–4

Philippi was not an ordinary provincial town. Refounded and enlarged by Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, and later granted the high status of a Roman military colony after the decisive battle fought nearby in 42 B.C., its citizens enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship even though the city itself sat in Macedonia, hundreds of miles from Rome. That civic pride in belonging to Rome while living far from it shows up more than once in this letter, most memorably when Paul reminds his readers that their truer citizenship belongs to an even more distant capital: “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). Paul had planted this church around A.D. 50, on his first crossing from Asia into Europe, and its first converts were about as unlikely a pair as could be imagined — Lydia, a successful Gentile businesswoman, and a Philippian jailer, saved the same night his prisoners’ chains fell away in an earthquake (Acts 16). From these beginnings grew a church that would become, by Paul’s own testimony, uniquely generous toward him, supporting his ministry with gifts more than once even after he had moved on to preach elsewhere (4:15–16).

Paul wrote this letter roughly a decade later, around A.D. 61, from house arrest in Rome, during the same imprisonment that produced Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. His immediate occasion for writing was Epaphroditus, a Philippian believer the church had sent to Rome carrying a gift for Paul and to care for his needs in prison.

Epaphroditus had fallen seriously ill along the way, nearly to the point of death, and Paul now wanted to send him home, both to relieve the Philippians' worry and to make sure Epaphroditus received the honor he deserved for risking his life in this service (2:25–30). Paul used the occasion to write far more than a simple thank-you note, though gratitude for their gift runs through the whole letter. He wanted to update them on his own circumstances, to announce a future visit from Timothy, and to address one specific, named conflict between two women in the congregation who needed to be reconciled (4:2–3).

What makes Philippians distinct among Paul's letters is its tone. There is no sharp rebuke here of the kind that fills Galatians, no extended correction of the kind that runs through 1 Corinthians. The word for sin does not appear in this letter even once. Paul's warnings are precautionary rather than corrective, and the letter's dominant note, sounded again and again from the first chapter to the last, is joy — a joy Paul insists on even while writing from prison, uncertain whether his trial will end in release or execution. That paradox, a man in chains rejoicing, sits at the very center of what this letter is trying to teach. The key to it, as Paul states directly, is “the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (2:5) — a mind willing to set aside its own privileges for the sake of others, the way Christ himself set aside the privileges of deity to become a servant, obedient even to death on a cross. Wherever that mind takes root, Paul suggests, joy becomes possible regardless of circumstance, because circumstance was never really its source to begin with.

This part corresponds to a single day on the reading plan — Philippians 1–4 — covered across all nine chapters below.

CHAPTER ONE:

Philippians 1:1–11

Paul's opening to this letter tells us something before he has said anything at all. He addresses it "to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons" (1:1) — the only one of Paul's letters to name church officers by title in its very first line, and a small hint of the settled, orderly affection Paul felt for this particular congregation. There is no rebuke waiting in the wings here, no crisis to manage before the greeting is even finished. What follows instead is thanksgiving, offered "every time I remember you" (1:3), for one specific reason above all others: "your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (1:5).

That word, partnership, is worth pausing over, because it will govern the entire letter. The Philippians had shared in Paul's ministry from the very beginning — through prayer, through financial support, and now through the gift Epaphroditus had carried to him in prison — and Paul frames this partnership as something with an assured future as well as a faithful past: "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (1:6). This confidence is not confidence in the Philippians' own consistency, which any honest church leader knows cannot be assumed. It is confidence in God's faithfulness to finish what he alone started, the same conviction Paul will echo later in this letter when he tells believers to work out their own salvation because "it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (2:13). Partnership in the gospel, in other words, was never merely a partnership between

Paul and the Philippians. It was, at its foundation, God’s own ongoing work in both of them.

Paul’s prayer for the Philippians, which closes this opening section, reveals exactly what kind of growth he hoped to see continue in them: “that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (1:9–10). It is a striking combination. Paul does not pray simply that their love would grow warmer or more sentimental; he prays that it would grow more discerning, sharpened by knowledge and insight until it can reliably tell the difference between what is merely good and what is genuinely best. Love, left untrained, can be sincere and still misdirected. Paul wants the Philippians’ love to mature into something wise enough to be trusted with real decisions, and fruitful enough, in the end, to fill their lives with “the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God” (1:11). Even here, before the letter has properly begun, Paul has already named its final destination: not the Philippians’ own credit, but God’s glory.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul thanks God for the Philippians’ partnership in the gospel “from the first day until now” — a consistency across years, not just a single generous moment. How consistent has your own partnership with a particular church, ministry, or mission effort been over time?
2. Paul’s confidence that God will finish the work he started rests on God’s faithfulness, not the Philippians’ own track record. Where in

your own spiritual life do you need to rest more in God's promised faithfulness rather than your own uncertain consistency?

3. Paul prays for a love that grows not just warmer but wiser, able to discern what is best rather than merely what is good. Can you think of a decision in your own life right now where sincere love needs to be paired with more careful discernment?
4. Everything in this opening prayer ultimately points toward "the glory and praise of God." How consciously do you connect your own spiritual growth to God's glory, rather than to your own comfort or reputation?

CHAPTER TWO:

Philippians 1:12–26

Paul now turns to his own situation, and the report he gives is almost the opposite of what his readers might have expected. “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel” (1:12). Paul had been in prison for some time by now, his case unresolved, his future genuinely uncertain — and yet he reports two specific, tangible results of his imprisonment that any reader would have found remarkable. First, “it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard, and to everyone else, that I am in chains for Christ” (1:13); Paul’s confinement had become, against every apparent likelihood, an occasion for gospel witness among Roman soldiers who would otherwise never have heard it. Second, “most of the brothers and sisters, confident in the Lord because of my chains, dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear” (1:14); Paul’s suffering had emboldened others rather than discouraging them, proof that the gospel’s advance did not depend on Paul’s own comfort or freedom.

Not every response to Paul’s imprisonment was admirable. Some, he acknowledges, preach Christ “out of envy and rivalry,” even hoping to add distress to Paul’s chains (1:15, 17), while others preach out of genuine goodwill (1:15–16). Paul’s response to this mixed situation is one of the most striking statements of priority in the entire letter: “The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice” (1:18). Paul was not indifferent to the preachers’ motives; he simply refused to let those motives determine his own joy, because his joy was never actually

located in how he was personally treated. It was located in whether Christ himself was being proclaimed.

That same detachment from his own comfort shapes how Paul faces the genuinely open question of his own fate. “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (1:20). And then comes the sentence that has echoed through Christian history ever since: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). Notice how completely this reorders ordinary human calculation. For most people, death is simply loss — the end of everything that made life valuable. For Paul, because his life was already wholly defined by Christ, death could only mean gain, since it would bring him into Christ’s own presence more directly and completely than his present life in the body ever could. This is not despair or a longing for escape; Paul is genuinely torn, admitting that to depart and be with Christ “is better by far,” while remaining convinced that to stay “is more necessary” for the Philippians’ sake, so that they might continue to progress and find joy in the faith (1:23–25). Even Paul’s uncertainty about his own future, in other words, is resolved not by which outcome benefits him most, but by which outcome serves Christ’s people best.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul reports that his imprisonment actually advanced the gospel, both among Roman guards and among emboldened believers. Can you think of a difficult circumstance in your own life that God used, unexpectedly, to advance something good rather than simply to cause loss?

2. Paul refuses to let other preachers' mixed motives determine his own joy, because his joy was located in Christ being proclaimed rather than in how he himself was treated. Where do you tend to let other people's motives or opinions control your own peace, rather than keeping your focus on a larger purpose?
3. "To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." How would you honestly describe what living is "for" you right now — and how close or far is that from being able to say the same thing Paul says here?
4. Paul resolves his uncertainty about his own future by asking which outcome would serve others best, not which would benefit him most. Is there a decision in front of you right now where this same question — not what benefits me, but what serves others — might change your thinking?

CHAPTER THREE:

Philippians 1:27–30

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). This single command governs the rest of the letter, and Paul immediately unpacks it in terms of three qualities he wants to see running through the entire congregation: unity, courage, and perseverance. Unity comes first — Paul wants to know, whether he is able to visit them or only hears reports from a distance, that the Philippians “stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel” (1:27). This is not unity for its own sake, a merely pleasant harmony; it is a unified front, contending together for something worth defending.

Courage follows directly from that unity. The Philippians are told not to be frightened by their opponents in any way, because their steadfastness under opposition is itself “a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved — and that by God” (1:28). Paul does not name these opponents explicitly here, but the rest of the letter makes clear that at least two distinct groups troubled this church: legalists who wanted to add the requirements of the Mosaic law to the gospel, whom Paul will call “dogs” and “mutilators of the flesh” in chapter 3, and libertines who twisted Christian freedom into an excuse for self-indulgence, whom Paul will describe as “enemies of the cross of Christ” later in that same chapter. Standing firm against both threats, Paul says, requires genuine courage, because both distortions of the gospel would have felt, to a first-century believer under social and religious pressure, like the easier and safer path.

Finally, Paul names perseverance, framing suffering itself as a gift rather than merely a burden to be endured: “it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (1:29–30). This is a remarkable way to describe suffering — not as an unfortunate accident that happens to befall faithful people, but as something actually granted, given, entrusted to believers the same way faith itself is given. The Philippians were not suffering because God had abandoned them to circumstance; they were suffering as participants in the very same struggle Paul himself was enduring in a Roman prison hundreds of miles away, joined to him not only in belief but in shared cost for that belief.

Taken together, these three qualities — unity within the church, courage against opposition from outside it, and perseverance through whatever suffering that opposition brings — describe a single, coherent way of life worthy of the gospel, and they follow a natural progression from inside to outside. Unity is the easiest of the three, however hard it can still feel in practice, because it asks believers to maintain something they already share with one another. Courage is harder, because it requires facing outward pressure and real opposition. Perseverance is hardest of all, because it requires sustaining that courage not for a single dramatic moment but across whatever length of time the struggle actually lasts. Paul will spend the rest of this letter filling in exactly what each of these three qualities looks like in practice — unity through humility in chapter 2, courage against false teaching in chapter 3, and perseverance through anxiety and want in chapter 4.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul asks for unity, courage, and perseverance, in that order, moving from what happens inside the church to what happens under outside pressure. Which of these three currently feels like your own greatest area of need — unity with fellow believers, courage against opposition, or perseverance through an ongoing struggle?
2. Paul says suffering for Christ is something “granted” to believers, the same way faith is granted. Does this reframe how you think about a difficult season you are currently in, or has this idea felt uncomfortable to you in the past?
3. Paul names two distinct threats to the Philippians — legalism, which adds requirements to grace, and license, which twists freedom into self-indulgence. Which of these two errors do you find yourself more naturally drawn toward in your own walk with God?
4. Standing firm together as “one for the faith of the gospel” requires real unity under pressure. Is there a relationship within your own church community right now where disunity is making it harder for all of you to stand firm together against a shared external pressure?

CHAPTER FOUR:

Philippians 2:1–18

Paul grounds the unity he called for in chapter 1 in a single quality: humility. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit,” he writes, “but in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you also to the interests of others” (2:3–4). That small word “also,” present in the original Greek but sometimes lost in translation, matters more than it first appears. Paul is not commanding total self-neglect, as though caring for one’s own genuine needs were itself sinful; he is commanding that concern for others be added to, and in practice prioritized above, concern for oneself. Scripture nowhere teaches that self-denial means self-erasure. It teaches that a life properly ordered puts others’ interests genuinely alongside — and, in the moment of decision, ahead of — one’s own.

To show what this actually looks like, Paul turns to what may be the most theologically dense passage in the entire New Testament, a hymn-like description of Christ’s own humility that many scholars believe Paul is quoting rather than composing on the spot. “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,” he writes, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant” (2:5–7). Notice the direction of this movement: not upward, toward greater status, but relentlessly downward — from equality with God, to the form of a servant, to human likeness, to obedience, and finally “to death — even death on a cross” (2:8), the most degrading form of execution the ancient world knew. Every step downward was

voluntary. Nothing was taken from Christ that he did not first choose to set aside.

And then the movement reverses completely. “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:9–11). The pattern could not be plainer: the way down was the way up. Christ did not empty himself in order to be exalted, as though humility were merely a strategy for eventual reward; but the sequence Paul describes still teaches believers something essential about how God’s economy actually works, in direct contrast to how status and advancement are pursued in ordinary human systems. Self-emptying, not self-promotion, is the path Christ walked, and it remains the path Paul now calls the Philippians to walk after him.

That call becomes remarkably concrete in the verses that follow: “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (2:12–13). This is not a formula for earning salvation through effort; the working out described here presupposes a salvation already secured, worked out the way a muscle already possessed is worked out through exercise, not the way a debt is worked off through labor. And it is God himself, Paul insists, who supplies both the will and the ability to do this — which is precisely why the effort called for can be sustained with confidence rather than anxiety, even as Paul closes the chapter urging the Philippians to “do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure... shining among them like

stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life” (2:14–16). A humble, united church, doing ordinary things without complaint, becomes in Paul’s imagery nothing less than a constellation of light against the darkness of “a warped and crooked generation” — proof, however unspectacular it may feel from the inside, that Christ’s own downward, self-emptying path is still being walked by his people.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul’s instruction to value others’ interests includes the word “also” — concern for others added to, not replacing, legitimate concern for oneself. Have you ever tempted yourself, or been tempted by others’ teaching, toward a kind of self-neglect that Scripture does not actually require?
2. Christ’s humility moved in one direction only — downward — before God exalted him. Where in your own life are you tempted to seek exaltation directly, rather than trusting God with the timing and shape of any exaltation that follows genuine humility?
3. Paul says believers work out a salvation that God himself is working in them, meaning the effort described here is not about earning anything. Does this distinction between “working out” and “working for” change the way you think about your own spiritual disciplines and effort?
4. Paul pictures a humble, uncomplaining church as stars shining against a warped and crooked generation. What would it look like this week for your own attitude — free of grumbling and arguing

— to function as one small point of that light in the specific setting you spend most of your time in?

CHAPTER FIVE:

Philippians 2:19–30

Having just described Christ’s own humility in the most exalted theological language available to him, Paul now turns to two very ordinary men who embodied that same humility in the details of daily life: Timothy and Epaphroditus. The shift is deliberate. Paul wants the Philippians to see that the mind of Christ is not merely an abstract ideal too lofty for anyone else to actually live out; it shows up, concretely, in people they already know.

Timothy comes first. Paul hopes to send him soon, “for I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (2:20–21). That final sentence is a sobering admission — even among Paul’s circle of coworkers, genuine, others-focused concern of the kind Timothy displayed was apparently rare enough to be worth singling out by name. Timothy’s qualification for this errand was not primarily his skill or reputation, though Paul commends both, but his proven character: “as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (2:22), a relationship built and tested over years rather than assumed overnight.

Epaphroditus receives even fuller commendation. Paul calls him “my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs” (2:25) — a threefold description covering personal friendship, shared labor, and shared danger, all before Paul even explains what Epaphroditus had actually done. What he had done was risk his own life. Sent by the Philippian

church to deliver a gift and to serve Paul in prison, Epaphroditus had fallen severely ill, “almost died” for the work of Christ (2:27, 30), and Paul now wants to send him home both to relieve the anxiety the Philippians clearly felt over the reports of his illness, and to ensure the church properly honors what he had risked: “welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him” (2:29). It is worth noticing what Paul does not say here. He does not tell the Philippians to honor Epaphroditus because his mission ultimately succeeded, or because his illness turned out fine in the end. He tells them to honor the risk itself — the willingness to hazard his life for the sake of the gospel — regardless of how narrowly the outcome resolved.

Running quietly beneath both commendations is the theme of joy that has already appeared repeatedly in this letter and will appear again and again before it ends. Paul hopes Timothy’s report will “cheer” him (2:19); he sends Epaphroditus so that the Philippians “may be glad” and Paul himself “may have less anxiety” (2:28); and Paul frames his own possible martyrdom, mentioned just a few verses earlier, in the same key: “even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (2:17). Timothy and Epaphroditus are, in this sense, living footnotes to the hymn about Christ that Paul has just finished quoting — two ordinary believers whose selfless service becomes, in Paul’s telling, further proof that the mind of Christ described in such exalted terms a few verses earlier is not confined to Christ alone, but is actually reproducible, however imperfectly, in the lives of his followers.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul says that even among his own coworkers, someone with Timothy's level of genuine concern for others was rare — “everyone looks out for their own interests.” How rare or common is this kind of selfless concern among the people you serve alongside in ministry or work?
2. Paul honors Epaphroditus for the risk he took, not merely for a successful outcome. Is there a risk you have hesitated to take for the sake of serving Christ or others, out of fear that it might not turn out well?
3. Both commendations in this passage are steeped in the language of joy — Paul's joy over their service, and his hope for their joy in return. How connected is your own joy to seeing other believers serve selflessly, the way Paul's joy was connected to Timothy and Epaphroditus?
4. Timothy and Epaphroditus function as living examples of the humility Paul has just described in Christ. Who in your own life currently serves as this kind of concrete, everyday example of Christlike humility for you to imitate?

CHAPTER SIX:

Philippians 3:1–16

“Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh” (3:2). Paul’s tone shifts abruptly and sharply here, and the target of his sudden alarm is unmistakable to anyone who has read Galatians: the Judaizers, Jewish teachers insisting that Gentile believers needed circumcision and law-keeping added to faith in Christ. Paul’s language deliberately inverts the categories his opponents would have used. First-century Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as unclean dogs; Paul turns the insult back on the teachers themselves. And rather than granting them the honored title “the circumcision,” he redirects it to genuine believers instead: “it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3).

To prove the point, Paul offers his own résumé, and it is formidable by any Jewish standard of his day: circumcised on the eighth day exactly as the law required, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee in his zeal for the law, faultless in legalistic righteousness (3:5–6). If anyone had reason for confidence in the flesh, Paul insists, he did, more than any of his opponents. And then comes the reversal that gives this chapter its force: “whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:7–8). Paul does not describe his former religious credentials as morally neutral achievements he simply chose to set aside. He calls them rubbish — the Greek word is coarser than most English translations render it —

worthless by comparison, not because law-keeping is inherently evil, but because any confidence placed in it necessarily competes with confidence placed in Christ, and the two cannot ultimately coexist as equal foundations.

What Paul wants in place of his old confidence is stated with striking precision: “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (3:9). And from there Paul describes a desire that has since become one of the most quoted verses in his entire letter, though frequently misunderstood: “I want to know Christ — yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (3:10). This is not a request for some private, ecstatic spiritual experience, however the language of power and resurrection might sound to modern ears removed from its context. It is Paul’s description of ordinary Christian discipleship, identifying so closely with Christ’s death to self and resurrection to new life that suffering for that identification, when it comes, is received not as an unwelcome intrusion but as a genuine, if costly, form of fellowship with him.

Paul is careful to add that he has not already attained this — “not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (3:12). The image that follows is drawn from the footrace, a picture familiar to any first-century reader: “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (3:13–

14). Neither Paul's impressive former credentials nor, presumably, his past failures are allowed to hold his attention; both are, in a real sense, behind him now, and the entire force of his energy is directed toward what still lies ahead. This is neither the false confidence of the legalist, who imagines the race already finished, nor the despair of someone who imagines it lost before it has properly begun. It is the posture of someone running hard, precisely because he knows Christ has already, decisively, taken hold of him.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul lists impressive religious credentials before calling them rubbish compared to knowing Christ. What credentials, achievements, or sources of self-confidence in your own life might you need to hold more loosely, or even consider loss, for the sake of a deeper knowledge of Christ?
2. Paul distinguishes between “a righteousness of my own” and a righteousness “through faith in Christ.” Where do you still catch yourself relying, even subtly, on your own performance rather than resting in Christ's righteousness?
3. Paul describes wanting to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings as well as the power of his resurrection. Have you ever experienced suffering that felt, in some way, like genuine fellowship with Christ rather than simply an obstacle to endure?
4. Paul forgets what is behind — both failure and achievement — to press on toward what is ahead. Is there something in your own past,

whether a failure or a past accomplishment, that you need to stop looking back at in order to run your own race well today?

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Philippians 3:17–21

Having just warned against the legalists who wanted to add the law to faith, Paul now turns to a second and quite different danger threatening this church, one drawn not from legalism but from license. “Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters,” he writes, “and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:17–18). Where the legalists distorted the gospel by adding requirements to grace, this second group apparently distorted it in the opposite direction, treating Christian freedom as license for self-indulgence: “their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things” (3:19).

It is worth noticing how Paul responds to each of these two threats. Against the legalists in the first half of the chapter, he offers argument — a careful, reasoned case built from his own credentials and their reversal. Against the libertines here, he offers example — his own life, and the lives of faithful believers around him, held up as a pattern worth imitating precisely because words alone are not always enough to counter a group whose real appeal is not intellectual persuasion but the pull of unrestrained appetite. Both errors, different as they are, share a common root: both, in their own way, place confidence and hope in earthly, visible, controllable things rather than in Christ.

Against that background, Paul offers the alternative in one of the most quoted passages in the letter: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we

eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:20). The word Paul chooses here would have resonated powerfully with a congregation living in a Roman colony that took particular pride in its own citizenship privileges, granted by a distant emperor in a city most of them had likely never seen. Paul deliberately borrows that civic pride and redirects it: whatever privileges Philippian citizens enjoyed by virtue of Rome, believers possess something greater by virtue of heaven, and their true home, like Rome for a colonist, remains a place they currently live away from rather than within.

That citizenship carries with it a promise directly relevant to the appetite-driven error Paul has just described. Christ, he writes, “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control” (3:21). The very bodies the libertines had made their god, gratifying every appetite without restraint, are not, in Paul’s vision, destined to be discarded as unimportant; they are destined to be transformed, glorified, brought fully under Christ’s control rather than left to control themselves. This is the corrective the libertines needed and did not have: not a rejection of the body as evil, which would have been its own kind of distortion, but a patient waiting for the body’s promised transformation, rather than a premature, self-indulgent attempt to satisfy it now on its own disordered terms.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul responds to legalism with argument and to license with personal example. Which of these two approaches — reasoned argument or

lived example — tends to be more persuasive for you personally when you are tempted toward error?

2. Paul redirects the Philippians' civic pride in Roman citizenship toward their truer citizenship in heaven. What earthly source of identity or pride in your own life might need to be redirected the same way?
3. The libertines made their appetites their god, while Paul points instead to a coming transformation of the body under Christ's control. Where do you feel the pull to gratify some appetite now, on your own terms, rather than trusting God's timing for its ultimate satisfaction?
4. Paul says believers "eagerly await" a Savior from heaven. Does your own posture toward Christ's return feel like eager anticipation, or does it feel more like a distant, abstract doctrine you rarely think about?

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Philippians 4:1–9

“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!” (4:1). Paul opens this chapter by gathering up everything he has just argued in chapter 3 — reject legalism, reject license, remember your citizenship in heaven — into a single word of application: stand firm. The command to stand firm first appeared back in 1:27, describing the unity, courage, and perseverance Paul wanted from the whole congregation; here it returns as the direct fruit of everything chapter 3 has just established about where true confidence and true citizenship actually lie.

That call to stand firm together becomes immediately, almost startlingly specific: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2). These are the only two individual members of this congregation Paul names and addresses directly in the entire letter, and whatever their disagreement actually concerned, Paul’s silence about its content is itself instructive. He does not adjudicate who was right. He asks for agreement, appealing also to an unnamed “true companion” to help these women, who had “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel” (4:3) — a phrase that credits them with real, substantial partnership in ministry, making their present discord all the more costly to the church’s unity. The value Paul places on reconciliation here outweighs, in his handling of the matter, any interest in settling who was in the wrong.

From this specific conflict, Paul widens back out to instruction for the whole church, and the chapter’s most famous verses follow in quick

succession. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (4:4) — the refrain that has echoed throughout this entire letter, now stated as an unqualified command rather than merely Paul’s personal testimony. “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near” (4:5), a reminder that final vindication, and final resolution to every present frustration, remains close at hand, so that gentleness in the meantime costs nothing that will not soon be more than repaid.

Then comes the passage countless anxious believers have returned to across the centuries: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:6–7). Notice that Paul does not merely forbid anxiety, as though the command alone could dissolve it; he supplies a specific replacement practice — prayer joined with thanksgiving — and a specific promise attached to that practice, a peace that does not depend on the anxious circumstance actually resolving in the believer’s favor, but stands guard over the heart and mind regardless of how the circumstance ultimately turns out. Paul, remember, was writing this from a prison cell, genuinely uncertain whether his case would end in release or execution. This was not a platitude offered from a place of safety; it was a promise Paul was actively relying on himself, in real time, as he wrote it.

The chapter closes with a final instruction about the mind’s proper diet: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things” (4:8). What a mind habitually

dwells on shapes what a life eventually becomes, and Paul's list functions less as a rigid checklist than as a filter, a set of questions to bring to whatever competes for a believer's attention. And then, characteristically, Paul roots even this instruction in something more than abstract advice: "whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (4:9). The peace promised in verse 7 belonged to God; the God of peace himself, Paul now promises, belongs to those who actually practice what they have been taught.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul pleads for agreement between Euodia and Syntyche without adjudicating who was right. Is there a conflict in your own church or family where pursuing reconciliation may need to take priority over determining who was in the wrong?
2. Paul commands rejoicing not as a suggestion but as a repeated command — "I will say it again: Rejoice!" Does joy feel more like a discipline you practice or a feeling you wait to arrive in your own life?
3. Paul's remedy for anxiety is not simply the absence of worry but the active presence of prayer joined with thanksgiving. When you feel anxious, is prayer usually your first response, or does it tend to come only after you have exhausted your own attempts to manage the anxiety yourself?

4. Paul gives a specific list of what the mind should dwell on. Take an honest inventory: what has your mind mostly been dwelling on this past week, and how well does it match Paul's list?

CHAPTER NINE:

Philippians 4:10–23

Paul closes his letter by finally addressing directly the gift that occasioned it — the provision the Philippians had sent through Epaphroditus — and the way he handles his own gratitude is almost the reverse of what a modern reader might expect. “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me,” he begins, before immediately clarifying, “not that I was in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (4:10–11). Paul does not want his thanks to be mistaken for desperation. What follows is one of the most personally revealing statements in the entire letter: “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (4:12). The word Paul uses for “learned” implies something acquired gradually, through experience, not a natural disposition he simply happened to possess. Contentment, for Paul, was a secret discovered over years of both abundance and genuine want, not a personality trait some people are lucky enough to be born with.

That secret is named in the verse that follows, one of the most quoted and most frequently misapplied verses in all of Scripture: “I can do all things through him who gives me strength” (4:13). Read outside its context, this verse has been pressed into service for every kind of personal ambition, athletic achievement, and business venture imaginable. Read inside its context, immediately after Paul’s description of contentment amid both hunger and plenty, it means something considerably more restrained and, in its own way, more remarkable:

Paul can endure any circumstance — not accomplish any goal — because Christ supplies the strength to bear it. This is a verse about endurance under both scarcity and abundance, not a promise of unlimited achievement. Paul is not claiming immunity from hardship; he is claiming sufficiency within it.

Only after establishing this contentment does Paul finally turn to genuine, warm gratitude for what the Philippians had actually done. He recalls that this church, alone among all the churches he had planted, had partnered with him financially “in the matter of giving and receiving” from the very earliest days of their acquaintance with the gospel, sending aid to him more than once even while he ministered elsewhere (4:15–16). And then Paul offers a small but telling clarification of his own motive in mentioning this at all: “Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account” (4:17). His gratitude was never primarily about his own material relief. It was about the spiritual reward their sacrificial generosity was storing up for them before God — generosity Paul describes, using unmistakably worship-laden language, as “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (4:18), the same kind of language used elsewhere in Scripture for offerings brought to the temple altar.

The letter’s final promise flows directly out of this exchange: “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (4:19). It is worth noticing exactly what has just happened in this chapter to earn that promise its full weight: the Philippians had given sacrificially out of their own need to meet Paul’s need, and Paul now assures them that the same God who supplied his contentment in

scarcity and plenty alike would supply theirs as well. The letter closes, fittingly for a book so preoccupied with joy amid difficult circumstances, not with a summary of doctrine but with simple benediction: “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen... The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (4:20, 23). A letter that began with thanksgiving for a partnership in the gospel ends the same way it began — grateful, joyful, and entirely confident that the God who had sustained that partnership from the first day would continue sustaining it still.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul says he “learned” contentment gradually, through both abundance and want, rather than possessing it naturally. What season of scarcity or difficulty in your own life has taught you something about contentment that comfort alone never could?
2. Philippians 4:13 is often quoted for personal achievement, but in context it describes strength to endure hardship, not strength to accomplish any goal. Has your own understanding of this verse matched Paul’s actual meaning, or has it drifted toward something closer to ambition?
3. Paul says his real interest in the Philippians’ gift was not his own relief but what would be “credited to your account” before God. When you give generously to someone in need, is your focus more on their relief or on how that generosity might be building something eternal in the giver?

4. The letter closes with the promise that God will meet the Philippians' needs "according to his glorious riches," directly following their own sacrificial generosity toward Paul. Is there a step of generosity you sense God calling you toward right now, trusting him to supply what you give away?

PART FOUR

Colossians: Complete in Christ

Colossians 1–4

Colosse was, by the time Paul wrote this letter, a town in decline. Once an important city in the Lycus Valley of the Roman province of Asia, new trade routes had long since diverted most of its traffic to its more prosperous neighbors, Laodicea and Hierapolis, leaving Colosse a relatively minor country town — probably the least significant city to which any of Paul’s letters is addressed. Paul had never visited it. The church there had been planted instead by Epaphras, a Colossian believer who had likely come to faith under Paul’s own ministry in nearby Ephesus and then carried the gospel home to his own city (1:7; 4:12–13). It was Epaphras who eventually traveled to Rome, where Paul was now under house arrest, bringing both good news and troubling news: the gospel had genuinely taken root and was bearing fruit among the Colossians, but a new teaching had begun circulating in the church, subtle enough to sound plausible and dangerous enough that Paul felt compelled to answer it at length, though he had never even met most of the believers he was writing to (2:1).

Reconstructing the exact content of this false teaching from Paul’s rebuttal alone is not straightforward, since he never pauses to describe it directly, only to answer it. But the shape of it can be traced from what Paul spends his energy correcting: an appeal to “hollow and deceptive philosophy” rooted in human tradition rather than in Christ (2:8), a demand for circumcision and other requirements borrowed from the

Mosaic law (2:11, 16), an unhealthy fascination with the worship of angels and visionary experience (2:18), and a severe asceticism — rules like “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” — that had the appearance of wisdom but no actual power to restrain sinful indulgence (2:20–23). Later interpreters would recognize the seeds here of what eventually grew into full-blown Gnosticism, but in Colosse the danger was still young, likely emerging from a blend of Jewish mysticism and the surrounding pagan philosophical culture rather than from any single, fully developed system. Whatever its precise sources, its underlying error was singular and diagnosable: it treated Christ as one valuable source of spiritual insight among several, rather than as the whole and sufficient answer to every human need.

That is precisely what Paul spends this letter refusing to allow. Where Ephesians, written around the same time from the same Roman imprisonment, unfolds what it means that the church is Christ’s body, Colossians unfolds what it means that Christ is the body’s head — supreme, sufficient, and complete in himself, so that anyone joined to him lacks nothing that any philosophy, ritual, or visionary experience could possibly supply. The letter’s center of gravity falls on a single, compact claim: “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness” (2:9–10). Everything else in the letter, whether doctrinal argument in the first half or practical instruction in the second, radiates outward from that one conviction. If Christ truly is enough, then every philosophy that claims to offer more than Christ is actually, whatever its apparent sophistication, offering less.

This part corresponds to a single day on the reading plan — Colossians 1–4 — covered across all seven chapters below.

CHAPTER ONE:

Colossians 1:1–14

Paul opens with thanksgiving, as he does in nearly all his letters that are not addressing an active crisis, and the specific grounds for his gratitude are worth noticing: “we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people — the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven” (1:4–5). Faith and love, Paul says, spring from hope — not the reverse. It is the settled confidence of a secure future in heaven that produces, in the present, both genuine trust in Christ and genuine love for other believers; take away that hope, and faith and love alike tend to wither for lack of a root to draw from.

Paul then makes a point of describing this gospel’s reach: it “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” (1:6). This detail matters more than it first appears, given what Paul is about to spend two chapters refuting. The Colossians did not need some additional, more advanced teaching to supplement what they had already received; the very gospel that had reached them, the same gospel bearing fruit across the entire world, was already the whole of what they needed. Whatever Epaphras had taught them, Paul affirms it fully, calling him “a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf” (1:7) — a small but important vote of confidence for a congregation about to be told that their own founding teacher’s instruction, not some newer philosophy, was the trustworthy standard to hold onto.

The chapter’s closing movement is Paul’s prayer for this church he had never met, and like his prayer for the Ephesians, it asks not for their

circumstances to change but for their understanding to deepen: “that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives” (1:9). The purpose of that knowledge, though, is immediately practical rather than merely intellectual — “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” (1:10). Notice the order Paul establishes here, one that will recur throughout the letter: knowledge of God’s will comes first, and a worthy, fruitful life follows from it, rather than the reverse. Paul closes this opening section by returning once more to the theme of rescue and inheritance that will govern so much of what follows: the Father “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:13–14) — language that anticipates, almost word for word, the greater description of that Son’s supremacy Paul is about to give in the verses immediately following.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul says faith and love spring from a settled hope stored up in heaven. How connected do you feel your own present faith and love for others are to a genuine confidence about your future with God?
2. Paul affirms Epaphras’s teaching fully, giving the Colossians no reason to look elsewhere for something more advanced. Are there voices in your own life encouraging you to seek some “deeper” spiritual teaching beyond the ordinary, sufficient gospel you were first taught?

3. Paul prays for knowledge that leads directly to a fruitful, worthy life, rather than knowledge pursued for its own sake. Is your own pursuit of biblical knowledge currently connected to a growing, fruitful life, or has it become more abstract than practical?
4. Paul describes believers as having already been rescued from darkness and brought into Christ's kingdom. Does this feel like settled, past-tense fact to you, or does it still feel like something you are waiting to fully experience?

CHAPTER TWO:

Colossians 1:15–29

Paul now offers what may be the highest, most concentrated description of Christ's person found anywhere in his letters. "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (1:15) — not "firstborn" in the sense of having been created first, but in the ancient sense of rank and inheritance, the position of supreme authority over everything that exists. Paul makes the point unmistakable in the very next breath: "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things have been created through him and for him" (1:16). Christ is not merely the highest being within creation; he stands entirely outside it, as its author, its sustaining power — "in him all things hold together" (1:17) — and its ultimate purpose, since all things exist not only through him but for him.

Having established Christ's supremacy over the created universe, Paul turns to his supremacy over the church: "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" (1:18). The word "supremacy" is almost a summary of the entire chapter in a single syllable. Whatever claims the false teachers in Colosse were making on behalf of angels, philosophy, or visionary experience, none of it could occupy space that belonged, by right of creation and by right of resurrection, to Christ alone. And the reason for this comprehensive supremacy is stated plainly: "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (1:19–20). Fullness

and reconciliation belong together in this passage; because the fullness of God genuinely dwelt in Christ, his death was sufficient to reconcile not merely individual sinners but “all things,” whether on earth or in heaven — a reconciliation of truly cosmic scope, accomplished through nothing more, and nothing less, than his own blood shed on an ordinary Roman cross.

Paul then applies this cosmic reconciliation directly to his readers: “once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 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” (1:21–22) — provided, Paul adds, that they continue in the faith, established and firm, without being moved from the hope of the gospel (1:23). Paul’s own ministry, he explains, exists entirely to serve this same purpose: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (1:28). That word “everyone,” repeated three times in a single verse, matters: Paul’s aim was never a spiritual elite possessing some higher knowledge unavailable to ordinary believers, the very promise the false teachers in Colosse were apparently offering. His goal was universal maturity, available to every believer through nothing more exotic than teaching and admonition grounded in Christ, pursued, Paul says, “with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (1:29) — a labor demanding enough to be described in the language of contest and struggle, but never a labor searching for some secret beyond what Christ himself had already fully supplied.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul describes Christ as both the creator who holds all things together and the head who gives the church its supremacy. Which of these two dimensions of Christ's identity — his authority over the universe or his headship over the church — do you find yourself thinking about less often than you should?
2. Paul says God's fullness dwelling in Christ is what made a truly cosmic reconciliation possible through the cross. How does thinking of Christ's death as cosmic in scope, not only personal, change how you understand what happened there?
3. Paul's ministry aimed at presenting "everyone" fully mature in Christ, not a spiritually elite few. Are there ways you have been tempted to think some believers have access to a "deeper" spirituality unavailable to ordinary Christians?
4. Paul describes his labor for the Colossians' maturity as demanding "all his energy." What would it look like for you to invest that kind of energy in another believer's spiritual maturity this season, whether a child, a friend, or someone you disciple?

CHAPTER THREE:

Colossians 2:1–15

Paul now turns from praise of Christ to direct application, and his opening concern reveals exactly what is at stake in this letter: “I want you to know how hard I am contending for you... 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” (2:1–2). Notice the target of that final phrase. The mystery is not some hidden, additional teaching layered on top of Christ; the mystery is Christ himself, and Paul’s concern is that the Colossians might be talked out of this simple, sufficient truth “by fine-sounding arguments” (2:4) — an admission that whatever the false teachers were offering, it was not crude or obviously false, but persuasive, plausible, even attractive on its surface.

Paul’s warning, when it comes, is direct: “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” (2:8). The image of captivity is deliberate. What the false teachers offered as an advancement, a deepening, Paul recasts as an enslavement — a subtle removal of freedom disguised as an addition of wisdom. And the reason no such addition is either necessary or possible follows immediately, in the verse that stands as the letter’s theological center: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority” (2:9–10).

This single claim answers every specific error Paul has been circling. Against the philosophy that treated Christ as merely one source of wisdom among others: in him dwells the fullness of Deity itself, not a partial or shared authority. Against the demand for circumcision and law-keeping: “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by human hands... having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God” (2:11–12) — a spiritual circumcision, accomplished by God rather than performed by human hands, that renders the physical requirement entirely beside the point. And against any lingering sense of unresolved debt or condemnation, Paul offers one of the most vivid images in all of his writing: God, “having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us... took it away, nailing it to the cross” (2:14) — the language of a legal certificate of debt, physically nailed up the way a Roman official might post a public notice, now displayed instead as evidence of a debt fully and publicly discharged. And in that same act, Christ “disarmed the powers and authorities” that the false teachers were apparently so preoccupied with, making “a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (2:15) — the very “elemental spiritual forces” some in Colosse feared and sought to appease had already been decisively defeated, in public, at the cross itself.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul warns that the false teaching in Colosse came through “fine-sounding arguments,” not obvious error. What subtle, plausible-

sounding ideas in your own culture or circle might be quietly pulling you away from a simple confidence in Christ's sufficiency?

2. Paul says believers "have been brought to fullness" in Christ — a completed reality, not a goal still being pursued. Do you tend to live as though something is still missing in your standing with God, or do you rest in this stated completeness?
3. The image of a debt certificate nailed to the cross, canceled and displayed, is one of Scripture's most vivid pictures of forgiveness. Is there a specific sin or failure in your own life that you have not yet fully allowed yourself to believe is genuinely canceled?
4. Paul says Christ publicly triumphed over every hostile spiritual power at the cross. Does this settled victory shape how confidently you approach spiritual struggle or opposition in your own life, or does that opposition still feel like an open question to you?

CHAPTER FOUR:

Colossians 2:16–23

Having established that believers are already complete in Christ, Paul spends the rest of this chapter drawing out the practical consequence: “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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (2:16–17). The image of a shadow is precise and worth sitting with. A shadow is not an illusion; it is a real, if partial, outline cast by something solid standing between the light and the ground. Old Testament dietary laws, festivals, and Sabbath observances were never meaningless; they were shadows genuinely cast by the substance of Christ himself, long before that substance had actually arrived. But once the substance has come, insisting on the shadow is not merely unnecessary devotion — it is a strange kind of regression, mistaking the outline for the reality it was only ever pointing toward.

Paul then turns to a second danger, apparently connected to the first: “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen, and their unspiritual mind puffs them up with idle notions” (2:18). Whatever specific visionary practices lay behind this warning, Paul’s diagnosis of the underlying problem is sharp: what presented itself as humility was, in fact, a subtle form of pride, an “unspiritual mind” inflated by claims to private spiritual experience unavailable to ordinary believers. And the deeper flaw, Paul

says, is structural rather than merely moral: such teaching has “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” (2:19). Whatever authority these visions and angelic encounters claimed, they had, in practice, detached themselves from Christ as the church’s actual source of growth and life — a severed connection no amount of impressive spiritual experience could repair.

The chapter’s final movement addresses a third error, ascetic self-denial pursued for its own sake: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (2:21), rules Paul says concern “things destined to perish with use,” based merely on human commands and teachings (2:22). His assessment of this approach is almost dismissive in its bluntness: “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” (2:23). This is a genuinely striking claim. The very practices designed, on their surface, to conquer bodily desire through sheer severity turn out, in Paul’s assessment, to be powerless against the thing they were meant to restrain. Rules imposed from outside cannot produce holiness from within; only a life genuinely joined to Christ, already declared complete in him, has any real power over sin — which is precisely the argument Paul has been building since the start of this chapter, and precisely what he will now spend chapter 3 showing his readers what it actually looks like to live out.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul describes Old Testament regulations as a genuine but partial “shadow” of the reality now found in Christ. Are there religious rules or practices in your own experience that you have mistaken for the substance itself, rather than recognizing Christ as the substance they were only ever pointing toward?
2. False humility, Paul says, can actually be a form of pride, inflated by claims to special spiritual experience. Have you ever encountered, or been tempted by, a spirituality that claimed access to something deeper than ordinary Scripture and ordinary faith?
3. Paul says ascetic self-denial has no actual power to restrain sensual indulgence. Have you ever relied on sheer willpower or external rules to fight a besetting sin, only to find, as Paul suggests here, that it lacked real power to change you from within?
4. Paul roots all genuine growth in staying connected to Christ as the head, “from whom the whole body... grows as God causes it to grow.” What practices currently keep you consciously connected to Christ as the actual source of your own spiritual growth?

CHAPTER FIVE:

Colossians 3:1–17

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (3:1). Paul’s practical instructions in this chapter flow directly from the doctrine of the previous two — notice the word “since,” anchoring every command that follows in a settled fact rather than an achievement still to be earned. Believers are told to set their hearts and minds on things above “since” they have already been raised with Christ, not in order to eventually be raised; the resurrection has already happened to them, in Christ, and their present orientation is meant to catch up with that already-accomplished reality. “For you died,” Paul explains, “and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (3:3) — the same believer who has already died to their old life is also, in the very next verse, described as having a life presently hidden with Christ, awaiting a future appearing in glory (3:4). Past death, present hiddenness, future glory: the whole shape of the Christian life compressed into four short verses.

That settled identity produces a familiar pattern, the same “put off, put on” structure that runs through Ephesians as well. Believers are told to “put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” — sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which Paul calls “idolatry” (3:5), along with anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language (3:8), because they have already “taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (3:9–10). And in this renewed identity, Paul makes an observation that would have struck his original

readers as remarkable: “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (3:11). Every distinction that structured the ancient social world — ethnic, religious, cultural, even the line between slave and free — is dissolved in a new identity where Christ himself is the only remaining category that matters.

What is put on in place of the old self is described with unusual warmth: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (3:12), bearing with one another and forgiving whatever grievances arise, “just as the Lord forgave you” (3:13). And over all of this, Paul places one final garment: “over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (3:14) — love functioning not as one virtue among the others but as the belt or sash that holds the entire outfit together, without which every other quality risks becoming disconnected and formless.

The chapter closes with instruction that returns to a theme already familiar from Ephesians, though phrased with a slightly different emphasis: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... And be thankful. 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” (3:15–16). Where Ephesians commands believers to “be filled with the Spirit,” the nearly identical instruction here commands believers to let “the message of Christ dwell among you richly” — the same result, teaching and singing and thanksgiving, flowing from what appears to be, on close comparison, essentially the same underlying reality

described two different ways. Being filled with the Spirit and being saturated with the word of Christ are not, on this reading, two separate pursuits but a single reality named from two angles: a life genuinely controlled by God's Spirit will be a life genuinely soaked in God's word, because it is through that word, ordinarily, that the Spirit does his shaping work. The chapter's final instruction gathers everything into one comprehensive rule: "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" (3:17) — no corner of life set aside as exempt from this single, unifying purpose.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul roots every command in this chapter in the settled fact that believers have already been raised with Christ, not in an achievement still to come. How much of your own obedience currently feels like striving toward a status you still lack, rather than living out a status you already have?
2. Paul says love is what binds every other virtue together "in perfect unity," like a belt holding a full outfit in place. Which of the virtues listed in 3:12 — compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience — do you currently practice without enough love behind it?
3. The Ephesians command to be "filled with the Spirit" and the Colossians command to let "the message of Christ dwell in you richly" appear to describe the same reality in two ways. Does

connecting Spirit-fullness this directly to Scripture engagement
change how you currently pursue it?

4. Paul says believers should do everything, in word or deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus. Is there an area of your ordinary daily life — work, hobbies, conversation — that you have not yet consciously brought under this rule?

CHAPTER SIX:

Colossians 3:18–4:1

Paul now applies the “new self” described in the previous chapter to the most basic relationships of ancient household life, in a passage that closely parallels the household code in Ephesians 5 and 6, though considerably more compressed. “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (3:18), followed immediately by “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them” (3:19) — a briefer version of the extended comparison to Christ and the church that filled an entire chapter in Ephesians, but carrying the same underlying logic: submission offered voluntarily and love offered without harshness, both understood as fitting expressions of life “in the Lord” rather than as culturally negotiable customs.

Children are told to “obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (3:20), and fathers are warned, in language nearly identical to Ephesians, “do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” (3:21) — a warning framed here in terms of the child’s own heart rather than the parent’s anger, naming discouragement as the specific danger a harsh or inconsistent pattern of parenting tends to produce. The household code then turns, at greater length than any of the relationships before it, to slaves and masters, a relationship that occupied enormous space in the ancient economy. Slaves are told to obey their earthly masters “in everything,” not with eye-service to win favor, but “with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord,” working “at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters” (3:22–23). The promise attached to this instruction reframes

the entire relationship: “since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (3:24). Whatever the earthly master did or did not recognize or reward, the true and lasting reward, Paul insists, comes from a different Master altogether, one who sees every hidden act of faithful, unrecognized labor.

That principle cuts both ways. Masters are told, in the single verse allotted to them, “provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven” (4:1) — a brief instruction, but a genuinely radical one for its time, placing master and slave under the authority of the very same heavenly Master, accountable by the identical standard, with no favoritism shown to either party’s earthly rank. Running underneath this entire household code, and stated most explicitly in the instruction to slaves, is a single controlling principle worth carrying into every relationship a modern reader occupies, whatever its outward form: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters” (3:23). Employer and employee, parent and child, spouse and spouse — every relationship a believer occupies is, in the end, only one layer deep. Beneath every human authority a believer serves or exercises stands the same Lord Christ, and it is ultimately to him, not to the visible party across the table, that every act of service is finally rendered.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul’s household instructions are considerably briefer here than in Ephesians but carry the same underlying logic. Which relationship named in this passage — spouse, parent, child, employee, or

employer — do you most need to reexamine through the lens of serving Christ rather than merely the human party in front of you?

2. Slaves are promised a reward from the Lord regardless of whether their earthly master ever recognized their faithful service. Is there an area of your own life — work, ministry, family — where your service currently goes unrecognized, and how does this promise reshape your motivation to keep serving well there?
3. Masters and slaves are placed under the same heavenly Master, accountable to an identical standard. Where in your own life do you hold real authority over someone else, and how consciously do you remember that you, too, answer to that same Master?
4. Paul says whatever we do should be done “with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” Think of one ordinary task on your schedule this week that you tend to do half-heartedly. What would it look like to do that specific task as though Christ himself were the one you were serving?

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Colossians 4:2–18

Paul's final instructions to the Colossians before his closing greetings center on two practices: prayer and wise conduct toward outsiders. "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" (4:2), he writes, and then makes his own request specific and personal: "pray also for us, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should" (4:3–4). It is worth pausing over what Paul does, and does not, ask the Colossians to pray for. He does not ask for release from prison, though release would certainly have been welcome; he asks for open doors and clarity of speech, so that his imprisonment itself might become another occasion for the gospel to advance, exactly as he described his own circumstances to the Ephesians and Philippians in the other letters written from this same captivity.

That same outward focus shapes his final piece of instruction to the church at large: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (4:5–6). The image of salt, in the ancient world, called to mind both preservation and flavor — speech that keeps a conversation from decaying into something unhelpful or corrosive, while also making the truth genuinely appealing rather than merely correct. Grace-filled, salt-seasoned speech is neither compromise, softening truth until it says nothing worth hearing, nor harshness, stating truth in a way that repels

rather than invites. It is speech calibrated, through wisdom, to the actual person in front of you and the actual opportunity the moment presents.

The letter closes with an unusually long list of personal greetings, and even this closing list carries real substance. Tychicus, who also carried the letter to the Ephesians, would bring news of Paul's circumstances and "encourage your hearts" (4:7–8). He traveled together with Onesimus, described here simply as "our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you" (4:9) — the very same runaway slave whose return to his master Philemon, a member of this same Colossian church, occasioned Paul's short personal letter carried on this identical journey. Paul passes along greetings from a small circle of coworkers, including Epaphras, "always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (4:12) — the very church founder whose teaching Paul had defended at the letter's opening, now shown continuing to labor for this congregation in prayer from a distance, exactly the kind of ongoing, unglamorous devotion the whole letter has been commending. Paul's final instruction asks that this letter be read publicly, and then exchanged with the church at nearby Laodicea, so that each congregation might read what had been written to the other (4:16) — a small but telling detail, confirming that Paul's letters, even those addressed to a single small congregation in a minor town, were never intended to remain private correspondence, but were meant, from the beginning, to circulate as shared instruction for the whole body of Christ. The letter's final words are written, Paul notes, in his own hand: "Remember my chains. Grace be with you" (4:18) — a brief, personal signature closing a letter that had spent four chapters insisting that the very Christ for whom Paul now sat imprisoned was, in

himself, entirely sufficient for everything the Colossians would ever need.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Paul asks for prayer not for release from prison but for open doors and clarity to keep proclaiming Christ despite his circumstances. When you pray for someone in a difficult situation, do you tend to pray primarily for the circumstance to change, or also for God's purposes to advance through it?
2. Paul describes wise, gracious speech as "seasoned with salt" — neither compromising truth nor delivering it harshly. Think of a recent conversation with someone outside the faith. Was your own speech closer to compromise, harshness, or the graceful, well-seasoned middle Paul describes?
3. Epaphras is described as "always wrestling in prayer" for a congregation he was currently absent from. Is there a person or church community you have moved away from, geographically or otherwise, that you continue to wrestle in prayer for the way Epaphras did?
4. Paul instructs the Colossians to exchange this letter with the church at Laodicea, so that Scripture written to one congregation would benefit another. As you finish this book alongside your own reading of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, who is one person you could share what you have learned with, the way these early churches shared Paul's letters with each other?

CONCLUSION

We opened this volume by noting that these four letters were never written as a set. One defended a gospel under attack in the heat of an early controversy; three others were composed years later from the enforced stillness of a Roman prison cell. And yet, read together, they turn out to answer one another in ways that feel almost too fitting to be accidental. Galatians insists that nothing can be added to faith in Christ without emptying the cross of its meaning. Ephesians shows what that same faith has already built: a single new people, chosen, redeemed, and sealed, destined to display God's wisdom to every power in heaven and on earth. Philippians shows what that identity produces under real pressure — a joy resilient enough to survive a prison sentence, because it was never actually dependent on freedom to begin with. And Colossians states plainly what the other three had already been assuming all along: that Christ himself, and nothing beside him, is sufficient for every need a human life could ever present.

The thread that ties all four letters together, easy to lose amid their very different occasions and tones, is the conviction Paul states most directly to the Colossians and most urgently to the Galatians: that believers are, in Christ, already complete. Not completed by keeping the law, as the Judaizers in Galatia insisted. Not completed by additional visions, angelic mediators, or ascetic achievement, as the false teachers in Colosse implied. Not completed, for that matter, by favorable circumstances, comfortable imprisonment, or a life free from suffering, as anyone reading Philippians from a place of comfort might be tempted to assume it requires. Completed by Christ alone, and only by Christ,

because in him — Paul says it as plainly as Scripture ever says anything — “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9).

We hope these thirty-two chapters have left you with more than a set of arguments to remember. Paul did not write any of these four letters as abstract theology, detached from the ordinary business of living. He wrote to real, struggling, imperfect congregations — quarreling with each other in Philippi, drifting toward legalism in Galatia, tempted by empty philosophy in Colosse, still learning what it meant to be one new people in Ephesus — and to every one of them he wrote essentially the same message, in four different keys: you already have, in Christ, everything you need. Not everything you want. Not the absence of every hardship. But everything actually necessary to stand complete before God, to love one another well, to endure whatever comes, and to grow, slowly and often unglamorously, into the mature likeness of the Christ who has already, from first to last, made you his own. Wherever you find yourself today — defending the gospel like the Galatians needed to, discovering your identity in Christ’s body like the Ephesians, holding onto joy under pressure like the Philippians, or resisting some subtle substitute for Christ’s sufficiency like the Colossians — we hope you will keep returning, as we have, to the single truth that holds every one of these four letters together: that in Christ, you are complete.

APPENDIX

Daily Bible Reading Plan

This is the same daily Bible reading plan we use at dailyqt.org, covering the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments alike, in three hundred sixty-five daily readings. It does not begin on January 1st, and neither must you; begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. The six readings that correspond to the chapters of this book, Galatians 1–3 through the whole of Colossians, fall late in the sequence and are marked in bold below, but the complete year-long plan is reprinted here, as it is in every volume of this series, so that wherever you are in your reading you always have the whole plan close at hand. Check off each day's passage as you complete it, and feel no need to catch up if you fall behind by a day or a week. The goal was never a perfect record. It was a daily habit of opening God's Word, kept up faithfully enough, and long enough, that it becomes less a task to complete than simply the shape of an ordinary day.

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
1/10	Genesis 1-3	1/11	Genesis 4-7
1/12	Genesis 8-11	1/13	Genesis 12-15
1/14	Genesis 16-18	1/15	Genesis 19-21
1/16	Genesis 22-24	1/17	Genesis 25-26
1/18	Genesis 27-29	1/19	Genesis 30-31
1/20	Genesis 32-34	1/21	Genesis 35-37
1/22	Genesis 38-40	1/23	Genesis 41-42
1/24	Genesis 43-45	1/25	Genesis 46-47
1/26	Genesis 48-50	1/27	Exodus 1-3

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
1/28	Exodus 4-6	1/29	Exodus 7-9
1/30	Exodus 10-12	1/31	Exodus 13-15
2/1	Exodus 16-18	2/2	Exodus 19-21
2/3	Exodus 22-24	2/4	Exodus 25-27
2/5	Exodus 28-29	2/6	Exodus 30-32
2/7	Exodus 33-35	2/8	Exodus 36-38
2/9	Exodus 39-40	2/10	Leviticus 1-4
2/11	Leviticus 5-7	2/12	Leviticus 8-10
2/13	Leviticus 11-13	2/14	Leviticus 14-15
2/15	Leviticus 16-18	2/16	Leviticus 19-21
2/17	Leviticus 22-23	2/18	Leviticus 24-25
2/19	Leviticus 26-27	2/20	Numbers 1-2
2/21	Numbers 3-4	2/22	Numbers 5-6
2/23	Numbers 7	2/24	Numbers 8-10
2/25	Numbers 11-13	2/26	Numbers 14-15
2/27	Numbers 16-17	2/28	Numbers 18-20
3/1	Numbers 21-22	3/2	Numbers 23-25
3/3	Numbers 26-27	3/4	Numbers 28-30
3/5	Numbers 31-32	3/6	Numbers 33-34
3/7	Numbers 35-36	3/8	Deuteronomy 1-2
3/9	Deuteronomy 3-4	3/10	Deuteronomy 5-7
3/11	Deuteronomy 8-10	3/12	Deuteronomy 11-13
3/13	Deuteronomy 14-16	3/14	Deuteronomy 17-20
3/15	Deuteronomy 21-23	3/16	Deuteronomy 24-27
3/17	Deuteronomy 28-29	3/18	Deuteronomy 30-31
3/19	Deuteronomy 32-34	3/20	Joshua 1-4

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
3/21	Joshua 5-8	3/22	Joshua 9-11
3/23	Joshua 12-15	3/24	Joshua 16-18
3/25	Joshua 19-21	3/26	Joshua 22-24
3/27	Judges 1-2	3/28	Judges 3-5
3/29	Judges 6-7	3/30	Judges 8-9
3/31	Judges 10-12	4/1	Judges 13-15
4/2	Judges 16-18	4/3	Judges 19-21
4/4	Ruth 1-4	4/5	1 Samuel 1-3
4/6	1 Samuel 4-8	4/7	1 Samuel 9-12
4/8	1 Samuel 13-14	4/9	1 Samuel 15-17
4/10	1 Samuel 18-20	4/11	1 Samuel 21-24
4/12	1 Samuel 25-27	4/13	1 Samuel 28-31
4/14	2 Samuel 1-3	4/15	2 Samuel 4-7
4/16	2 Samuel 8-12	4/17	2 Samuel 13-15
4/18	2 Samuel 16-18	4/19	2 Samuel 19-21
4/20	2 Samuel 22-24	4/21	1 Kings 1-2
4/22	1 Kings 3-5	4/23	1 Kings 6-7
4/24	1 Kings 8-9	4/25	1 Kings 10-11
4/26	1 Kings 12-14	4/27	1 Kings 15-17
4/28	1 Kings 18-20	4/29	1 Kings 21-22
4/30	2 Kings 1-3	5/1	2 Kings 4-5
5/2	2 Kings 6-8	5/3	2 Kings 9-11
5/4	2 Kings 12-14	5/5	2 Kings 15-17
5/6	2 Kings 18-19	5/7	2 Kings 20-22
5/8	2 Kings 23-25	5/9	1 Chronicles 1-2
5/10	1 Chronicles 3-5	5/11	1 Chronicles 6

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
5/12	1 Chronicles 7-8	5/13	1 Chronicles 9-11
5/14	1 Chronicles 12-14	5/15	1 Chronicles 15-17
5/16	1 Chronicles 18-21	5/17	1 Chronicles 22-24
5/18	1 Chronicles 25-27	5/19	1 Chronicles 28-2 Chronicles 1
5/20	2 Chronicles 2-5	5/21	2 Chronicles 6-8
5/22	2 Chronicles 9-12	5/23	2 Chronicles 13-17
5/24	2 Chronicles 18-20	5/25	2 Chronicles 21-24
5/26	2 Chronicles 25-27	5/27	2 Chronicles 28-31
5/28	2 Chronicles 32-34	5/29	2 Chronicles 35-36
5/30	Ezra 1-3	5/31	Ezra 4-7
6/1	Ezra 8-10	6/2	Nehemiah 1-3
6/3	Nehemiah 4-6	6/4	Nehemiah 7
6/5	Nehemiah 8-9	6/6	Nehemiah 10-11
6/7	Nehemiah 12-13	6/8	Esther 1-5
6/9	Esther 6-10	6/10	Job 1-4
6/11	Job 5-7	6/12	Job 8-10
6/13	Job 11-13	6/14	Job 14-16
6/15	Job 17-20	6/16	Job 21-23
6/17	Job 24-28	6/18	Job 29-31
6/19	Job 32-34	6/20	Job 35-37
6/21	Job 38-39	6/22	Job 40-42
6/23	Psalms 1-8	6/24	Psalms 9-16
6/25	Psalms 17-20	6/26	Psalms 21-25
6/27	Psalms 26-31	6/28	Psalms 32-35
6/29	Psalms 36-39	6/30	Psalms 40-45

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
7/1	Psalms 46-50	7/2	Psalms 51-57
7/3	Psalms 58-65	7/4	Psalms 66-69
7/5	Psalms 70-73	7/6	Psalms 74-77
7/7	Psalms 78-79	7/8	Psalms 80-85
7/9	Psalms 86-89	7/10	Psalms 90-95
7/11	Psalms 96-102	7/12	Psalms 103-105
7/13	Psalms 106-107	7/14	Psalms 108-114
7/15	Psalms 115-118	7/16	Psalms 119:1-88
7/17	Psalms 119:89-176	7/18	Psalms 120-132
7/19	Psalms 133-139	7/20	Psalms 140-145
7/21	Psalms 146-150	7/22	Proverbs 1-3
7/23	Proverbs 4-6	7/24	Proverbs 7-9
7/25	Proverbs 10-12	7/26	Proverbs 13-15
7/27	Proverbs 16-18	7/28	Proverbs 19-21
7/29	Proverbs 22-23	7/30	Proverbs 24-26
7/31	Proverbs 27-29	8/1	Proverbs 30-31
8/2	Ecclesiastes 1-4	8/3	Ecclesiastes 5-8
8/4	Ecclesiastes 9-12	8/5	Song of Songs 1-8
8/6	Isaiah 1-4	8/7	Isaiah 5-8
8/8	Isaiah 9-12	8/9	Isaiah 13-17
8/10	Isaiah 18-22	8/11	Isaiah 23-27
8/12	Isaiah 28-30	8/13	Isaiah 31-35
8/14	Isaiah 36-41	8/15	Isaiah 42-44
8/16	Isaiah 45-48	8/17	Isaiah 49-53
8/18	Isaiah 54-58	8/19	Isaiah 59-63
8/20	Isaiah 64-66	8/21	Jeremiah 1-3

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
8/22	Jeremiah 4-6	8/23	Jeremiah 7-9
8/24	Jeremiah 10-13	8/25	Jeremiah 14-17
8/26	Jeremiah 18-22	8/27	Jeremiah 23-25
8/28	Jeremiah 26-29	8/29	Jeremiah 30-31
8/30	Jeremiah 32-34	8/31	Jeremiah 35-37
9/1	Jeremiah 38-41	9/2	Jeremiah 42-45
9/3	Jeremiah 46-48	9/4	Jeremiah 49-50
9/5	Jeremiah 51-52	9/6	Lamentations 1:1-3:36
9/7	Lamentations 3:37-5:22	9/8	Ezekiel 1-4
9/9	Ezekiel 5-8	9/10	Ezekiel 9-12
9/11	Ezekiel 13-15	9/12	Ezekiel 16-17
9/13	Ezekiel 18-20	9/14	Ezekiel 21-22
9/15	Ezekiel 23-24	9/16	Ezekiel 25-27
9/17	Ezekiel 28-30	9/18	Ezekiel 31-33
9/19	Ezekiel 34-36	9/20	Ezekiel 37-39
9/21	Ezekiel 40-42	9/22	Ezekiel 43-45
9/23	Ezekiel 46-48	9/24	Daniel 1-3
9/25	Daniel 4-6	9/26	Daniel 7-9
9/27	Daniel 10-12	9/28	Hosea 1-7
9/29	Hosea 8-14	9/30	Joel 1-3
10/1	Amos 1-5	10/2	Amos 6-9
10/3	Obadiah 1, Jonah 1-4	10/4	Micah 1-7
10/5	Nahum 1-3	10/6	Habakkuk 1-3, Zephaniah 1-3
10/7	Haggai 1-2	10/8	Zechariah 1-7
10/9	Zechariah 8-14	10/10	Malachi 1-4

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
10/11	Matthew 1-4	10/12	Matthew 5-6
10/13	Matthew 7-8	10/14	Matthew 9-10
10/15	Matthew 11-12	10/16	Matthew 13-14
10/17	Matthew 15-17	10/18	Matthew 18-19
10/19	Matthew 20-21	10/20	Matthew 22-23
10/21	Matthew 24-25	10/22	Matthew 26
10/23	Matthew 27-28	10/24	Mark 1-3
10/25	Mark 4-5	10/26	Mark 6-7
10/27	Mark 8-9	10/28	Mark 10-11
10/29	Mark 12-13	10/30	Mark 14
10/31	Mark 15-16	11/1	Luke 1
11/2	Luke 2-3	11/3	Luke 4-5
11/4	Luke 6-7	11/5	Luke 8-9
11/6	Luke 10-11	11/7	Luke 12-13
11/8	Luke 14-16	11/9	Luke 17-18
11/10	Luke 19-20	11/11	Luke 21-22
11/12	Luke 23-24	11/13	John 1-2
11/14	John 3-4	11/15	John 5-6
11/16	John 7-8	11/17	John 9-10
11/18	John 11-12	11/19	John 13-15
11/20	John 16-18	11/21	John 19-21
11/22	Acts 1-3	11/23	Acts 4-6
11/24	Acts 7-8	11/25	Acts 9-10
11/26	Acts 11-13	11/27	Acts 14-15
11/28	Acts 16-17	11/29	Acts 18-20
11/30	Acts 21-23	12/1	Acts 24-26

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
12/2	Acts 27-28	12/3	Romans 1-3
12/4	Romans 4-7	12/5	Romans 8-10
12/6	Romans 11-13	12/7	Romans 14-16
12/8	1 Corinthians 1-4	12/9	1 Corinthians 5-8
12/10	1 Corinthians 9-11	12/11	1 Corinthians 12-14
12/12	1 Corinthians 15-16	12/13	2 Corinthians 1-4
12/14	2 Corinthians 5-9	12/15	2 Corinthians 10-13
12/16	Galatians 1-3	12/17	Galatians 4-6
12/18	Ephesians 1-3	12/19	Ephesians 4-6
12/20	Philippians 1-4	12/21	Colossians 1-4
12/22	1 Thessalonians 1-5	12/23	2 Thessalonians 1-3
12/24	1 Timothy 1-6	12/25	2 Timothy 1-4
12/26	Titus 1-3, Philemon 1	12/27	Hebrews 1-6
12/28	Hebrews 7-10	12/29	Hebrews 11-13
12/30	James 1-5	12/31	1 Peter 1-5
1/1	2 Peter 1-3	1/2	1 John 1-5
1/3	2 John 1, 3 John 1, Jude 1	1/4	Revelation 1-3
1/5	Revelation 4-8	1/6	Revelation 9-12
1/7	Revelation 13-16	1/8	Revelation 17-19
1/9	Revelation 20-22		