

# First Steps . . . to Maturity

The promise of new life is always exciting. Ask any parent and they will recall the heady mixture of anticipation and pleasure, with at least a hint of uncertainty, that they felt at the birth of their child, especially their first child. You know that all of their life stands before them but you hardly dare think about that as you look at this little bundle of life, so small, so alive and yet so very vulnerable.

The very last thing that any new parent wants to consider is the possibility that this precious new life might be marred in any way, that anything should stand in the way of their child reaching their full potential. This is a time of hope and of looking forward to the time when this tiny new person will grow to maturity. It hardly seems possible to them then but, as any grandparent will tell you, the years soon fly by and their child has a child of their own.

Normal development. Exciting, personal, unique in every case but still nonetheless normal. We all know families where not everything has run quite so smoothly and there have been setbacks along the way. They discover a 'new normal', dealing with accident, disability, disease, upsets large and small which have thrown challenges in the child's path. We get a buzz of delight as we see the family, and especially the young life, deal with these obstacles and overcome them. If the truth be told, all lives, young and old, have these challenges and there are few if any who just sail through apparently unscathed.

Maturity. Observing it in your own children is probably one of the greatest, largely unspoken, joys of the later years of parenthood. I well remember one particular evening when we had been together as a family all day and Val and I were walking a few paces behind our three grown-up children in a quiet city centre street. They were absorbed in lively conversation together. We observed and enjoyed what we saw. Maybe we hadn't done so badly as parents after all; these three seemed like pretty mature young adults and they were evidently enjoying each other's company.

The apostle John had the same glow of satisfaction as he observed his own spiritual 'children' going forward and 'walking in the truth' (**3 John 4**).

Sadly, it seems that such spiritual 'growing-up' is a comparative rarity. Too many of us seem to suffer from some form of arrested development which holds us back from reaching the potential that our Father has always had in mind for us.

Even more disturbing is the perception by many that there is no growing up to be done. It seems to be accepted as 'normal' that we will remain as weak and helpless as the day we were first 'born from above'. Anyone who speaks of their desire to move on to greater maturity in Christ may be told that they are biting off more than they can chew and perhaps even that they have too big an idea of their own importance.

Paul had no such delusions. (Because that is what they are, delusions!) Quite the opposite! For him, it was normal that **every** believer would make it to maturity. As far as he was concerned, it was the destiny of every child of God to come to their full potential, to fully reach the goal of their life in Christ, and he took it as his own responsibility to do whatever he could to make sure that it happened. He wanted to be able to present these 'children' as mature in Christ.

Despite the apparent contradiction, Paul never claims to have 'arrived', to have progressed so far that there is no more spiritual journey for him to make. Writing to the church in Philippi, he says "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (**Philippians 3:12**)

Writing now to the church in Colossae, his heart burns : "We proclaim him, admonishing everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone complete in Christ." (**Colossians 1:28**) These were people he had not even met. He had simply been told about them by his friend and colleague Epaphras; their faith, their response to the message of Jesus, their love for other believers and their love for Epaphras – and Paul himself – 'in the Spirit'. (**Colossians 1:3-8**) His response was to contribute whatever he could to try to ensure that they continued to respond and grow to maturity.

As we take a closer look at what he wrote to them and follow his pointers to spiritual maturity, we need to understand that this is first of all an internal process, not a list of things to do, projects to undertake or appearances to be tinkered with. To those who might tend to dismiss such an approach as 'unrealistic'

or even 'super-spiritual', I would simply suggest that they look at the whole tone and 'flavour' of Paul's letters. Here was a man whose life was a demonstration of practical, visible change and who certainly expected to see such change in those to whom he wrote. But every letter is charged with teaching of spiritual truth as the foundation and motivation for every single change of practical action which he longed to see in his readers. The foundation and motivation that would lead them on to maturity.

At the risk of labouring the point, let me say again that we will not move towards spiritual maturity by undertaking any number of projects or getting involved in any quantity of new initiatives, however worthy they may be. The best that this sort of thing can do is to place us in situations where we realise afresh our deep need of more reality in our walk with God.

Such situations may be very effective as they make us face up to the need to make some practical changes in our lives, in order to bring ourselves into a place of obedience. This cannot be an attempt to earn any sort of favour with God, but is simply a response to what he is saying into our lives.

Here is an important key to growth: response!

Two people undertake very similar tasks to serve the Lord. One does so because they feel that they should, perhaps because it is their duty. The other does so because they are responding to what the Lord is saying to them. The external results may look similar but there is a wealth of difference between obligation on the one hand and fulfilment on the other. In fact, look a little deeper and you will see that the results are different, too, not just for the people themselves but also for those who observe and are affected by what they do.

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And so to our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians, looking at **First Steps To Maturity**. Perhaps better to start by changing that to '**First Steps . . . To Maturity**', because Paul starts with the very basics and then moves on to more depth. Maybe because he is writing into a situation which he did not know first-hand, he wants to make sure that his letter is useful for all the believers in Colossae, whatever their stage of spiritual growth. There are treasures here for each one of us!

Of course, there is more to Colossians than this one theme and there is more to spiritual maturity than these 'first steps'. But we need to start the process from where we are . . .

### **1. Introduction Colossians 1:1-12**

Straight in at the deep end! Paul wastes no time in getting down to business. He had apparently never visited Colossae but it was not very far from Perga, Pisidian Antioch and Iconium (where he had gone in **Acts 13 & 14**), about halfway between them and Ephesus, where he spent a considerable time (**Acts 18:19-21, 19:1-41**). Some of the Colossians may have travelled to these other cities; maybe they heard the good news of Jesus there? They had certainly met Paul's friend Epaphras. He had been the one who told them about the grace of God. Maybe they had also met some of the other Christian believers whom Paul knew. However the gospel had reached them, they had believed in Jesus the Anointed One and their lives were being changed. The word was 'constantly bearing fruit and increasing' in them. No wonder that Paul was encouraged by what Epaphras had told him about them! He puts himself at their disposal, longing to help them and praying for their continuing growth. Maybe Epaphras had suggested that Paul made contact? Right from the start of his letter, he rejoices in the love they are already showing and longs to see them take further steps to spiritual maturity.

Right from the start, too, he spells out how that process works. **Verses 9 & 10** sum it up: "*We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God . . .*" This list of results continues into **verses 11 & 12**, as Paul gets carried away with the wealth of the inheritance that they (and he, and we) have been brought into.

But, please note, they are **results!** Paul does not tell them to "walk worthily, please God in all respects, bear fruit in every good work, increase in the knowledge of God and be strengthened with all power". No, he prays that they may be filled with the real knowledge of what God wants, with full spiritual wisdom and real understanding, **so that** their lives will be changed from the inside and all these desirable external results will become visible. There is a world of difference.

If we were writing this letter instead of Paul, we might tend to tone it down a little, to make it a little 'easier' for these new believers by just giving them a convenient list of 'dos and don'ts' and perhaps come back and explain the 'doctrinal' bits later. No way! Paul knows that real growth is based on real truth, and he dearly wants to see these folk grow to maturity – without any false starts.

## **2. The Extent of the Rescue    *Colossians 1:11-14***

Please note the overlap! Paul has got so excited about the results that will come in the Colossians' lives that he overflows into delight about what God has done for all believers in Jesus. See how he starts with 'you' in the earlier verses but moves to 'us' by the end of **verse 12**! He is very definitely in this with them, not loading them with some theoretical doctrine that he feels obliged to pass on! And this is not the young Paul, newly converted and fresh from his vision of the risen and ascended Jesus. No, sitting chained to a Roman soldier and awaiting trial in Rome, Paul the elder statesman writes with the freshness of a man who, all these years later, continues to revel in what God has accomplished in Christ.

We have seen the practical results of being 'filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding' :- pleasing God in every way and bearing good fruit – **verse 10**. Now, in **verses 11 & 12**, Paul shows that this process 'snowballs':- increasing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all power (in the measure of the might of **his** glory!), attaining all steadfastness (= endurance, persistence) and patience with joy (not grumpy 'patience'!) The whole thing brings us back to giving thanks to the Father for what he has done – making us fit to take part in the light-filled inheritance of his holy ones. Wow!

And then Paul condenses the whole truth of the gospel into just a few words – **verses 12-14**. Rescued out of the authority of darkness, transferred into the kingdom of God's Son whom he loves, buying us back to freedom by forgiving our failure and rebellion. That's **us**, says Paul, you and me, Paul and Epaphras, the Colossian believers – **all** those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ!

## **3. Who is this Rescuer?    *Colossians 1:15-22***

Paul flows on! These subheadings are mine, not his! For him the whole thing flows from one aspect into another, all amazing, gripping and supremely relevant as he seeks to build foundations into the lives of these young believers.

This Son whom God loves, who is he? Living there in Colossae in what is now Turkey, surrounded by the worship of Greek and Roman deities, pagan rituals and the increasing demands of an emperor who also wanted to be worshipped, perhaps it would have been easy to think that this Jesus was just a prophet belonging to the Jews. A rather special prophet, perhaps? One who had apparently come back to life after crucifixion! Paul is writing to believers, so they already know better than that, but he delights to spell out who it is that they have been joined to, whose kingdom they have been transferred into.

1) God made visible in human form (**v.15**). No other faith makes this claim and it was as breathtaking then as it is now. That the unknowable, invisible and inexpressible Creator did not just make some amazing display of his majesty but actually became a man and lived in very ordinary circumstances. Paul's clarity here seems to echo **John 1:14-18**.

2) The Creator and Sustainer of everything (**v.16-17**). Writing in the vernacular Greek of the time, Paul says that all things were created **in** him, **through** him and (literally) **into** him. In other words, he is the originator of all creation, the one who exercised the creative force and the one towards whom all creation is designed to move. And, Paul adds, we are not just talking about the creation on earth, nor even just the physical and visible creation, but everything in the heavens as well, including all the invisible 'thrones, dominions, ruler and authorities'. He is making sure that his Colossian brothers and sisters don't have a limited idea of who Jesus is – he has been around since before anything was created and is the One who holds everything together. Paul has come a long way since he asked that question on the Damascus road: "Who are you, Lord?" (**Acts 9:5**)

3) The Goal and Destination of the Father's Eternal Plan (**v.18-20**). Paul certainly doesn't hold back! Not only is this Jesus the creative and sustaining power behind all of creation, he is its ultimate aim, the driving direction of the unfolding of all that God is doing! ' . . . first place in everything . . . all the fulness to dwell in him'.

4) The Great Reconciler. That process demands the 'reconciling of all things to himself', Paul writes.

Why do 'all things' need reconciling to God through Jesus? And not just all things on this earth, but all things, 'whether things on earth or things in the heavens'.

**Romans 8:18-25** gives us the clue. In **v.20**, we read that 'the creation was subjected to futility'. What does that mean? Putting it simply, God made humankind and placed them (us!) over the whole of creation in a position of control and responsibility (**Genesis 1:26-31**). Then, when mankind rebelled against God and stepped out of his will and purpose, the whole of creation 'fell' with them, with the result that creation is now less than perfect and Satan is 'the prince of this world'. As the apostle John states so dramatically, 'the whole world lies in the evil one' (**1 John 5:19**). The full reconciliation of the whole of creation is urgently needed! I have been excited to discover that here and in **v.22** Paul does not just use the ordinary word for reconciliation, but a stronger form of it that means 'complete reconciliation' – !

Like our own reconciliation, this too is 'through the blood of his cross.' This great and cosmic process has been started and will culminate in the 'revealing of the sons of God', the great event for which we are waiting, along with **the whole of creation**, and of which we will be a part. In the meanwhile, 'just now', "*he has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through death, in order to present you before him holy and blameless and beyond reproach . . .*" (**v.22**)

5) The Head of the Body. Along the way, he is also 'head of the body, the church' and 'the firstborn from the dead' **so that** he will come to have first place in everything. Do we understand what this means? The church is not some little sideline that God is doing while he gets on with his main plan. Paul is saying here that it is **as a result** of being the 'head of the body, the church' and being 'the firstborn from the dead' that the Lord Jesus will have that first place in everything. Do we begin to see what a central role the church has in the Father's ultimate plan?

#### 4. Yes, we are included! **Colossians 1:21-23**

Having blown their minds (and ours) with the extent of the God's rescue operation and who the rescuer really is, Paul confirms to the Colossians and us that we really are included in this. . .

1) In spite of our past (**v.21**). 'Alienated, hostile in mind and engaged in evil' is a pretty comprehensive summary of where we have come from, no matter how good and upright our background might seem to be. Paul may well have been thinking about his own past! There is little doubt that he fitted that description very closely, however much he may have believed at the time that his persecution of the church was 'the right thing to do'. See **Acts 22:3-5** and **Acts 26:4-11**.

2) Reconciled for a purpose. We have just looked at the massive and complete reconciliation of 'all things' for which the price has already been paid but which will finally be accomplished in Jesus. **We** have already been fully reconciled, for our own lives now and in order to be part of the whole process of the plan and purpose of God which will be finally revealed in Jesus. Perhaps we are familiar with the fact that we have been reconciled to God, but have we begun to realise what that means in the light of the whole picture? We have been reconciled 'in his fleshly body through death', **in order to** present us 'before him holy and blameless and beyond reproach'. Our reconciliation and restoration hinges totally on the historical death of the Lord Jesus. The complete cosmic reconciliation and restoration hinges on the same event – Wow!

3) Hang on in there! In order to experience this promised presentation before him, there is one simple instruction – 'continue in faith'. Paul uses the same word that the Lord Jesus used when he told the disciples to 'abide' in him – 'stay, dwell, remain' – but again uses the emphasised form of it. There is absolutely no sense of us *earning* anything by hanging on, simply that there is only one place in which we can come into the promise, and that is **in Christ**, so we need to 'abide'. Much more of this later . . .

#### 5. Paul and the message. **Colossians 1: 24-29, 2:1-2**

1) A servant. In reminding them not to move away from the message which they have heard (though not from him initially), Paul is reminded of the spread of the good news and the fact that he was made a servant of that good news. Even now, as he is in chains and seemingly powerless to do very much, he recognises that his servanthood is a responsibility given to him by God and will be for their benefit, as he 'makes full' the word of God.

2) A steward. The word translated 'stewardship', 'dispensation' or 'commission' refers directly to the chief servant in a rich man's household, the steward. He had the rule of the household but was directly responsible to the master of the house and needed to make sure that everything that the master wanted was done – to 'make full his word'. This is the sort of responsibility that Paul knows has been

given to him by God and, even there in chains in Rome, he is able to fulfil some of that commission by writing to the Colossians – and indirectly to us!

3) A mystery unveiled. This ‘word’, says Paul, is a mystery that has been hidden for ages and generations but which has now been disclosed (manifested, ‘shone out’) to ‘the saints’, so that in turn they can make it known among all the nations – not just the Jews! And ‘the riches of the glory of this mystery’ are simply this: Christ **in** you, the hope of glory! A life changed from the inside! So different from any religious practice, including Judaism, though, looking back through the Old Testament, we can find traces of it, truly hidden – but there!

4) A daring ambition. So, along with the rest of ‘the saints’, Paul proclaims Jesus and does not hold back! **Verses 28 & 29** read as if they are his manifesto: He confronts **everyone** with the facts, teaches **everyone** in ‘**all** wisdom’, so that, in the end, he can present (‘stand beside’) **everyone complete** (mature, full-grown) in Christ. Wow! Some manifesto! Impossible for him to accomplish by himself but, as he writes, *“For this purpose I labour, striving according to his working, which works in power within me.”*

5) Struggling for a purpose. (**Ch.2:1-2**) He is a captive in Rome, but still Paul struggles on behalf of the believers in Colossae and Laodicea (just down the road, another place he had not visited). So how does he struggle? How *can* he struggle for them, in all likelihood chained to a Roman soldier or at the very least under house arrest? We may often say that we will pray for people, but here Paul is in a realm that most of us hardly ever touch. He is taking on a spiritual battle, not just for those in Colossae and Laodicea but also for all the other believers he knows about whom he has never met. He is taking his stewardship very seriously, not just determined to see them all come to maturity but prepared to undertake spiritual warfare in order to see it happen.

## 6. Made Complete in Christ (*Colossians 2:2-7*)

1) The root of maturity. Paul’s desire is to see believers with their hearts encouraged, having been knit together in love and into all the wealth of the full assurance of understanding, into true knowledge of God’s mystery, Christ. There is both a position and a process here. The ‘having been knit together in love’ is the position, a necessary starting point from which they can move forward into all that wealth, into a true knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let’s unpack that a bit . . .

a) United in love. ‘Knit together’ is a stronger word than just ‘united’ and it is the same word that Paul uses in **Ephesians 4:16**, where he writes about the whole body being held together through each part working properly. Although it is one of Paul’s aims to see believers encouraged and bound together in love, he also sees that as a basis from which to move further forward (‘having been . . .’). Real unity as an essential starting point for spiritual growth and maturity – challenging!

b) Riches and true knowledge. For any of us who have been plagued with a sense of uncertainty (and who hasn’t?), ‘the full assurance (or confidence) of understanding’ sounds like real riches, like the highly valuable pearl that Jesus spoke of in **Matthew 13:46** – worth giving up other things in order to gain! This, says Paul, is part of their/our inheritance. Maybe a part that neither the Colossian believers nor we have yet fully taken hold of, but nonetheless one that he struggles for and fully expects to see them (and us) moving into. So, **into** all this wealth of full assurance and **into** the true knowledge of God’s mystery, the Lord Jesus himself. Maturity indeed!

2) Firmly rooted in Jesus – how to escape delusion and deception. Maturity is not some far-off future goal, seemingly unattainable, says Paul. Yes, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him, perhaps not immediately obvious – or experienced. But Paul is delighted to see that, right now, they are ‘in good order’ and solid in their faith in Christ, especially in the face of attempts to turn them away. He reassures them that, as they have already been firmly rooted in Jesus and as they are now being ‘built up into a house’ (literally) and strongly based in him, so they can ‘walk the walk’ in him in the same simple way that they first received him.

Paul starts to concentrate on the central and simple fact that they and we are **in Christ**, joined to him and so able to escape the captivity of man-made religion and philosophy.

## 7. Escape from Captivity (*Colossians 2:8*)

In about AD 56, Paul had written his letter to the Galatian churches (several churches in different towns and cities in the Roman province of Galatia) at least partly because they were in danger of being seduced by Jewish teachers who insisted that the believers needed to submit to Jewish laws and traditions in order to be true followers of the Lord Jesus. In that letter, he had contrasted the freedom of faith in Jesus with the bondage of legalism. Now, more than 5 years later, he writes to the church in

Colossae (a single city in the nearby Roman province of Asia) because the same problem persists, this time combined with eastern mysticism and man-made philosophies. Ironically, he himself is now a prisoner, but he warns them urgently to avoid the more dangerous captivity which seems to be threatening to pull them away from that same glorious freedom.

1) Seductive influences. The Greek word translated 'take captive' means 'to take away as booty' or 'seduce'. Paul is really concerned that these influences could radically upset these new believers. What are they?

a) Philosophy. Literally, the love of wisdom, which immediately places (or at least, **tries** to place) man in a superior position. Perhaps Paul is especially aiming at *false* philosophy or sophistry, which uses apparently clever but false ideas in order to deceive.

b) Empty deception. This seems to be much more blatant, not even hiding in supposed 'wisdom' but simply offering deceptive and untrue information as if it were factual.

Paul lists the common sources that are shared by **both** these types of deception:–

a) The tradition of men, specifically the Jewish traditions. The continuing attempts by many to compel Gentile believers to embrace Judaism 'in order to be better Christians', attempting to get them to be circumcised and obey all the Jewish laws and traditions. Any system of laws, rules or traditions that suggests that keeping them will bring people into relationship with God is just as deceptive and dangerous, perhaps especially the rules and traditions that we make for ourselves individually.

b) The 'elementary principles of the world'. Some translations use the phrase 'elemental spiritual forces of this world'. Even if we leave the spiritual aspect of this for a moment, we are talking about the world system, the way that the world does things, the way it 'ticks'. A 'natural human approach', 'common sense' and 'everyone does it this way', perhaps. When we know that the Lord Jesus referred to Satan as the ruler of this world (**John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11**), and that John states clearly that the whole world lies in his power (**1 John 5:19**), then 'the way the world works' begins to slip into sharper focus and the spiritual element becomes more evident.

'... and not according to Christ'. 'According to' means 'in line with'. An even simpler definition of the seductive influences trying to ensnare us and pull us away. If it's not in line with the Lord Jesus and what he has done, says Paul, then steer away from it! And then he goes on to itemise some of the most significant – and amazing – features of what is **already ours in Christ!**

## 8. The Heart of Our Maturity (**Colossians 2:9-15**)

These seven verses seem to be the central pivot of the whole letter. Everything else that Paul is writing to the 'saints' in Colossae in some way either leads to these verses or springs out of them. Having underlined for them / us (in the first chapter) that they / we have been transferred from Satan's authority of darkness into the light-filled kingdom of the Father's beloved Son, he now takes it a step further – and what a step! He has already written about the fact that they / we are **in Christ**. Now he spells out the depth of that unity. Not simply transferred into his kingdom, but brought into unity with the Lord Jesus himself!

It is best to read this whole passage straight through, because so much is inter-connected, but here are some of the main points:–

1) Who we have been joined to (**v.9-10**). Back in **1:14-22**, Paul has already told (or reminded) the Colossian believers that they are **in Christ**, and expanded on who the Lord Jesus really is. Now he sums it up in one powerful sentence: "*In him all the fullness (= completeness) of Deity dwells in bodily form*". But the next sentence is mind-blowing: "*and in him you have been made complete (= full)*." Wow! And he is head over all rule and authority. We'll come back to that shortly.

2) Doing away with our old life (**v.11-12**). Remember that these non-Jewish believers were being pestered by some people who said that they had to embrace Judaism in order to be genuine followers of the Lord Jesus. That would have meant that they would have had to be circumcised, following the sign of God's covenant with Abraham (see **Genesis 17**). No, says Paul, the fresh start you need has already been accomplished by the Lord Jesus himself, and you have already acknowledged it by being baptised. The word he uses for 'removal' of the body of the flesh means simply removing clothing. A wonderful sense of stepping out of old clothes that no longer belong to us!

3) Set up in our new life in Jesus (**v.12-13**). If our submersion in baptism speaks of the end of our old life, then our re-emergence from the water demonstrates our 'resurrection' into newness of life. Not just 'made alive', but 'made alive together with him'. Paul uses exactly the same word when writing to

the church in Ephesus (**Ephesians 2:5**).

4) All our failures and debts wiped out (**v.13-14**). It was already done when he made us alive together with Jesus ('having forgiven . . . having cancelled'). The (literally) 'handwriting against us' consists of decrees, laws, rules and regulations, all of which are hostile towards us. So not just our past sins but also the obligation to follow legalistic and condemning rules – it has all been wiped away! And not just wiped away, but nailed to the cross!

5) The Triumph of the Cross (**v.15**). What seemed like defeat at the crucifixion was actually the triumph of release! The Lord Jesus disarmed (literally 'divested himself of') the rulers and authorities and made a celebration of that release! And, as Paul wrote back in **v.10**, Jesus is himself the head of all rule and authority!

You can find many parallels to this passage in other places. See **Romans 6**, **Galatians 5:1-6**, **Ephesians 2** – just to get you started!

## 9. The End of Condemnation, Religiosity and Legalism (**Colossians 2:16-23**)

'Therefore' Paul writes. Why? Because of all that our Father has done for us in Jesus, this comprehensive release and identification with him in his death and resurrection, we do not need to submit to any philosophy or empty deception according to man's traditions or the world's (Satanic) principles, as he wrote back in **verse 8**. Now that he has explained the basis for our freedom, he expands on some of the things that we are freed from and therefore the attacks that we can resist on the basis of that freedom.

1) Release from Religious Condemnation (**v.16-17**). These days, we are unlikely to be frowned upon for not observing a Jewish sabbath, new moon or festival (**1 Chronicles 23:31**), but there are subtler ways in which people can put religious pressure on us (or we can put it on ourselves) for not following accepted religious guidelines. Those Jewish religious practices were ordained by God, says Paul, but they were just a shadow of things to come. The 'real thing' is here now – the Lord Jesus Christ!

2) Here's another way we can come under pressure: someone who delights in being very (apparently) humble, whose religion involves angels and who is full of visions that they think they have seen (**v.18-19**). Easy for us to feel disqualified if we compare ourselves to them! Paul says that someone like that is inflated with no reason, because they are just acting from their own natural thinking and not relying on 'the head' (i.e. Jesus). The whole body (i.e. the Church) grows together with growth from God and is held together by each part that **does** stay firmly attached to the head. (See also **Ephesians 4:14-16**).

3) Religious rules are **OUT !** (**v.20-22**) Through the death of Christ, says Paul, you have died to the elemental spiritual forces of the world (see **v.8**), so why do you submit to religious rules? That's strong talk! He is saying that religious rules spring from the elemental spiritual forces which are under the control of Satan, and so we are cut off and freed from them. Perhaps we need to reflect on some of the things that we do 'religiously' – ?

Whether it's special observances, fake spirituality or religious rules, it's all useless to make any real changes. It looks good, perhaps, but achieves precisely nothing positive, only satisfying 'the flesh' – i.e. our old life. (**v.23**)

## 10. Putting On the New Person (**Colossians 3:1-17**)

Paul moves towards the practical application of all this amazing truth by using another 'therefore'! As the outcome of all of this, he says, this is how we can now live. There is not a 'should' in sight! Because of all that the Father has done for you in Jesus, he says, go on, live like this! These are NOT rules to be followed – remember what he has just been writing about – but results of internal spiritual change. If we try to adopt these courses of action without at least starting to be "filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (**ch. 1:9**), then we shall at the very least deceive ourselves.

1) Your Life Is Joined To The Life Of Christ. (**Colossians 3:1-4**) We have been raised to new life in Jesus, he is at the right hand of the Father, so we are to go on seeking what concerns him. This is very much concerned with **now**, so that his current priorities are ours too. But there is also a definite 'history' side to this, because we can't really give our attention to his priorities if we are all caught up in our own. Once again, Paul says 'for' or 'because'. **Because** we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God (**v.3**), we are able to follow the instructions in **v.1-2** to keep seeking the things above and

setting our mind on them, not earthbound matters.

We cannot fulfil this current and ongoing command without knowing that our old life is dead and that we now live 'hidden with Christ in God'. Reminds me of Paul again in **Romans 6:3** "*Don't you know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus have been baptised into his death?*" In **Romans 6:4-11** (and **ch.8**), Paul then goes on to write about how we can experience new resurrection life **now**. Here in his letter to Colossae, he says that our lives, now almost secretly hidden in Christ, will be 'revealed with him in glory' when he returns and is revealed.

2) The Old Life has Gone – the New has Come! (**Colossians 3:5-11**) Paul has already said that we have died (past tense!) but now he writes something that may seem strange. He tells the Colossian believers and us to (literally) 'make dead the members that are on the earth' and then lists different types of behaviour that belong to the old life. Although most Bible translations try to 'explain' this by referring to 'your earthly body' or 'your earthly nature', these words are simply not in the original Greek. He is not talking about our bodies being evil, nor suggesting that we have two opposing natures, an earthly one and a heavenly one. And he is also not saying that this is something that we need to do repeatedly, again and again. The tense of the Greek word (aorist imperative) means that this is a 'once and for all' thing to do, 'So', says Paul, 'do it now!'

The 'explanations' can actually get in the way. He has just told us that we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God, and now he uses another 'therefore', telling us (as a follow-on from being already dead) to make all these things dead, too. Consign them to the death which has already been accomplished. Once and for all.

In the same way that we cannot possibly 'keep seeking the things that are above' and 'keep setting our minds on the things above' without knowing that our old life is dead and gone, so we can only consign to death these unwelcome things **because** we know that our old life is finished. Look at what Paul writes in **Romans 6**, especially **v.6-11**: "*knowing this, that our old person was crucified with Him . . . knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again . . . Even so (literally, "And in this way"), count yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*"

In Romans, Paul is writing about the ongoing process of continuing to count (reckon, consider) ourselves as dead to sin – because we **are** – but in **Colossians 3:5** he is telling them to start that process by actively consigning the old life to the death with Christ that has already been accomplished. Although our Father has already included us in his Son and therefore in his death and resurrection, the results are not automatic; they need our active co-operation. Hence Paul's instruction to "Make dead . . ."

This is one of the most liberating truths of the New Testament message – probably why the Enemy does all he can to make it seem strange and difficult to understand! Little wonder that Paul goes to such lengths to make sure that he gets the point over in this letter!

If (and when!) temptations come to fall back into these ways, we can face them in the same way, by 'hiding' in the fact that our old life is already dead. This is the 'escape route' that Paul writes about in **1 Corinthians 10:13**.

(Again I would point you to **Romans 6**, **Galatians 5:1-6** and **Ephesians 2**, and perhaps suggest that you may want to read Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Life*, which I think is probably the best book on the subject. It has certainly helped me and many others. Still in print, 60 years on and half a million copies later! Two of Nee's other books, *Love Not The World* and *Sit, Walk, Stand* also touch on the same subject.)

There are two more places in this passage where Paul uses this 'once and for all' instruction, **verses 8 & 12**, where he tells us the two sides of this fresh beginning.

**Verse 8** is actually to do with an ending rather than a beginning. 'Put them all aside' he says and then in **v.9** he goes back to the continuous process, telling us not to lie (or even to stop lying!) to each other, '*since you laid aside (once for all) the old person with its evil practices*'. That word 'laid aside' is the same word he used in **2:11 & 2:15**, meaning removing a layer of clothing. Again, that graphic image of stepping out of old discarded clothes, and it is firmly fixed in the past tense, 'laid aside'. So the ongoing change in day-to-day behaviour is based upon the fact of the 'once for all' consigning our old life to having been included in the death of Jesus. Back to what he said in **v.3** and **2:20**: We **have** died with Christ. Not we might have, or we will one day, or even that we should have done. We **have!** Who says so? God himself!

This doesn't mean that we are claiming to be perfect or sinless. No, simply that we acknowledge that we were included in the death of Jesus; when he died, our old life died with him. As Paul writes in

**Romans 6:6** “*knowing this, that our old person was crucified with him, in order that our body of sin might be put out of action, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.*” Once we have come to see and know that our old life really is dead (because God says it is!), then we really can consign all of that old life over to death, putting all those things aside once and for all. On that basis, we can continue the process by increasingly learning to take hold of not being slaves to sin and failure, not by trying to be strong and stand against temptation but by knowing that our old life is dead and gone. (**1 Corinthians 10:13** again!)

And then **verse 12!** Here is the other side of it, very positive! Having once and for all ‘laid aside’ the ‘old clothes’ of our old life, now we are told to ‘put on’ (once and for all) ‘a heart of compassion’ and all the other attributes that Paul lists in **v.12-14** and beyond. This is what he is talking about in **v.10**, where (following on from the fact that we took off the ‘clothes’ of our old person) he says that we dressed ourselves in the new one, who is being ‘renewed into a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.’ Once again, we see that the ongoing process of renewal and transformation **follows on** from the ‘once for all’ decisive action. Writing to the churches in Galatia, Paul said very much the same: *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me.* (**Galatians 2:20**)

So what are these ‘clothes’ of the new life that we are to ‘put on’? Paul has already given us the answer: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.’ See what he writes in **Romans 13:14, Galatians 3:27, Ephesians 4:24** and here in **Colossians 3:10**. “*Put on the Lord Jesus Christ*”, “*clothed yourselves with Christ*”, “*put on the new person*”, “*being renewed into a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him*” – The Lord Jesus himself!

When we were looking at **ch.1**, we touched on Paul’s instruction to ‘hang on in there’ or, to use the word that the Lord Jesus himself used in **John 15**, ‘abide’ or ‘remain’. In **ch.2**, Paul emphasised that we are **in Christ** and that we are identified with his death and resurrection. Now in **ch.3**, he applies the same truth very simply and tells us to ‘put on’ what is ours in Christ – the resurrection life that he has talked about in **2:6,7,10-15** and which he also writes about in **Romans 6:4-13** and **Ephesians 4:17-24**.

This is not some theoretical doctrine, only for Bible scholars or special people; this is for all of us! And please don’t think that the difference between the ‘once for all’ command and the ‘go on doing this’ command is something academic and only for Greek scholars. Anyone reading or hearing Paul’s letters would have immediately understood the difference as soon as they read or heard the words. (I must confess that I have only just found this out, and it has already made quite a difference to my understanding of this passage and some others. I shall go on exploring!)

## **11. The Results of Our Response (Colossians 3:9-25, 4:1)**

Again, we have an overlap! We have already looked as far ahead as **v.14**, but we need to go back to **v.9** and work through to see the practical examples that Paul gives: how these spiritual transactions that we make will work out in our lives. There are commands here, but we really must avoid falling into the trap of trying to follow them in order to please God. Someone has wisely said that ‘all the commands in the Bible are addressed to the new man in Christ’ and, as Watchman Nee has written, ‘Grace means that God does something for me; law means that I do something for God’. We need to see that clearly. Paul is writing about the ‘outworking’ of the grace of God in our lives, not another set of rules.

So, here are some of the things that have died, the things that we have ‘taken off’ by the grace of God.

- 1) Lying. Why? Because it is one of the practices of the old life, and that has gone. (**v.9**)
- 2) Discrimination. A live issue in the world – then as now – but in **v.10** Paul is specifically talking about those who are undergoing this renewing transformation, and makes it clear in **v.11** that there is no room in this renewal for any discrimination whatsoever. See also **Romans 10:12, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:28** – all relating to non-discrimination within the church. Totally revolutionary in the first century Roman Empire!
- 3) Non-forgiveness (**v.13**). Because of the ‘positives’ in **v.12**, ‘bearing with’ and forgiving complaints that we might have against anyone. The Lord Jesus gave grace to us, so we do to each other.

And some of the qualities of this new life that we have ‘put on’. Compare with the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ in **Galatians 5:22-23**:–

- 1) Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (v.12)
- 2) Love, 'the perfect bond of unity'. It encompasses it all and goes beyond a mere catalogue of good behaviour. (v.14) An alternative translation would be 'the binding together of maturity'. (The same word is used here as in **Hebrews 6:1**)
- 3) The peace of Christ ruling in our hearts – part of our calling into one body. (v.15)
- 4) Thankfulness – expressed! (v.15)

#### **How it works out in practice (3:16-4:1)**

1) An overflow of the message of Christ within us. It comes out in teaching and admonishing each other – including psalms, hymns and spiritual songs – and all with our hearts singing with thanks to God! (v.16)

2) Lives that acknowledge the Lord Jesus in actions as well as words, and again giving thanks through him (how else could we do it?) (v.17)

3) Wives acknowledging the leadership of their own husbands, 'as is fitting in the Lord' (v.18). We could get into protracted discussion here, but it is worth noting that Paul says nothing about social or religious conventions of the time or culture, but simply relates this to being 'fitting in the Lord'. The words 'be subject' literally mean 'place yourself under'.

4) Husbands loving their wives. This is the sacrificial 'agapé' love which reflects God's love to us (v.19). Compare **Ephesians 5:22-32** for a fuller explanation of the parallels between the husband–wife relationship and the Christ–Church one! No room for getting embittered or resentful!

5) Children being obedient to their parents (v.20). Paul addresses them directly; they will have been present when his letter was read or passed round the church in Colossae. The word 'be obedient' literally means 'listen under', so: acknowledging their junior position and taking note of what they are told to do. The motivation, that this obedience is 'well-pleasing to the Lord', seems to indicate that at least some of these children were believers, which is also backed up by the motivation given to their fathers in the next verse! Also by the implication that they may well have been reading all that we have studied so far – wow!

6) Fathers not exasperating their children (or provoking or irritating them!), with the aim that they will not lose heart (v.21). How easy to just go a little bit too far with our kids and drive them to discouragement! Especially important if our children are also believers. This seems to be the context here.

7) Slaves (v.22-25). Some people take this reference and others in the New Testament to suggest that Christian belief condones slavery, but that is obviously incorrect. Paul's acceptance of the fact of slavery in the society in which he lived is just that, acceptance, but he makes a positive suggestion to any believer who is a slave that he would do well to become a free man if he gets the opportunity, but not to worry about it if he can't. On the other hand, he tells free people not to **become** slaves (**1 Corinthians 7:21-23**). So, if you are a slave, he says, obey ('listen under') your human masters, but don't just serve well enough to please the master's eye. Use your service as an opportunity to serve the Lord! Again, going beyond what is required. Yes, this was addressed to those in slavery, but there are some useful parallels for employees today!

A slave worked because he had no choice. There was no income or benefit to be gained by it. But Paul tells these believing slaves that there **is** a reward for their work, and one that a slave would never dream of receiving – the inheritance! 'You're not working for your slave master, you're working for a different master – the Lord Christ!' (The same Greek word is translated as 'master' and 'Lord').

Peter also has some useful things to say about these practical relationships. See **1 Peter 2:13-3:9**.

## **12. Some More Practical Results (Colossians 4:2-6)**

Let's not forget that all these 'practical' issues, the family and employment relationships and now just a few more pointers, are all **results** of what Paul has been passing on in the earlier chapters. He has not suddenly changed gear and started to give out sets of rules to follow. On the contrary, all these practical actions spring from the internal changes that we have begun to experience as we take hold of the fact that our lives have been joined to the life of the Lord Jesus, that our old life really is dead and gone and we are dead to that old slavery to failure, law and man-made religion.

1) Prayer (v.2-4). Almost automatically, it sounds like something religious that we **ought** to do, doesn't it? 'Be strong' or 'persevere' towards it, says Paul, being alert and vigilant and (literally) 'with thankful language'. The word that is translated 'pray' has its roots in 'wishing towards', not in some sort of religious observance. When we 'pray', the idea is that we are expressing to our Father our most

deeply-held wishes. That just **cannot** be done as a religious duty! It would make as much sense as telling someone that we love them out of a sense of duty, with nothing more in our hearts. Paul is encouraging us to allow that new life that is in us to express itself to the One who gave it to us – response, not duty!

‘And while you are doing that’, says Paul, ‘here is what is uppermost on **my** heart – I want to have an open door to share the word and open up the mystery of the Christ here in Rome, just as I have been writing about it to you there in Colossae. I need to make it clear. Please join with me in this!’ Surely the cry from the heart of anyone who has something to share from the Lord!

2) Opportunities (**v.5-6**). He reminds them and us of the opportunities that we have with other people, those outside the church. First of all, ‘**walk with wisdom**’ – the way we are speaks so much louder than our words – and buy up the opportunities when they come. If the new life is flowing out of us, then our words will always be with graciousness (seasoned with it, like salt improves the flavour), with the result that we will know how to respond to each one individually. I don’t think he means just when we are talking to them about the Lord, either!

### 13. People and Greetings (Colossians 4:7-18)

Tychicus (see **Acts 20:4, Ephesians 6:21-22, 2 Timothy 4:12**) One of Paul’s stalwart companions, experienced and reliable. Just the sort of man to be able to communicate personally exactly how Paul is doing, passing on the details and being a real encouragement to the church in Colossae.

Onesimus (see **Philemon 10-20**) Not just a slave who has come to Christ, but now useful, a beloved brother, ‘my very heart’, a partner to Paul. Quite a transformation! Now returning home to Colossae, where his former master is. Could be a very difficult step, but he is taking it, with Paul’s support.

Aristarchus (see **Acts 19:29, 27:2, Philemon 24**) He is another who travelled with Paul and went through a tough time with him in Ephesus. Also a prisoner now, there in Rome.

Mark, Barnabas’s cousin, once a disappointment to Paul (**Acts 13:13, 15:37-39**) but now he comes highly recommended! (**2 Timothy 4:11**) He is in Rome, too (but not imprisoned), sends his greetings and may also come to visit Colossae.

Jesus ‘Justus’. Another Jewish believer, not mentioned anywhere else. He and all the others mentioned (all Jews so far) have really encouraged Paul.

Epaphras. We have met him before in the early part of this letter. He is not a Jew but is from Colossae, in some ways the one whose contact with Paul may have sparked this whole letter. He, like Paul, longs to see them all move into maturity and fully take up all the will of God. Yes, Epaphras is a man with a deep concern for the believers in Colossae and those in Hierapolis and Laodicea, neighbouring towns.

Luke. He seems to be always there but inconspicuous. Have you sometimes been surprised by ‘we’ in the events recorded in Acts? There he was, with Paul so much of the time and recording all that he saw the Lord doing, even travelling to Rome with him. Plus, of course, he researched and wrote as complete a biography of the Lord Jesus as he possibly could, especially geared towards the non-Jewish audience. ‘The beloved physician’ – such an understated appreciation of one of Paul’s most devoted companions! He also sends his greetings to them.

Demas. There with Paul at the time that he writes to Colossae and Philemon, but deserted him by the time of Paul’s (probably) last letter to Timothy. (**Philemon 24, 2 Timothy 4:10**) A sad story!

Greetings from Paul (and the others) to the believers in neighbouring Laodicea, and to Nympha (or Nymphas) and the folks who meet in his/her/their house. Paul seems to be encouraging some good contact between the believers in these two towns.

Those in Laodicea should have benefited from this letter, but it seems from **Revelation 3:14-22** that (later if not at that same time) they chose to shut their eyes and ears to what the Lord was saying to them, claiming that they were OK as they were, and blind to their own spiritual poverty. They had **chosen** not to move forward to spiritual maturity. A warning for any of us who think that we can ignore what Paul has written here!

Archippus, part of Philemon’s household and part of the church in Colossae. He evidently had a ministry which would benefit the church, but needed to make sure that he went on fulfilling it, so Paul tells the church to encourage him towards that ‘cramming full’ of his ministry!

Paul signs off. Someone else probably did all the rest of the writing, but Paul signs it, with a request for them to remember his imprisonment! He may not have seen quite how valuable it was, not just to those in Colossae, but to all who got letters from him (some of which have not survived) and to the rest of us who have the opportunity to learn from him.

# After-Word

Paul's letter to the church in Colossae is an excellent and concentrated introduction to God's purposes in bringing us to greater spiritual maturity. Sadly, for many Christians, 'spiritual maturity' seems to be almost unintelligible, because there has been little if any teaching which takes us any further than the absolute basics and clearly sets out the foundations of what it means to have new life in Jesus.

Please forgive me if this is not your experience. If you have been blessed with Spirit-led and Spirit-filled teaching and, as a result, you have already started to learn to live truly **in Christ**, then hopefully these pages and this study in Colossians may have served to simply reinforce what you have already experienced, rather than to introduce you to a totally new understanding. With these foundations made more secure, time now to explore **more** of our Father's purpose in 'bringing many sons to glory'!

Or perhaps you have read Paul's letter and these pages and found a fresh understanding of God's aim for your life, maybe seeing for the first time the reality of what it means to be **in Christ** and beginning to take hold of an inheritance which you had never imagined might be yours in him? Exciting times!

In any case, we need to understand that these are truly only first steps to the maturity which is our birthright. The mystery of God's dealings with mankind is magnificent, sometimes hard to understand but always with a view to the expression of his nature through those of us who have been joined to his Son.

Watchman Nee has expressed this well in his book *What Shall This Man Do?:*–

*Yet 1 Corinthians 12 is a very simple passage, and perhaps it is just because it is so simple that its meaning is missed by many. What is here is not heavenly, nor is it earthly, but heavenly and yet expressed on earth. The revelation of the Body in the heavenlies is intended spontaneously to issue in very practical results, and it is these results that are there defined.*

*God's principle is the principle of incarnation. God desires – indeed for Him it is more than a desire; it is a divine necessity – to show the heavenly life in an earthly expression, not in angels or spirits but in men, not as something vague and imaginary but in a form that is real and practical. It is blessed to be living in the heavenlies in Ephesians, but remember, the same apostle who wrote Ephesians also wrote Corinthians. God's character demands that His Church, universal, spiritual, heavenly, should have its earthly expression in local churches, set in places no less dark than the pagan city of Corinth. And because there is this earthly expression, men will always be ready enough to step in with their opinions, and have a hand in the arrangements. 'We must be earthly sometimes!' they say in extenuation. But 1 Corinthians 12 shows us that, even in such an earthly environment, the church is still to operate on the principles of the heavenly Body. For the local church is not merely an outward type, it is a real manifestation of Christ in the earth today. 'Ye are the Body of Christ'. Here in Corinth you Corinthian believers are called to be the whole Body in essence. (Ch. 7, 'Building in Love')*

Hopefully we have begun to taste something of what our own individual spiritual maturity may mean, but this is only a beginning; it is as if we have begun to discover what it means to be a living stone (See **1 Peter 2:5**).

That is exciting enough, but the purpose of the Master Builder for each one of those living stones is for us to be 'being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit' (**Ephesians 2:22**). And that is not just some far-off, distant and 'heavenly' vision.

**It is what he longs to do with us NOW.**

Dave Taylor

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