



New Testament Theology

Hidden with Christ in God

A Theology of Colossians and Philemon

KEVIN W. MCFADDEN

Series edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

“Christ is our preeminent hope! Kevin McFadden demonstrates the reality of this grand statement from Colossians and Philemon. More importantly though, he exegetically, theologically, and pastorally applies this divine reality to our daily life ‘in Christ.’ We live in a new realm, one inaugurated by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our God and King, Jesus Christ, who is not only preeminent but also sufficient. We have everything we need in him during our pilgrimage here on earth: faith, love, and hope—even in the most dire circumstances. What McFadden shows his readers is the glorious power of a hope-filled gospel that definitively proves one thing: ‘No one is without hope, and we should never give up hope.’ This book will water the garden of your heart with Christ, the hope of glory.”

David E. Briones, Associate Professor of New Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Paul’s letter to the Colossians is focused on the supremacy, rule, and glory of Christ and all that he achieved through the cross. Kevin McFadden faithfully unpacks these themes so that our eyes are drawn to Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and understanding that far outstrip the empty philosophies of this world. McFadden’s book is not just a helpful resource on Colossians and Philemon for students and pastors; it will also encourage the heart of anyone wanting to dig deeper into the wonders of Christ.”

Claire Smith, New Testament scholar; author, *God’s Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women*

“In this volume, Kevin McFadden has made an invaluable contribution to work on Colossians and Philemon. It’s written clear enough for everyone to benefit and substantial enough to satisfy scholars and students of New Testament theology. More importantly, McFadden not only lays out interpretive options but also makes persuasive cases on some exegetically difficult passages—all thoughtfully presented. This book is already helping me understand Paul better in these two letters, and for that, I am grateful.”

Robert S. Kinney, Director of Ministries, Charles Simeon Trust; Priest, Christ Church, Vienna, Austria

“Kevin McFadden has written a clear, accessible, exegetically faithful, and theologically rich book on Colossians and Philemon, pointing us as readers to our ultimate hope in Christ. Those who read this book may not agree with each of McFadden’s exegetical moves or with every theological insight, but readers should draw much encouragement from the important theme in his exposition that the believer’s life is indeed hidden in Christ.”

Jarvis J. Williams, Professor of New Testament Interpretation,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Hidden with Christ in God

New Testament Theology

Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

The Beginning of the Gospel: A Theology of Mark, Peter Orr

From the Manger to the Throne: A Theology of Luke, Benjamin L. Gladd

The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts, Patrick Schreiner

Ministry in the New Realm: A Theology of 2 Corinthians, Dane C. Ortlund

United to Christ, Walking in the Spirit: A Theology of Ephesians, Benjamin L. Merkle

Hidden with Christ in God: A Theology of Colossians and Philemon, Kevin W. McFadden

The God Who Judges and Saves: A Theology of 2 Peter and Jude, Matthew S. Harmon

The Joy of Hearing: A Theology of the Book of Revelation, Thomas R. Schreiner

Hidden with Christ in God

A Theology of Colossians and Philemon

Kevin W. McFadden

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Hidden with Christ in God: A Theology of Colossians and Philemon

Copyright © 2023 by Kevin W. McFadden

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Series design: Kevin Lipp

First printing 2023

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-7656-0

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7659-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7657-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McFadden, Kevin W., 1980– author.

Title: Hidden with Christ in God : a theology of Colossians and Philemon / Kevin W. McFadden.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2023. | Series: New Testament theology | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022051501 (print) | LCCN 2022051502 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433576560 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433576577 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433576591 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Hope—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Jesus Christ.

Classification: LCC BV4638 .M454 2023 (print) | LCC BV4638 (ebook) | DDC 234/.25—dc23/eng/20230615

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022051501>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022051502>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP		32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*For my sister Kelley†
Now and ever we confess
Christ our hope in life and death*

Contents

Series Preface	11
Preface	13
Abbreviations	15
Prologue: Hope in Difficult Circumstances	17
1 Christ, Our Hope	27
2 Christ, God's Son	39
3 Christ, Our Life Above	59
4 Christ, Our Life Below	73
5 Hope for Philemon and Onesimus	87
Epilogue: Hope for Paul	101
General Index	103
Scripture Index	107

Series Preface

THERE ARE REMARKABLY FEW TREATMENTS of the big ideas of single books of the New Testament. Readers can find brief coverage in Bible dictionaries, in some commentaries, and in New Testament theologies, but such books are filled with other information and are not devoted to unpacking the theology of each New Testament book in its own right. Technical works concentrating on various themes of New Testament theology often have a narrow focus, treating some aspect of the teaching of, say, Matthew or Hebrews in isolation from the rest of the book's theology.

The New Testament Theology series seeks to fill this gap by providing students of Scripture with readable book-length treatments of the distinctive teaching of each New Testament book or collection of books. The volumes approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology. They pay due attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text, but their main focus is on presenting the teaching of particular New Testament books about God and his relations to the world on their own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus. Such biblical theology is of fundamental importance to biblical and expository preaching and informs exegesis, systematic theology, and Christian ethics.

The twenty volumes in the series supply comprehensive, scholarly, and accessible treatments of theological themes from an evangelical perspective. We envision them being of value to students, preachers, and interested laypeople. When preparing an expository sermon

series, for example, pastors can find a healthy supply of informative commentaries, but there are few options for coming to terms with the overall teaching of each book of the New Testament. As well as being useful in sermon and Bible study preparation, the volumes will also be of value as textbooks in college and seminary exegesis classes. Our prayer is that they contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the kingdom and glory of God in Christ.

We live in a world that is “spiritual” but also wants a religion that is “practical.” Paul instructs us about true spirituality and concrete practicality in both Colossians and Philemon. There is no true spirituality that isn’t Christ-centered, for any claim of being spiritual is false if the person and work of Jesus are shunted aside. After all, Jesus is fully divine, and believers are reconciled to God and forgiven of their sins through his death and resurrection, and no pathway to God exists outside of Christ. Any attempt to reach the highest heavens and to uncover the greatest mysteries is futile, counterproductive, and a testament to human pride if it skirts around or ignores the truth that all of God’s mysteries are ours in Jesus Christ. He is the path to wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. The apostle Paul, however, doesn’t communicate what it means to be a believer in abstract terms. He unfolds in Colossians, with practical instructions, what it means to live a Christ-centered life. In the tense situation between Philemon and Onesimus Paul delicately negotiates the relationship between the master and the slave, affirming the dignity, personhood, and value of Onesimus in the process. Kevin McFadden deftly handles all these matters in this pithy and insightful exposition of hope that animates believers. Here the riches of Colossians and Philemon are opened for readers, and our hope and prayer is that we will be reminded afresh that Christ is sufficient for every need.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

Preface

THIS BOOK IS A BRIEF BUT COMPREHENSIVE SUMMARY of the theology of Colossians and Philemon. These two letters are often grouped together because they were written at the same time and sent together to the church at Colossae, which likely met in Philemon's house (Philem. 2). My goal in writing this book has been to supplement the many excellent commentaries on these letters with a readable overview of their major themes. My hope is that pastors and Bible teachers beginning a series on Colossians or Philemon could read this book in a weekend and come away with the big picture of Paul's teaching in these letters. Those working on Colossians should read the first four chapters, and those working on Philemon should read the fifth chapter. I also hope that the book will be of some benefit to scholars and seminary students, although experts will see that my reading of the massive amount of secondary literature on these letters was necessarily curtailed by the scope of the project.

The discipline of biblical theology attempts to explain the teaching of the Bible on its own terms, using its own categories and often following the development of its themes from Genesis to Revelation. One way to view biblical theology is as a bridge between exegesis (the practice of interpreting the Bible) and systematic theology (the study of Christian doctrine and practice). With this in mind, I have attempted to focus on the teaching of Paul himself, using his own words and categories as much as possible, and showing how his teaching relates to major themes in the Bible. But I have also worked carefully through all the exegetical

issues in Colossians and Philemon and have tried to think carefully through the important doctrinal and practical issues. Again, the scope of the project has necessarily limited my discussion of these issues.

Some acknowledgments: I want to thank Brian Rosner and Tom Schreiner for inviting me to contribute to this exciting new series. I especially want to thank Tom, my *Doktorvater*, who has had a great influence on my understanding of Scripture and so has had a great influence on this book. My dean and friend, Keith Plummer, helpfully suggested that I teach a graduate-level exegesis elective on Colossians and Philemon, which definitely helped the project. Thanks to the following students in that course for their sharpening effect through many enjoyable classroom discussions and through their feedback on some early drafts: Evan Carey, Justin Gambrell, Lydia Garrison, Nathan Garrison, Brandon Miller, Micah Portis, Sascha Rose, and Jon Silva. Thanks also to Caleb Daubenspeck for fielding more than a few ILL requests. Colleen McFadden, Mike Moore, and Ben O'Toole read a rough draft of the entire book, each improving it in distinct ways. Thanks to Lydia Brownback for carefully editing the manuscript. All remaining faults, of course, are my own. Finally, thanks to the Lord for giving me understanding and strength to finish this book, and thanks to friends and family for praying for me.

Kevin W. McFadden
September 15, 2022

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> , by Josephus
BDAG	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed.
BDF	<i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>Diatr.</i>	<i>Diatribai</i> , by Epictetus
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i> , by Pliny the Younger
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
ÖTK	Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentaries
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
THGNT	Tyndale House Greek New Testament

TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Prologue

Hope in Difficult Circumstances

Remember my chains.

COLOSSIANS 4:18

SOMETIMES DIFFICULT EARTHLY CIRCUMSTANCES bring clarity to the heavenly hope of the gospel. Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon were written in the midst of difficult circumstances: Paul was in prison, the church was in danger of false teaching, and Philemon was estranged from his slave Onesimus. But in these letters we find some of the Bible's most profound teaching about Christ and the practical difference he makes in our lives and relationships. Let us briefly, then, "remember [Paul's] chains" (Col. 4:18) by considering the difficult circumstances that led to the hopeful teaching of Colossians and Philemon.

Paul in Prison

The ministry of the gospel has never been easy. This was perhaps truest for the apostle Paul, of whom Jesus said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). Paul describes his own work as "toil" and "struggle" (Col. 1:29; 2:1), similar to how he describes the work of Epaphras, who planted the church at Colossae (4:12–13). And he uses labels for his colleagues in ministry that

communicate the arduous and dangerous nature of the task: “fellow worker” (Col. 4:11; Philem. 1, 24), “fellow soldier” (Philem. 2), “fellow slave” (Col. 1:7 CSB; cf. 4:12), and “fellow prisoner” (4:10). In fact, Paul wrote these two letters from prison, most likely his two-year house arrest at Rome (c. AD 60–62; see Acts 28:16–31).¹

Paul did not view his imprisonment as a hiatus in ministry but as a part of his ministry. We see this in Colossians 1:24–2:5, where he explains his purpose for writing. He tells the Colossians that he is suffering “for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (1:24). Paul does not mean that the death of Christ was insufficient to fully save. Rather, he means that the risen and ascended Christ is currently using ministers suffering “in the flesh,” like Paul and Epaphras, to bring the church to full maturity (1:28; 4:12; cf. 1:22).

So the apostle continued to work in the midst of his imprisonment. He was instrumental in the conversion of Onesimus (Philem. 10). And he wrote his letter to the Colossians, which arguably contains his most profound theological reflection on the doctrine of Christ. For some scholars, the theological teaching of this letter goes so far beyond what Paul writes in his other letters that they question whether Paul could have written it.² I raise the issue of authorship because it affects how

1 This is the traditional view, and it is held by many modern scholars as well, e.g., David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 23–24. Some scholars question whether Paul could be writing from Rome because of its distance from Colossae, which is located in modern-day Turkey. Would Onesimus have traveled that far? And would Paul be planning to visit Colossae so soon after his release (Philem. 22)? Wasn’t he planning to go the opposite way to Spain (see Rom. 15:23–24)? To account for this, many theorize that Paul was perhaps imprisoned at some earlier point in Ephesus, which is much closer to Colossae, and in which Paul ministered for many years; e.g., N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 37–42. But Rome was less than a month’s journey from Colossae, according to the Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World (<https://orbis.stanford.edu>). And we know that Paul changed his travel plans at other points (Acts 16:6–8; 2 Cor. 1:15–2:4).

2 See, e.g., Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 177–83. The theology of Colossians seems to be the major reason that scholars came to reject Pauline authorship

we think about the theology of Colossians. Is the teaching of this letter really from an apostle? In my view, it seems historically likely that the apostle Paul wrote and sent Colossians at the same time as Philemon because it overlaps on so many points with Philemon.³ The profundity of its theological reflection is not a contradiction with the theology of Paul's other letters but rather an extension of his theology, sharpened by his confrontation with a false teaching that was threatening the saints in Colossae.

Colossae and the Philosophy

Colossae was a remote inland town, located in the Roman province of Asia in what is now modern-day Turkey. Paul had probably never been to Colossae when he wrote these two letters.⁴ But during his third missionary journey, he spent an extended time of ministry in the large coastal city of Ephesus (c. AD 52–55; see Acts 19:1–20:1). Luke tells us that during this time “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). The Colossians, along with their neighbors in Laodicea and Hierapolis, had heard the word

in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until W. Bujard supported this theory with an analysis of the style of the letter (see John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, T&T Clark Study Guides [New York: T&T Clark International, 1997], 20–23). Moo thinks that even today, “scholars on both sides of the debate on authorship . . . generally agree that the critical evidence in deciding the issue is the theology of the letter.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 32.

- 3 Both letters claim to be written by Paul during an imprisonment; both mention Timothy as a cosender of the letter; both open by thanking God for the Christian virtues of faith and love; both focus on slavery (note that slavery is given much attention in the household code of Col. 3:18–4:1); both mention Onesimus the slave; both address Archippus as a minister in the church; and both send greetings from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. As Fee remarks, “It remains one of the singular mysteries in NT scholarship that so many scholars reject Pauline authorship of Colossians yet affirm the authenticity of Philemon.” Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 289n2.
- 4 There is a chance that Paul could have taken the road through Colossae on his way to Ephesus at the beginning of his third missionary journey (see Acts 18:23 and 19:1). But Schnabel concludes that “since Paul did not know the Christians in Colossae and in Laodikeia personally (cf. Col 2:1), it is rather likely that he did not travel to Ephesus through the Lykos Valley and the Maeander Valley in A.D. 52.” Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1200.

from Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:13). So Epaphras was probably one of Paul's converts in Ephesus, which was about a week's journey on foot from Colossae. One can imagine Epaphras hearing the gospel and then traveling home up the eastern road that led along the Maeander River until it turned slightly south into the Lycus River Valley and eventually to Colossae. Once there, he told his friends and family the gospel, and they received Christ Jesus as their Lord (2:6).⁵

But soon after, the Colossian believers were confronted with a false teaching. Paul apparently caught wind of this through Epaphras, who was with Paul in his imprisonment (Philem. 23). So he decided to write to these believers "in order that no one may delude [them] with plausible arguments" (Col. 2:4). He warns, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8). More literally, Paul writes in this verse of "*the philosophy [tēs philosophias]*," likely referring to a specific teaching. Perhaps the false teachers labeled their teaching as "philosophy" in order to gain credibility, just as someone today might label their view "scientific." But what was the philosophy? It is most clearly explained in the polemical section of Colossians 2:16–23, where we see that it required law-keeping and angelic visions to reach the fullness of salvation.

The false teachers were ready to "pass judgment" on the Colossian saints unless they followed certain food restrictions and kept certain holidays (2:16; cf. 2:21). Most likely they were teaching that believers must keep the food and calendar requirements of the Mosaic law in order to be saved. The law prohibits eating unclean animals and touching their carcasses (Lev. 11), drinking from unclean vessels (Lev. 11:34), and drinking wine for priests in the tent of meeting and for those under a Nazirite vow (Lev. 10:9; Num. 6:3). After the exile to Babylon, some Jews living in pagan cultures would refrain from all meat and wine in order to avoid defilement (Dan. 1:8–16). And we know that after the

5 Some copies of Col. 1:7 say Epaphras "is a faithful minister of Christ on *our* behalf" (NIV) rather than "on *your* behalf" (ESV). This wording would imply that Paul sent Epaphras to Colossae. But unfortunately it is very difficult to decide which wording was original to Paul's letter.

exile, there was a Jewish presence in Colossae because Josephus tells us that two thousand Jewish families had been moved from Babylon to Phrygia, the ancient name for the region of Colossae.⁶ Regarding the holiday requirements, the law regulated Israel's yearly, monthly, and weekly calendar (Lev. 25). And Paul's threefold description, "festival," "new moon," and "Sabbath" (Col. 2:16), is found several times in the Old Testament with reference to the calendar regulations of the law (e.g., 2 Chron. 2:4). Finally, Paul says that the calendar and food regulations "are a shadow of the things to come" (Col. 2:17), using typological reasoning like the author of Hebrews, who wrote, "The law has but a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb. 10:1). The philosophy, therefore, probably taught that believers must keep the Mosaic calendar and food laws in order to be saved. Perhaps it also taught that Gentile believers must be circumcised according to the law (cf. Col. 2:11).

For this reason, a few scholars have argued that Colossians confronts the same issue Paul confronted in Galatians, where Jewish-Christian teachers were compelling Gentile Christians to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law.⁷ But most have rightly observed that the issue in Colossae was different and more complex. The false teachers were apparently promoting law-keeping as an ascetic practice that would lead to heavenly, angelic visions: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind" (Col. 2:18; cf. 2:23). So the false teachers were ready to "disqualify" from salvation anyone who did not share in these ascetic practices and angelic visions. But what were these visions? This aspect of the philosophy is very difficult to understand because Paul does not give much explanation and because Colossians 2:18, the main piece of evidence, is difficult to translate.

Today there are two basic views. Some scholars suggest that the philosophy was a kind of Jewish mysticism. In this view the "worship of angels" in Colossians 2:18 refers to the angelic worship of God, like we

6 Josephus, *Ant.* 12.3.4.

7 See especially Wright, *Colossians*, 26–33, 109.

see in Revelation 4–5 and other Jewish apocalypses. “Going on in detail” is more literally translated “entering,” and perhaps it refers to someone’s entrance into heaven to see and join with the angels in their worship.⁸ Other scholars think that the philosophy was syncretistic, drawing on aspects of Judaism but also aspects of paganism. In this view, “worship of angels” in Colossians 2:18 refers to the human worship or veneration of angels. Arnold has documented how common it was in local folk religion for people to call upon angels for help, even Jewish people.⁹ A fourth-century Christian council in the nearby city of Laodicea had to forbid Christians from worshiping angels and clergy from becoming magicians or astrologers.¹⁰ If the philosophy was syncretistic, then perhaps “entering” refers to initiation into the visionary experiences of one of the pagan mystery religions, as it does in inscriptions at a pagan temple at Claros, north of Ephesus.¹¹

A choice between these two views is difficult. I am inclined toward the syncretistic view (the second view) because a pagan fear of angelic powers seems to fit the emphasis in Colossians on the lordship of Christ over all demonic powers (1:16; 2:8, 10, 15, 18–19, 20). Perhaps the Colossians were afraid of “missing out” on something by simply holding to Christ. They were being told they needed do something else or have other religious experiences or call upon angels to help them in their daily lives. This situation may sound worlds away to a modern reader. But Thurston observes that “Colossians addresses the perennial centrality of Jesus Christ, who in this letter is the standard against which all else is measured. This Christocentricity was asserted in a world of cultural, philosophic, and religious pluralism not unlike our own.”¹²

8 For a classic and influential argument for this position, see the two chapters by Fred O. Francis, in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies*, rev. ed., ed. Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks (Missoula, MT: SBL and Scholars, 1975), 163–207.

9 Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 11–89.

10 Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 86.

11 See Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 104–7, 127–31, 155–57.

12 Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *All the Fullness of God: The Christ of Colossians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), viii.

In a complex, pluralistic world, Christians can be afraid that they are missing out on something. And we are often told that we are. But Paul writes to teach us that we are not. Christ is sufficient for everything in our lives, even the mundane but difficult relational conflict between Philemon and his slave Onesimus.

Philemon and Onesimus

The circumstance in Paul's letter to Philemon that probably seems most difficult for modern readers is the fact that Onesimus was enslaved. Pauline scholarship has gone back and forth about how we should compare ancient slavery in the Roman world and modern slavery in America. Some have argued that ancient slavery was not as bad as modern slavery, and others have argued that it was terrible. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle and varied in experience for different people.¹³

Nevertheless, it is important for modern readers of Philemon to see that the main offender in this particular situation seems to have been the slave Onesimus (Philem. 11, 18). This can be hard for us to imagine, because those who live in a liberal democracy can sometimes think of no greater evil than taking someone's liberty. Paul's letter to Philemon does have something to say to the modern issue of slavery.¹⁴ But Onesimus's enslavement is not the main problem in the letter. The main problem is the estrangement and hostility between Onesimus and Philemon, which can be seen from Paul's main point in the letter: "So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me" (17).

What had led to this estrangement? Reconstructing the historical situation is very difficult because of the delicate, pastoral way Paul speaks of it. Traditionally, interpreters have assumed that Onesimus was a fugitive slave who ran away from his master Philemon

13 For an overview of scholarship on Paul and slavery that has influenced this paragraph, see John Byron, "Paul and the Background of Slavery: The *Status Quaestionis* in New Testament Scholarship," *CBR* 3.1 (2004): 116–49.

14 I address the issue of slavery on pp. 83–85, 95–97.

and perhaps stole property.¹⁵ This would explain why Onesimus was parted from Philemon (15) as well as Paul's allusive references to his uselessness (11) and his having wronged Philemon (18). Lampe, however, has argued that Onesimus was not a fugitive slave who just happened to run into Paul; rather, he purposely went to Paul to intercede for a previous altercation between Philemon and Onesimus.¹⁶ This would better explain how Onesimus met Paul, especially if Paul was imprisoned in Rome, a city of over a million people. Comparison is often made with a letter of Pliny the Younger, to whom a freedman went in order to intercede between him and his former master for whom he still worked.¹⁷ A problem with this view is that there is no indication that Onesimus was in danger of experiencing Philemon's anger and punishment, unlike the texts appealed to by Lampe and Pliny's letter that repeatedly mentions the master's anger. Rather, the issues raised in this letter are the "useless" conduct of Onesimus and the suggestion that he has perhaps wronged Philemon. These issues are best explained by his having run away.¹⁸

From the delicate way Paul writes, it is clear that it would not be easy for Philemon to welcome back his estranged slave. Neither could it have been easy for Onesimus to return to his master. But in this letter we see a powerful example of how the hope of the gospel makes a difference in believers' relationships with one another both now and forever (15).

15 Mitchell shows that the fugitive slave view was held by Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Chrysostom, Jerome, and others. Margaret M. Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look," *HTR* 88.1 (1995): 145–47.

16 Peter Lampe, "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' des Onesimus," *ZNW* 76 (1985): 135–37.

17 Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 9.21. For an accessible translation, see N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 3.

18 Another theory is that Philemon had sent Onesimus to help Paul, argued most recently by Stephen E. Young, *Our Brother Beloved: Purpose and Community in Paul's Letter to Philemon* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021). In my view, Young unconvincingly downplays Onesimus's wrongdoing in Philem. 11 and 18 in order to save the letter from the traditional reading, which he thinks is inherently oppressive (*Our Brother Beloved*, 7–38). I agree that the traditional theory has been applied oppressively in America's past, but this misapplication does not invalidate the theory.

Hidden with Christ in God

These difficult earthly circumstances led Paul to reflect and write more deeply about the heavenly hope of the gospel. The main points of these two letters are essentially practical: walk in Christ (Col. 2:6) and welcome your brother (Philem. 17). But these practical instructions are rooted in the deep theology of the letters, especially their Christology.

Many have observed the emphasis on Christology in Paul's letter to the Colossians.¹⁹ If the New Testament is the Rocky Mountains of Christology, then Colossians is its Pikes Peak. Prominent vistas include the famous poem about Christ (1:15–20), the statement that Christ is the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3), and Paul's summary and application of his Christology for baptized believers in Colossians 3:1–4.

In this book, I explore the Christology of Colossians in four chapters that roughly follow the argument of the letter (although they are not based on its four chapters). Chapter 1 introduces Christ as our hidden hope. Chapter 2 dives deeper into Paul's teaching about the preeminence of the Son. Chapter 3 spells out the sufficiency of Christ by examining Paul's teaching about our new life in Christ above. And chapter 4 builds upon this indicative reality by working through Paul's imperatives to live out the new life below. Finally, chapter 5 summarizes the theology of Philemon, demonstrating how the hidden hope of Christ was sufficient for the difficult situation facing Philemon and Onesimus.

In Colossians and Philemon, Paul roots his practical appeals in a rich theology of Christ. He teaches that our hope in the midst of difficult circumstances is the preeminent and sufficient Christ. This hope is hidden in heaven above and not yet openly revealed below. Therefore, the main theme of this book is that the preeminent and sufficient Christ is our hidden hope.

19 For example, Barclay observes that “the Christology of Colossians is as confident and broad in scope as is to be found anywhere in the New Testament.” John M. G. Barclay, “Ordinary but Different: Colossians and Hidden Moral Identity,” *ABR* 49 (2001): 36.

Christ, Our Hope

Christ in you, the hope of glory.

COLOSSIANS 1:27

THIS CHAPTER INTRODUCES the hope of the gospel, which is Christ himself. We begin where Paul begins. In the midst of his imprisonment and the threat of false teaching at Colossae, the apostle begins with thanksgiving. He is grateful to God the Father for the fruit he is bearing in the lives of the Colossians: their faith in Christ and love for all the saints because of the hope of the gospel of his beloved Son.

Thanksgiving

Colossians opens with a prayer of thanksgiving (1:3–4), like most of Paul’s letters. But this was no mere formality. Prayer and thanksgiving were Paul’s regular discipline: “We *always* thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you” (1:3); “We have not ceased to pray for you” (1:9).¹ Epaphras, the evangelist of Colossae, had this discipline as well: “Epaphras . . . greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers” (4:12). And Paul instructs the Colossians

1 Perhaps Paul set aside times to pray in the morning, noon, and evening, like Daniel: “He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God” (Dan. 6:10).

to pursue the same discipline: “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (4:2).

Thanksgiving is the appropriate human response to “the grace of God,” as Paul describes the gospel in Colossians 1:6. God’s grace leads to our gratitude. In Colossians Paul uses the Greek word *charis* to refer both to the grace of God (e.g., 1:2 and 4:18) and to our response of “thankfulness” (3:16). He also uses the similar words *eucharistos* and *eucharisteō* to speak of our thankfulness: “And be thankful [*eucharistoi*]” (3:15); “giving thanks [*eucharistountes*] to the Father” (1:12); “giving thanks [*eucharistountes*] to God the Father through him” (3:17).

Thanksgiving is closely related to the purpose of this letter. Whereas the false teachers were telling the Colossians to look beyond Christ, Paul calls them to be thankful for the redemption God has already given them in Christ (1:12; 2:6–7).² In Colossians 3:15–17 he associates calls for thankfulness with the peace of Christ, with the word of Christ, and with the name of Christ. Pao observes that “the call to thanksgiving as a response is the call to live in light of the sovereignty of God and his Son,” concluding that “it is precisely Paul’s emphasis on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ that prompted him to focus on the life of thanksgiving.”³

Finally, it is notable that thanksgiving is consistently directed toward God the Father in Colossians (1:3, 12; 3:17), for the Father is the ultimate source of all grace. Colossians 1:1–14, in fact, emphasizes the Father’s role in our redemption. Many have observed that the greeting of Colossians is unique among Paul’s letters in that it only mentions “our Father” and not the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2). Moo’s comment seems on point: “Perhaps, in a letter that elevates Christ, Paul wants at the outset to anchor the person of Christ firmly to God the Father.”⁴ The preeminence and sufficiency of Christ does not eclipse the glory of the Father. Instead, the

2 For this point, I am indebted to Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, Der Brief an Philemon*, ÖTK 12 (Gütersloh, Germany: Gerd Mohn, 1993), 64.

3 David W. Pao, *Thanksgiving: An Investigation of a Pauline Theme*, NSBT 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 114, 116.

4 Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 83.

gospel teaches that *the Father* has brought about redemption *through* “his beloved Son” (1:13).⁵ Thus the Father is the ultimate source of the grace of redemption and the one who deserves all our thanksgiving.

Beale concludes with these helpful words of application:

When there is no prayerful contemplation of divine blessings, there can be no attitude of thanksgiving. . . . Continual reflection on the Giver of good gifts causes us to be more conscious of and thankful for those gifts. . . . Christians impoverish themselves when they do not prayerfully consider how they have experienced God’s grace, and this theological impoverishment results in an unthankful attitude. To the extent that one has a prayerful attitude, to that extent one will have an attitude of thanksgiving.⁶

Paul clearly had such an attitude of prayerful contemplation. As he remembered the Colossians from prison, he was filled with joy (1:24; 2:5), and he was thankful for the faith and love the Father had worked in them.

Faith and Love

Paul first thanks God for the Colossians’ “faith in Christ Jesus” (1:4), probably because faith is the first step of the Christian life. Their faith had come by hearing: Paul says they had heard the gospel, understood it, and learned it from Epaphras (1:5–7; cf. 1:23). And they had come to believe it—that is, they had come to believe in Christ himself (1:4; 2:5). Colossians 2:6, the verse that states the main point of the letter, also mentions their coming to faith, when they had “received Christ Jesus the Lord.” Here we see that faith is a receiving of Christ as Lord, expressed in the confession that “Jesus is Lord” (cf. Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3).⁷

5 “His beloved Son” in Col. 1:13 likely alludes to the Father’s pronouncement at Jesus’s baptism and transfiguration (see Mark 1:11; 9:7 and parallels).

6 G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 383–84. Note that these words are a conclusion from the opening thanksgiving of Philemon, which is very similar to the one in Colossians.

7 Perhaps Paul also refers to their faith in Christ in Col. 1:2. Most modern English versions translate the verse similarly to the ESV: “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ

Faith in Christ is not only the first step in the Christian life but the continuing walk of the Christian life. Here we come to the main point of Colossians: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Col. 2:6–7). The Colossians must continue to walk by faith (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7). Indeed, they will only be presented as “holy and blameless and above reproach” at the final judgment *if* they continue in the faith (Col. 1:22–23). That is, they will only be finally saved if they continue in the faith. In Colossians 1:23 and 2:7 Paul describes continuing to believe in Christ with the language of architecture and agriculture: “stable and steadfast”; “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith.” His point is that Christ must be the soil in which believers grow and the foundation on whom believers are constructed.⁸ Believers must not shift away from the hope of the gospel they heard (1:23); they must continue to walk in Christ.

Second, Paul thanks God because he had heard of the love that they had for all the saints (1:4). The Colossians’ common faith in Christ had created a new family. They were now brothers and sisters (1:1, 2; 4:7, 9, 15) and “beloved” to one another (1:7; 4:9, 14). Their love for “*all* the saints” may refer to their love for fellow believers in the neighboring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis (cf. 4:13–16). Perhaps Paul was also thinking of their love for him, made known to him by Epaphras (1:8). One of the goals of Paul’s ministry was that believers in every place would be “knit together in love” (2:2; cf. 2:19). He says later in the letter that love is the crowning virtue that “binds [everyone] together in perfect harmony” (3:14).⁹ It makes sense, then, that when he heard

at Colossae.” But as a statement of Christian identity it makes more sense to see Paul speaking about their faith rather than their faithfulness. So perhaps we should follow the older translations of Tyndale and Luther: “brethren that believe in Christ”; “*den gläubigen Brüdern in Christo*.” So Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 9.

8 In Col. 1:23 and 2:7, perhaps the passive voice of the participles “stable” (lit. “founded”), “rooted,” “built up,” and “established” implies that God the Father is the one who does this work through Christ. So Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 181.

9 I have changed the ESV’s “everything” to “everyone.” For my reasoning, see p. 78n12.

about the Colossians' love in the midst of his imprisonment, he was filled with joy and thanksgiving to God.

One of the few references to the Holy Spirit in this letter describes him as the agent of the Colossians' love (1:8). Perhaps Paul does not mention the Spirit often in Colossians because he focuses on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Nevertheless, he does say that the Spirit is the agent of divine revelation, praying to God that the Colossians "may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all *spiritual* wisdom and understanding" (1:9). The Spirit is also the agent of the composition or performance of Christian music, for Paul instructs the Colossians to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . singing psalms and hymns and *spiritual* songs" (3:16). And he was the agent of the Colossians' love, for Epaphras had made known to Paul their love "[by] the Spirit" (1:8).¹⁰ We would not be wrong to say that the Spirit was also the agent of their faith, for Paul says elsewhere that "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3 CSB).

Finally, the faith and love of the Colossians were rooted in their heavenly hope: "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."¹¹ They had heard about this hope from Epaphras "in the word of the truth, the gospel" (Col. 1:5). Thus, the foundation of their faith in Christ, their love for the saints, and Paul's thanksgiving to God was the hope of the gospel.

The Hope of the Gospel

What is the hope of the gospel according to Colossians? In a word, it is Christ. Paul tells the Colossians that "the hope of glory" is "Christ in you" (1:27). Those who have Christ dwelling in them (by his Spirit) have the hope that they will one day share in the glory of his resurrection (cf. Rom. 5–8). Hope is by definition oriented toward this unseen future

10 I have changed the ESV's "in the Spirit" to "by the Spirit" because the preposition *en* is most likely instrumental. So Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, vol. 12, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 23.

11 Paul was apparently the first to associate the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (Wolter, *Kolossier*, 51). Cf. 1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8.

reality, “for who hopes for what he sees?” (Rom. 8:24). But the hope of the resurrection is also rooted in the past reality of the cross of Christ through which the Father has accomplished our redemption and reconciliation.

Redemption in Christ

In his opening prayer, Paul reminds the Colossians that the Father has accomplished redemption in his beloved Son (Col. 1:14). While *redemption* can be used to describe salvation generally, here it specifically refers to a payment for our release from captivity.¹² Paul’s reasoning is fleshed out in Ephesians, a letter probably written at the same time, in which he says that this payment is the cross: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

What was the captivity from which Christ’s blood redeemed us? Paul defines this redemption as “the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:14). So the cross has redeemed us from the captivity of the debt of our sins against God. And as a result we are also freed from captivity to “the domain of darkness” (1:13) or the evil kingdom of Satan. Satan has authority over fallen humanity because of his role in our sins: he tempts us to sin as he did with Eve (Gen. 3:1–5), and he accuses us of sin as he did with Job (Job 1:6–12). People today tend to reject or forget about Satan and demonic powers, but the Colossians were acutely aware of the presence of angels and demons. Perhaps the philosophy promised them deliverance from the threat of demonic powers. But Paul reminds them that the Father had already delivered them “from the domain of darkness” (Col. 1:13), because he had forgiven their sins in Christ (1:14).

He has also “transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). In Christ, believers are bona fide citizens and heirs of the kingdom of God, for the Father has qualified us “to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (1:12).¹³ The redeemed, then, are rightly called “saints”

12 This conclusion has been influenced by Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 16–18.

13 Some commentators argue that “saints in light” in Col. 1:12 refers to angels, drawing parallels with Qumran texts that describe angels as God’s “holy ones” (e.g., Lohse, *Colossians*

or God's "holy people" now, in the present (1:2, 4, 12, 26). And we also have hope for the future that at the final judgment he will "present [us] holy and blameless and above reproach before him" (1:22), provided of course that we continue in the faith (1:23).¹⁴

Reconciliation through Christ

In the famous poem about Christ in Colossians 1:15–20, Paul teaches that the Father has also accomplished reconciliation through the cross of Christ. The word "reconcile" implies the problem of rebellion. Although God created all things through and for his Son (1:16), these things are now at war with him. Yet through the incarnate Son he has reconciled "all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (1:20).

Interpreters and theologians struggle to explain Colossians 1:20. Does this verse teach universal salvation for all people on earth and angels in heaven? This view seems unlikely when one considers what Paul says in the next paragraph about the need for people to continue in the faith to stand blameless before God (1:21–23) and what he says later in the letter about God's coming wrath against disobedient people (3:5) and Christ's triumph over evil angels (2:15). Arnold observes that the language Paul uses in Colossians 2:15 "leaves no room for a reconciliation as friends."¹⁵ Instead, we must see that reconciliation in Colossians 1:20 is a category broader than salvation. It refers to the universal peace God has brought about through the cross. The war has ended! Some enemies have been "disarmed" and brought into submission (2:15). Other enemies have been turned into friends.

and Philemon, 36). But in the context of Col. 1:2, 4, and 26 it makes more sense to see a consistent reference to God's holy people.

¹⁴ Many interpreters detect exodus imagery and typology in Paul's teaching about redemption in Col. 1:12–14. Just as the Lord delivered Israel from captivity and brought them into their inheritance, so he has now redeemed believers to bring us into our inheritance. See the extensive discussion of Beale in *Colossians and Philemon*, 72–74.

¹⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 268.

Paul goes on to say the Colossians are in the latter category: “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (1:21–22). The Father is indeed our source of peace (1:2). And his work of reconciliation through the death of his Son is the foundation of our future and final hope.

Our Hidden Hope

Thus the hope of the gospel is Christ. The Father has accomplished our redemption and reconciliation through his Son in order to present us blameless at the final judgment. When he appears, we will appear with him in the glory of his resurrection (3:4). But until that day he remains hidden in heaven at the right hand of God (3:1), and our lives are hidden with him as well (3:3). The Christological content of the gospel, then, is rightly described as “the hope laid up for you in heaven” (1:5). Further, this description introduces us to the “heavenly eschatology” that characterizes Colossians, for it contains both eschatological (“the hope”) and heavenly (“in heaven”) categories.

The gospel of Christ is eschatological in that it is a message about the eschaton, the end of time when God will establish his kingdom, judge his enemies, and redeem his people through the Messiah. On the one hand, Paul teaches that this kingdom has come already with Christ (1:12–14; cf. 4:11). The Father has defeated his enemies and redeemed his people through the cross of Christ. This inaugurated aspect of eschatology is emphasized in Colossians. On the other hand, Paul teaches in Colossians that Christ has not yet appeared (3:4). We look forward in hope to share in the glory of his resurrection (3:4) and the inheritance of the saints (1:12).

This “already but not yet” eschatology overlaps with Paul’s heavenly categories in Colossians. Christ is already reigning at the right hand of God in heaven, but his lordship is not yet openly revealed on the earth (3:1–4).¹⁶

¹⁶ Beker helpfully speaks of “the present but hidden lordship of Christ.” J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 19.

According to Colossians, then, the hope of the gospel is hidden in heaven. And thus the main theme of this book is that Christ is our hidden hope.

Bearing Fruit and Increasing

The hidden nature of the gospel, however, does not mean that it has nothing to do with the here and now. For Paul tells the Colossians that “in the whole world [the gospel] is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth” (1:6).¹⁷

Externally, the gospel was increasing and spreading around the entire world. Writing in the early AD 60s, Paul says Christ had been “proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (1:23). He was revealed not only to the Jews but to the Gentile nations (1:27). And Paul was offering him freely to every person: “Him we proclaim, warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ” (1:28). The point is that the gospel is not an esoteric message offering salvation to a limited “in group.” The philosophy attempted to disqualify anyone who did not keep their regulations or experience their visions (2:16–23). But the true gospel is offered openly to everyone so that it may be believed by everyone in the world. Regarding the phrase “in the whole world” in Colossians 1:6, Lightfoot insightfully comments:

More lurks under these words than appears on the surface. The true Gospel, the Apostle seems to say, proclaims its truth by its universality. The false gospels are outgrowths of local circumstances, of special idiosyncrasies; the true gospel is the same everywhere. The false gospels address themselves to limited circles; the true Gospel proclaims itself boldly throughout the world. Heresies are at best ethnic: truth is essentially catholic.¹⁸

¹⁷ Many commentators suggest that Paul’s language about “bearing fruit and increasing” (Col. 1:6, 10) alludes to the command to “be fruitful and multiply” in Gen. 1:28 (see especially Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 42, 48–50, 59). But this allusion is not clear to me because of the difference in wording and meaning of the two contexts.

¹⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Lynn, MA: Hendrickson, 1982), 134–35.

This catholic nature of the true gospel is a correlate of the universal lordship of Christ. He is the true Lord of the whole world, even though he is currently hidden above.

Internally, the gospel was also bearing the fruit of faith and love among the Colossians. And Paul prays that they would bear fruit even more: “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (1:9–10). In contrast with the “wisdom” of the philosophy, Paul prays that they would be filled with the knowledge of *God’s* will (1:9). Moo rightly comments that “what Paul has in mind is not some particular or special direction for one’s life (as we often use the phrase ‘God’s will’), but a deep and abiding understanding of the revelation of Christ and all that he means for the universe (vv. 15–20) and for the Colossians (vv. 21–23).”¹⁹ As a result, they will “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him” (1:10).

This reference to the Colossians’ “walk” anticipates the heart of the letter: “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (2:6). *Walking* in Colossians refers both to walking by faith in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7) as well as walking in “every good work” that pleases Christ (cf. Col. 3:7; 4:5).²⁰ And it is interesting that the Christian walk is bookended by theological knowledge in Paul’s prayer in 1:9–10. Walking in Christ is both rooted in the knowledge of God’s will and followed by a deeper knowledge of God.

Paul finishes his prayer with a request for divinely enabled perseverance, that they would be “strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy” (1:11). Growth in the gospel is never complete here and now, because we are still waiting for the hidden Christ to be revealed. Our great need in

¹⁹ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 93.

²⁰ Pace Wright, who sees the emphasis only on ethical conduct in Col. 2:6 (*Colossians and Philemon*, 104).

the meantime is “endurance and patience with joy.” Thankfully, it is the glorious power of God himself who produces this fruit of perseverance in us.²¹ This is another reason for hope. God’s kingdom can seem as small as a mustard seed, especially in a small town like Colossae. But the hidden hope of the gospel was bearing fruit and increasing in them and in the whole world.

Conclusion

Paul’s letter to the Colossians opens with thanksgiving to God the Father for the fruit he had borne in the Colossians: faith in Christ Jesus and love for all the saints. Their faith and love were rooted in the hope of the gospel they had heard from Epaphras: Christ himself! The Father has redeemed and reconciled us through his beloved Son in order to present us as holy before him at the final judgment. Until that day Christ, our hope, remains hidden in heaven above. Yet his gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the world below. In the next chapter we dive deeper into Paul’s teaching about the Son.

21 Arnold observes in Col. 1:11 the “extraordinary emphasis on the divine power (‘being empowered with power by power!’)” (Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 303). Cf. Paul’s own reliance on divine power in his mission: “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col. 1:29).