

*Living Word*  
BIBLE  
STUDIES

# COLOSSIANS & PHILEMON

*Continue to Live in Him*

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON





COLOSSIANS  
& PHILEMON

# *Living Word* BIBLE STUDIES

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*Colossians and Philemon: Continue to Live in Him*

*1 & 2 Thessalonians: Living the Gospel to the End*

# COLOSSIANS & PHILEMON

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P U B L I S H I N G

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# CONTENTS

Foreword by Philip Graham Ryken	vii
A Personal Word from Kathleen	xi
Introduction	xiii
Studying a Book of the Bible	xvii

## LESSON 1

Meeting a New Book	1
--------------------	---

## LESSON 2 (COL. 1:1–14)

Plunging in . . . Who, What, and How?	9
---------------------------------------	---

## LESSON 3 (COL. 1:15–23)

Who Is This Jesus?	19
--------------------	----

## LESSON 4 (COL. 1:24–2:5)

Into the Heart of Paul	29
------------------------	----

## LESSON 5 (COL. 2:6–23)

So Then . . . Getting to the Application	41
--	----

## LESSON 6 (COL. 3:1–4)

Four Short and Weighty Verses	53
-------------------------------	----

CONTENTS

LESSON 7 (COL. 3:5–14)

Full-Scale Application 65

LESSON 8 (COL. 3:15–4:1)

Application That Hits Home 77

LESSON 9 (COL. 4:2–18)

The People Around Us 91

LESSON 10 (PHILEMON)

Personal Study of a Personal Letter 105

Notes for Leaders 113

Outline of Colossians 119

Suggested Memory Passages 121

Notes on Translations and Study Helps 123

## FOREWORD

Why study the Bible? And if we do study the Bible, how should we study it?

Maybe the best way to answer these questions is by seeing what the Bible says about itself.

The Bible says that it is the very Word of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The one true and living God speaks to us in every word on every page. And we should reverently and joyfully recognize our awesome privilege as direct recipients of divine revelation. Therefore, we should believe that as we read and study the Bible we are hearing the voice of God. Then we will be worthy of the commendation that the apostle Paul gave to the Thessalonians: “We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13).

The Bible also says that the God-given Word was written by real human beings, who wrote under the direction of God the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:21). The Bible was written for people like us, by people like us. Furthermore, these divinely inspired authors claimed to write with special care and the best efforts of their literary skill. For example, the writer of Ecclesiastes said that he “taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and



arranging many proverbs with great care,” and that he “sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (Eccl. 12:9–10).

We should read the Bible, therefore, both as a divine book and as a human book. This means recognizing and understanding the conventional literary forms in which the Bible is written: stories, poems, lists, hymns, genealogies, visions, laments, historical records, and so forth. It means that as we read, we should find pleasure and take delight in the Bible’s beauty, simplicity, and majesty. It also means that we should take as much care to study the Bible as the original authors took to write it, paying close attention to every word that was carefully chosen to fit into its proper context.

The Bible claims further that the Word of God is something we need to live. Jesus said it like this: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3). In other words, we need God’s Word as much or even more than we need our daily bread. Therefore, we should read and study the Bible every day as if our lives depended upon it.

To be more specific, the Bible says that it has the life-giving power to bring us into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The sacred writings of Scripture “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The saving wisdom of Scripture is not limited to one part of the Bible or another but holds true for every book in the Old and New Testaments. What John said about his gospel is really true about the whole Bible: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31; cf. Luke 24:25–27).

As we read and study the Bible we should look to see Jesus on every page. The Savior expected in the prophets is exhibited in the gospels, explained in the epistles, and exalted in the Reve-

lation. As we read these Scriptures by faith, therefore, we come into a personal saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

What else does the Bible say about itself? It says that God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). In other words, the Bible shows us the way to go in life. In fact, the Bible tells us everything we need for godly thinking and holy living: every word of Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Bible is the most useful book ever written. As we read, therefore, we should be looking for practical truth that will make a difference in what we think, what we say, and what we do in every situation in life.

This study guide will give you a helpful method for studying the Bible in all the right ways. It will encourage you in the daily reading, meditation, and memorization of Scripture. It will help you to be serious and systematic about studying the Bible for yourself. It will ask you questions that help you see the literary structure, the Christ-centered meaning, and the practical implications of what you are reading. It will give you growing skill and confidence in understanding the Bible, while at the same time helping you make progress in personal holiness and deepening your love for God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And it will help you do all of this in relationship with other members of your spiritual family—your brothers and sisters in the church.

Colossians and Philemon are richly rewarding letters to study. In Colossians, the apostle Paul celebrates the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ, corrects some soul-destroying errors in theology, and teaches us how to live for Christ in our daily relationships. In Philemon he addresses a delicate interpersonal conflict in the church, helping us see how to honor God in restoring a relationship.

## FOREWORD

May the same Holy Spirit who first revealed these words to the apostle enable you to understand what you read, to find joy in what you study, and to return the glory to God by the way that you live.

Philip Graham Ryken



# A PERSONAL WORD FROM KATHLEEN

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys, and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and

power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don't think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we've forgotten how to *read*! We're so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We've disowned that process of careful reading . . . observing the words . . . seeing the shape of a book and a passage . . . asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it . . . digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here's my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to a study of Colossians and Philemon. Our goal will be to read, understand, and apply these two New Testament epistles. These are not simply beautiful and fascinating letters written during the first remarkable years of growth in the early church; these are the inspired, authoritative Word of God. The same Spirit who inspired these words can teach us what they mean and show us how to apply them to our lives. As we study, may the Word of God be truly living and active in our hearts and in our lives.

## BACKGROUND OF PAUL AND THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE

Colossians and Philemon are two of Paul's "prison epistles"—letters written while he was imprisoned, probably in Rome, around AD 60. He was bound in chains, he explained, "because of the hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20)—that is, because he preached the gospel of Jesus the promised Lord Christ. The Lord Jesus had appeared to Paul (then Saul) on the Damascus road, appointing him "as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you" (Acts 26:16). The Lord had declared him "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings



and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). So the persecutor Saul became the persecuted apostle Paul, who never stopped carrying the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter how he suffered for doing so.

One result of Paul’s faithful witness was the salvation of a whole group in Colossae through a Colossian man named Epaphras, who was evidently converted under Paul’s preaching in Ephesus and who then carried the gospel back home to Colossae, just eighty miles away. A strong church grew in Colossae, a small town in the Lycus river valley (in modern-day Turkey), near the larger cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis (see Col. 4:13). These towns were all directly inland from Ephesus, and their inhabitants would have been included in “all the residents of Asia . . . both Jews and Greeks” who “heard the word of the Lord” through Paul’s preaching in Ephesus (Acts 19:10).

Now, later, Paul in prison receives a visit from Epaphras, hears of the Colossian church and its struggles, and writes them this loving letter. At the same time, he writes a personal letter to a Colossian believer named Philemon, sending that letter by the hand of Philemon’s own runaway but now returning slave.

## BACKGROUND OF THE CHURCH THREATENED BY FALSE TEACHING

Paul tells the Colossians that, as they have received Christ, so they must walk in Christ, who is fully sufficient—not only as Savior but also as Creator and Ruler of the whole world and everyone in it, forever and ever. Some false teachers in the early church were challenging the sufficiency of Christ, as we shall see. Just as in our world today, Christians in the early church faced a swirl of popular but heretical philosophies and religious views threatening to corrupt the pure message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some see Paul’s warnings as targeting the early stages of Gnosticism, which eventually grew into a widely accepted her-

esy asserting the availability of a special knowledge beyond the knowledge of Christ. (The Greek word *gnosis* means “to know.”) The various heresies of the day, against which Paul taught, made assertions such as the following:

- the existence of an elite few with special spiritual status, either through a superior knowledge or through adherence to certain rules or rituals.
- a superior wisdom, mysterious and hidden from most. Only a few could reach perfection.
- the importance of spirituality. Physical matter was either unimportant or evil. Such views led either to sinful license or to legalistic rules and regulations—as well as to a denial of the incarnation.
- the existence of many complicated levels of invisible spiritual powers, both good and evil. Some false teachers offered special knowledge of the evil powers and special means of protection from them.

Such false teaching sounds remarkably similar to many ideas coming at us in today’s world, and perhaps even in today’s church. The message of Colossians is relevant and alive in many ways.

## METHODS OF STUDY

As we read and study God’s Word, we will use certain basic Bible study methods, summarized just before chapter I in a section called “Studying a Book of the Bible.” The primary goal is to understand and apply Colossians and Philemon, but one important related goal of this study is to help each participant further develop the ability to use these methods independently. It will be helpful to read and think through the outline of study methods so that you can watch for them and use them with awareness. The questions in this study will lead you through

these methods (not always in the same order), asking you to try them out, encouraging your thoughtful interaction with the text. Finally, in the last lesson, on Philemon, you will be asked to work through these study methods by yourself—just you and the text in front of you. What a joy for each of us to be developing more and more of an ability to take up the Word of God, read it, understand it, and apply it.

This can happen only under the direction of the Holy Spirit. We need God's Spirit to understand God's Word in the way that he intends. Let us approach the Scriptures with humility and reverence, for they are the word of the Lord to us. Let us approach them with prayer, asking God by his Spirit to fill us with "the riches of full assurance of understanding" found only in our Lord Jesus Christ.



# STUDYING A BOOK OF THE BIBLE

- I. Simply *read* the book through several times, making initial *observations*.
- II. *Ask questions*\* about the book.
  1. Why is this text here?
    - In other words, identify the main point, or *theme*, of the book.
    - Look for a *theme verse* or verses that capture the book's main point.
  2. Why does it say what it says in the way that it says it?
    - Consider first the *original recipients* of the book and how they would have understood it.
    - Examine the book's *organization*, or shape: how do the different parts work together to support the main theme?
    - Find *key words* and determine their meaning and significance in the book.
    - Observe the book's *literary style* and the way in which that style contributes to the meaning.

\* The five general questions have been suggested by Rev. Dick Lucas in teaching workshops at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois.

3. How does this text point us to Jesus?
  - Discover how, even indirectly, this book supports and develops the *Bible's main theme* of God's redeeming a people, through Jesus Christ for his own glory.
4. What are the surprises in this book?
  - Continually look to *notice* and *learn* what you didn't know or expect.
5. What is the application?
  - Identify *specific personal applications*.

III. *Study shorter sections* in detail, asking the following questions.

1. What is the main idea here?
2. What questions does the text make me ask?
3. How does this section connect with verses before and after?
4. How is this section organized?
5. What key words do I find?
6. How does this section support the book's main theme?
7. What other Scriptures shed crucial light on these verses?
8. How does this section apply to me?

# Lesson 1

## MEETING A NEW BOOK

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### DAY ONE—JUST READING!

Before we approach the study of Colossians in more detail, let's read it! There is no better starting point than the text itself—a letter from the apostle Paul to the church in Colossae. (See the introduction for further background.) For this first day, read the book straight through in one sitting, which should take about twenty to thirty minutes. Do not stop in parts that seem difficult; we'll come back! Today's goal is to get a sense of the whole.

But wait . . . before beginning, speak to the Lord God who gave us this book, and ask him to teach you what it means, through his Holy Spirit who inspired it and who even today brings it to life in our minds and hearts.

### DAY TWO—GETTING THE MAIN POINT

- I. Today, have not a read-through but a slightly briefer look-through, again of the entire book. This time, as you make your way through the text, ask yourself what









3. What further sections or divisions of this book might you identify, between the introductory greetings (Col. 1:1–8) and the final greetings (Col. 4:7–18)?

#### DAY FOUR—THE WRITER’S PURPOSE FOR US

Having gained an overview of this letter, its main message, and its general shape, we should ask at the start: what is the purpose of this book for us, in the whole scope of God’s great biblical revelation? Paul states clearly his main purpose for those to whom he writes (Col. 2:2–4).

1. First, who are the ones for whom Paul wishes his purpose to be accomplished? See Colossians 2:1.





3. Colossians 2:4 adds a further “in order that” for this letter. How will the purpose of Colossians 2:2–3 insure the purpose of verse 4?

Colossians’ message will emphasize the reality and the treasure of all that is ours in Christ, if we have received him for who he is—and Paul will make clear who is this one in whom we are to put our faith. Continuing to know him more and to live in him faithfully is everything we need. May Paul’s message truly strengthen and encourage our hearts.

#### DAY FIVE—PRAYER

How amazing to think that Paul wrote this letter not only for the churches of his day but for us as well, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Take a few minutes to pray that this book of Colossians will accomplish in your life the purpose for which it was intended.

*Lord God, as I study this book you have inspired and preserved, would you encourage my heart, according to your truth. Knit together in love those of us who study. May we together know more and more of the riches of full assurance of understanding found in Christ. May we plumb God’s mystery, which has been revealed in Christ. Thank you for giving us your only Son, the Lord Jesus, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

*May I take the message of Colossians to heart, knowing what it means not only to have received Christ Jesus the Lord but also to walk in him, rooted and built up in him, established in the faith and abounding in thanksgiving.*

*In Christ I pray. Amen.*

# Notes for Lesson 1