

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 3

### PHILIPPIANS 3:1-21

#### THE BACKGROUND

Paul urged his friends to “rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 3:1). He indicated that he had no problem with repeating his instructions to them. Then he warned against false teachers who were trying to mislead believers (3:2). These Jewish-Christian teachers insisted that believers add legalism to faith in Christ to be genuine Christians. Paul denounced such “confidence in the flesh” and reviewed his Jewish heritage and works-righteousness before he encountered Christ (3:3-6). After his conversion, Paul repudiated without regret all his attempts to gain righteousness through legalism. Faith in Christ, not law-keeping, had made him right with God.

Paul’s priority was to be intimately related to Christ (3:10-11). The apostle wanted to experience Christ’s resurrection power and to follow His model of sacrificial self-giving. Paul anticipated taking part in the final resurrection (3:11).

Paul stressed that he hadn’t reached spiritual perfection. He wasn’t as spiritually mature as he could be, but he was growing toward that goal (3:12-13). Rather than live in the past, he moved toward gaining “the prize promised by God’s heavenly call” (3:14). He urged his friends to have his mindset and to live by the truth they had received (3:15-16).

In 3:17-21, Paul encouraged believers to follow his example and give close attention to others who did so. Sadly, he declared that many people lived as “enemies” of Christ’s cross (3:18); they were self-absorbed and headed for destruction (3:19). In contrast, believers were citizens of heaven who eagerly anticipated Christ’s return. At His return, Christ will exercise His sovereign power to transform Christians into His likeness (3:20-21).

#### 1. COUNT ALL THINGS LOSS (PHILIPPIANS 3:1,7-11)

**Verse 1:** *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write to you again about this is no trouble for me and is a protection for you.*

The word “finally” here doesn’t mean Paul was about to end his letter. The Greek term means “as for the rest.” Paul shifted gears as he moved to other matters. He again addressed his friends warmly as brothers. He repeated a constant refrain: they were to rejoice in the Lord. Secure in the knowledge that Christ held them in His grace, they confi-

dently could face the challenges of being His followers.

To what did the phrase “about this” refer? Among interpreters’ suggestions are: (1) The admonition to rejoice; (2) the warning to “watch out” (3:2); (3) statements in previous letters; and (4) dissensions in the church. Both disunity and false teachers threatened the church. Paul’s repeated exhortations to unity and warnings against false teachers were protection for believers against real threats.

Abruptly in 3:2-6, Paul issued a strong warning. “Watch out for” translates a Greek term that means “beware of,” “guard against.” Paul scathingly denounced people he called “dogs” (3:2). He characterized them as “evil workers” and “those who mutilate the flesh” — men who submitted to circumcision. These men were probably Judaizers [JOO day ighz uhrz] — Jewish Christians who insisted that to be Christians, believers must become Jewish proselytes in addition to placing faith in Christ. These false teachers asserted that men must be circumcised and that both men and women must keep the Jews’ rules. Paul consistently refuted them, declaring that salvation comes through grace by faith in Christ — with nothing added.

In 3:4-6, Paul listed his superlative assets during the time he sought to attain righteousness through legalism. His credentials were impeccable. His parents followed the law and had him circumcised when he was eight days old. He was born an Israelite. He also belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. Within Judaism, Paul was a Pharisee. Pharisees were Jewish laymen dedicated to obeying all the law — the Ten Commandments and the many regulations that had been added. No one could accuse him of breaking the law; he felt he had achieved righteousness by his works. In his zeal to protect Judaism from the threat Christians posed, Paul had persecuted believers (see Acts 8:1; 9:1-2). Everything changed, however, when Christ encountered Paul on the Damascus road (see Acts 9:3-9).

**Verse 7:** *But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ.*

At one time, Paul considered the factors he listed in 3:5-6 to be religious assets or profits. When he met Christ, however, he considered these elements as loss — minuses to be discarded as one package. The tense of the Greek word translated “have considered” has the sense of a firm decision made in the past whose effects continued into the present. The phrase “because of Christ” has the sense of accepting God’s grace in Christ.

**Verse 8:** *More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them filth, so that I may gain Christ*

Paul stressed the finality of his turning away from a works-righteousness to salvation by grace. Not only did he count his former religious credentials as minuses, but more than that he continued to consider everything a person could conceive of as religious pluses to be a loss. What Paul jettisoned was everything on which he had depended for self-generated goodness. He recognized that an intimate relationship with Christ was of supreme value. Paul used his full designation for Christ: Christ Jesus my Lord.

Paul had chosen to forfeit what he had counted as religious assets. In fact, he considered these to be filth. He disposed of what he saw as worthless garbage to experience the greatest gain: an ever-deepening relationship with Christ.

**Verse 9:** *and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith.*

Above everything else, Paul wanted to be found in Christ. That is, at any point in his life, at death, or at Christ’s return, he wanted to be judged as having a vital union with Christ. Dispensing with his pursuit of a works-righteousness, Paul would present a righteousness that came through faith in Christ. Such righteousness is from God based on faith. *Righteousness* is right standing with God that He gives by grace. Through Christ, God makes us right with Him and expects us to live rightly. *Faith* is not mere intellectual acceptance of facts about Christ; it’s trust in and commitment to Christ. Only this response makes us right with God.

**Verse 10:** *My goal is to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,*

Paul wanted to know Christ in the sense of experiencing an ever-deepening relationship with Him. In that intimate relationship, Paul wanted to have the power of His resurrection. He wanted his life and service infused with the same power that raised Christ from the dead. Resurrection power would enable him (and all believers) to be victorious over sin, to grow spiritually, and to minister effectively. In union with Christ, Paul wanted to experience the fellowship of His sufferings. Paul viewed his hardships as Christ’s emissary to be an extension of Christ’s sufferings; he readily shared those sufferings, albeit to a lesser degree than his Lord.

Part of Paul's goal was to be conformed to Christ's death. As did Jesus (see 2:7), Paul wanted to pour himself out in service to others. Paul wanted the same kind of obedience, selflessness, and self-sacrifice Christ demonstrated. This attitude involved Paul's death to sin and self in order to live for God and others.

**Verse 11:** *assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.*

Paul wasn't expressing doubt that he would experience believers' resurrection from among the dead. Rather, his words expressed humility. They also may have reflected his uncertainty about his trial's outcome. He might die, or he might be allowed to live. Either way, sooner or later, he would experience resurrection to eternal life.

## 2. NEVER LOOK BACK (PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16)

**Verse 12:** *Not that I have already reached the goal or am already fully mature, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus.*

Paul's life with Christ was in process. He hadn't reached the goal he outlined in 3:10, but he was on his way. He knew he was not already fully mature as a follower of Christ. He had come far since his conversion, but he still had ground to cover. Evidently, some believers in Philippi were claiming to have arrived at the highest level of spiritual attainment; they claimed moral perfection. Yet Paul, Christ's apostle and the Philippians church's founder, admitted to having not yet reached the goal of spiritual maturity. The Greek term rendered "reached" means "obtained," "taken possession of." It was used of obtaining a prize. The tense of the Greek verb may convey the sense that Paul wasn't made perfect at the time of his conversion. The tense of the verb translated "am ... fully mature" has the idea that Paul hadn't been made perfect and still wasn't perfect.

Paul didn't mean, however, that he had leveled out in his spiritual development. Using the analogy of a race, he stressed he was continuing to run hard after the goal of spiritual maturity to obtain it. Christ had taken hold of Paul on the Damascus road and had set him on the course toward spiritual maturity.

**Verse 13:** *Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead,*

Again, Paul emphasized he hadn't obtained complete Christlikeness. Yet it remained his priority. As a disciplined

runner in a race, he didn't look behind him and thus break stride or lose speed but kept his eyes riveted on the finish line, stretching forward to cross the line.

**Verse 14:** *I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.*

The goal toward which Paul exerted supreme effort was *the prize* promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Interpreters have identified "the prize" variously as eternal life, Christlikeness, and Christ Himself. I take the promised prize to be Christlikeness. The *heavenly call* was God's call through Christ to salvation and discipleship — the same calling all believers receive. It originates with God, draws believers toward Him, and culminates in life in His immediate presence.

**Verse 15:** *Therefore, all who are mature should think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this also to you.*

Paul concluded that the spiritually mature among the Philippian believers should agree with him and consider themselves to be in the process of growing toward Christlikeness. In effect, he insisted that mature believers would be aware of their incomplete maturity. Paul was confident that if some Christians disagreed with him and thought they had arrived at perfection, God would convince them of his viewpoint's validity.

**Verse 16:** *In any case, we should live up to whatever truth we have attained.*

No matter what points of disagreement believers had about spiritual maturity, they were to let their level of development serve as an impetus for further progress. They were to direct their lives by the truth they had received. They had moved toward Christlikeness, and they were to continue traveling that path.

## 3. DON'T GET TOO COMFORTABLE (PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21)

**Verse 17:** *Join in imitating me, brothers, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.*

Paul urged his brothers in Christ to join in imitating him. He wasn't bragging or holding himself up as the perfect model; yet he was the best example of Christ's follower they had. He urged the Philippian believers to fix their attention on believers who were following his example. Behind the Greek word translated "live" was the Hebrew term for "walk" (in the sense of conduct). The Philippian Christians were to pattern their lifestyles after Paul and other believers who imitated him — all of whom were following Christ's model.

**Verse 18:** *For I have often told you, and now say again with tears, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.*

With deep emotion, Paul warned his friends against enemies of the cross of Christ. The word "many" could refer to Jewish-Christian teachers. By requiring adherence to the law in addition to faith in Christ, they set themselves up as opposed to the way of the cross. Another view is that the enemies were unsaved people outside the church. A third view is that Paul's opponents were people who professed to be Christians but displayed shamefully pagan lifestyles. In any case, Paul described them as unbelievers and wept because of their tragic condition and their negative effect on others in the church. They were enemies of the cross because their lifestyles contradicted their professed commitment to Christ.

**Verse 19:** *Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. They are focused on earthly things,*

Paul declared that these pseudo-Christians were headed for destruction — that is, ruin in the sense of eternal separation from God. The Greek word for "destruction" can also mean "waste." In the end, these people would wind up on eternity's garbage heap. Though they professed to worship God, they had made idols of their stomachs, which referred to the wide range of their sensual appetites. These included gluttony, but also involved sexual immorality. Their self-indulgence contrasted sharply to Christ's sacrificial self-giving.

Rather than center their lives on heavenly or spiritual values, truths, and goals, the professing Christians were focused on earthly things. The Greek term rendered "are focused on" means "to set the mind on," "to be intent on," and conveys continuous action. They consistently pursued material things as their priority.

**Verse 20:** *But our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

In contrast, genuine believers' citizenship was in heaven. Paul maintained that Christians were members of two realms. They were citizens of the Roman Empire and should be exemplary citizens. More importantly, they were citizens of God's kingdom and owed their primary loyalty to God. Their heavenly citizenship governed their earthly lives.

Paul emphasized the creative tension in which believers lived: They eagerly awaited the return of Christ, their Savior. Paul's emphasis may have been on the fulfillment or culmination of Christians' salvation at that time or their being de-

livered from persecution.

**Verse 21:** *He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject everything to Himself.*

As Deity, Christ has supernatural power ... to subject everything to Himself. He's sovereign. With such unlimited effective energy, at His coming Christ will transform believers' bodies. The Greek word translated "transform" has the idea of changing something so it conforms to something else. The body of our humble condition is the physical body. The phrase "His glorious body" refers to the Lord's spiritual or resurrection body appropriate for eternity. Christ will change believers' bodies to be like His, not merely in external appearance but also in essential nature. Believers will reach full maturity.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 10

### PHILIPPIANS 4:1-23

#### THE BACKGROUND

Paul exhorted the Philippian believers to maintain their commitment to Christ (4:1). Then he turned to what perhaps was a primary concern of his letter: a disagreement between two women in the church that threatened to become divisive (4:2-3). Paul urged them to settle their differences and asked an unidentified church member to help.

Paul called on his friends to rejoice continually and to be gracious (4:4-5). Rather than being anxious, they were to make their requests to God, who would grant them His peace (4:6-7). He listed eight virtues that were to characterize believers' lives (4:8-9). Then he again urged them to be faithful to what he had taught them and to follow the example he had set.

In 4:10-20, Paul expressed appreciation for the church's gift. When the Philippian Christians learned about his circumstances, they acted promptly. Their gift helped him and pleased God. Paul thanked his friends in such a way that they wouldn't feel he was asking for more. He assured them he had everything he needed and declared that God would meet their needs.

Paul ended his letter with a request that his greetings be extended to each church member. He also conveyed greetings from unnamed believers who were with him (4:21). He then closed with a prayer that Christ's grace would be with his friends (4:23).

#### 1. WHEN SECOND THINGS ARE FIRST (PHILIPPIANS 4:1-7)

**Verse 1:** *So then, my brothers, you are dearly loved and longed for—my joy and crown. In this manner stand firm in the Lord, dear friends.*

The phrase “so then” points back to Paul's reminder that believers' citizenship was in heaven and that they eagerly awaited Christ's return (3:20). Under those circumstances, they were to stand firm in the Lord. They were to maintain their faithfulness to Christ. Paul referred to his friends in glowing terms. They were his dearly loved brothers in the family of faith. The Greek text includes a word that means “longed for” and emphasizes that Paul wanted to see them again. Furthermore, they were his joy and crown. Their continued faithfulness would be evidence of his effective ser-

vice to Christ.

**Verse 2:** *I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord.*

Paul turned to what perhaps was his letter's major objective. He wrote directly to two women whose disagreement threatened the church's fellowship. All we know about Euodia [yoo OH dih uh] and Syntyche [SIN tih kee] is that they were dedicated church members who clashed over an unspecified matter and whose ongoing conflict imperiled the church's unity. Paul desperately wanted to head off division among his cherished Philippian friends.

Paul urged the two women to agree in the Lord. To avoid any hint of partiality, he addressed each woman specifically. The word “agree” translates a Greek phrase that literally reads “the same to be minded.” Thus Paul appealed to Euodia and Syntyche to have Christ's attitude of humble selflessness (2:5). In light of Christ's sacrificial self-giving on their behalf, how could either one continue to insist on her way? The phrase “in the Lord” emphasized the sphere of their living — the realm in which Christ ruled. Paul wanted the women to be reconciled in a Christian manner.

**Verse 3:** *Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the book of life.*

Paul then appealed directly to someone he addressed as true partner. The Greek word rendered “partner” could be a proper name: Suzuge [SOO zuh geh]. If this is so, then the term “true” has the sense of the person's being aptly named. Paul wanted this Christian to mediate the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche and to resolve it before it issued in serious divisiveness. Paul expressed his appreciation and esteem for the women by acknowledging they had labored strenuously side by side with him for the gospel. They were sincere Christians who disagreed, but for the gospel's (and the church's) sake they needed to be reconciled.

Paul went on to commend Clement and other coworkers who were instrumental in spreading the gospel. All we know about Clement is that he was a dedicated believer. That Paul referred to the rest of his coworkers without naming them reminds us of the numberless unsung heroes in the early church. The phrase “whose names are in the book of life” may refer to the two women, Clement, and other coworkers, in which case the words indicate they belonged to God. If the term “whose” refers only to Clement and the others, the

phrase could suggest that they had died.

**Verse 4:** *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

Paul's exhortation that his friends rejoice in the Lord always emphasized that in all their circumstances they were to celebrate being held securely in God's grace. Their union with Christ would enable them to rejoice even in difficult and threatening situations.

**Verse 5:** *Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*

Believers were to let their graciousness be extended to everyone. The word “graciousness” conveys a reluctance to insist on one's full rights, even at personal cost. Such consistent kindness would demonstrate the true Christian spirit and offer a positive witness concerning the gospel's transforming power.

Paul strengthened his admonition with a warning: The Lord is near. He may have meant Christ was present with the believers and observed their behavior. More likely, he referred to Christ's imminent return, when the Lord would expect to find the quality of forbearance in them.

**Verse 6:** *Don't worry about anything, but in every-thing, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*

Paul urged his friends not to worry about anything. The Greek word translated “worry” has the sense of consuming anxiety that rips life apart. Paul didn't mean believers were not to have concerns about themselves and others. Rather, they were not to come apart at the seams, but in every situation were to express their requests to God. The Greek term rendered “prayer” described the attitude of worship on the part of the person who approached God. The Greek word translated “petition” had the sense of expressing needs. Every approach to God was to be suffused with thanksgiving, a necessary element of genuine worship.

**Verse 7:** *And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

Consistent prayer to God would result in receiving His peace that is beyond human understanding. The word “peace” may include the idea of serenity, but it basically has the sense of spiritual health, wholeness, or soundness under God's rule. Such soundness would stand guard over their lives. The terms “hearts and minds” referred to the intellectual, emotional, and volitional center of their beings. God's peace would act as a sentinel at the core of their lives.

It would come from their union with Christ Jesus.

## 2. WHEN FIRST THINGS ARE FIRST (PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9)

**Verse 8:** *Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise—dwell on these things.*

The word “finally” probably signaled Paul’s transitioning to a new subject and conveyed the sense of “for the rest” (3:1). He listed eight virtues that his friends were to dwell on. The Greek term rendered “dwell on” means “to take into account, “to consider.” It has the idea of weighing or meditating on something and allowing it to shape one’s conduct. He wanted believers to concentrate on and practice virtues that characterized their union with Christ.

The first two virtues Christians were to have and exhibit concerned their thought life. The word “true” has the idea of what is real or genuine as opposed to what is deceptive, illusory, or false. It applies to speech as well as facts. The Greek term translated “honorable” describes something that’s worthy of reverence. It has the sense of what’s respectable or honest and conveys the idea of Christian behavior that’s inviting.

The third and fourth virtues had to do with everyday life. The word “just” has the idea of uprightness. It conveys the sense of giving God and others their due — of doing right by them. Surrounded by pagan immorality, the Philippian Christians were to be morally pure. The word “pure” described something so clean it could be brought into God’s presence. Believers were to be models of sexual purity.

Virtues five and six describe the results of allowing Christ to shape believers’ thoughts. The word rendered “lovely” can also be translated “attractive” or “winsome.” It has the idea of what’s pleasing and inspires love. Christian character is to have an appealing beauty.

The Greek term rendered “commendable” literally means “fair-speaking.” It has the idea of putting a favorable light on something. Almost as an aside, Paul added two virtues in a conditional clause. It has the sense of “because.” The phrase “moral excellence” translates a Greek term that described physical, mental, and moral excellence. Believers’ outstanding moral character was to contrast sharply to the paganism around them.

Paul expected believers’ exemplary conduct to draw people’s commendation. Believers weren’t to seek people’s ap-

proval to boost their egos; rather, they were to live in such a way that others would see the positive difference Christ made in them.

**Verse 9:** *Do what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

From Paul’s preaching and teaching, the Philippian Christians had learned and heard and received instructions concerning salvation and living as Christians. In his consistent Christlikeness, they had seen a worthy example of faithful discipleship. They were to do what he instructed and modeled.

## 3. SEARCH FOR CONTENTMENT (PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13)

**Verse 11:** *I don’t say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.*

Paul acknowledged the joy the Philippians’ gift had evoked in him after a time when they had lost track of him (4:10). His expression of gratitude was no afterthought, and its coming at the end of his letter didn’t indicate a lack of appreciation. His eagerness to deal with problems the church faced — especially potential divisions — was his first priority.

Paul made clear that he wasn’t asking for additional gifts. He wasn’t in need. He had learned to be content in all his circumstances. In Stoic philosophy, the Greek term rendered “content” emphasized the sense of being self-sufficient. Paul knew, however, that his sufficiency came from Christ in him (4:13).

**Verse 12:** *I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need.*

In Paul’s missionary work, he sometimes had a lot and sometimes had a little. He had learned the secret of being content. Borrowing the image of being initiated into a mystery religion, Paul stated that he had been initiated into Christ’s secret of dealing positively with life’s varying circumstances.

**Verse 13:** *I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

Paul revealed the source of his coping ability. He could do all things through Christ who strengthened him. A literal translation of the Greek text of this verse is: “All things I have power in the One empowering me.” Through Christ, Paul could face and deal adequately with any situation that arose in his ministry. The phrase “all things” refers to the circumstances to which Paul alluded in 4:11-12.

## 4. THE TRIUMPH OF FIRST THINGS (PHILIPPIANS 4:15-19)

**Verse 15:** *And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone.*

Paul established the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey (see Acts 16). When he left Macedonia and continued his journey, the Philippian believers shared with him as he continued to spread the gospel. Paul used accounting terms to describe their partnership. If he kept a ledger, theirs would be the only account in which he entered debits and credits.

**Verse 16:** *For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times.*

Paul had gone from Philippi to Thessalonica as he continued his work (see Acts 17:1). Several times, the Philippian believers sent gifts to meet Paul’s need. He usually didn’t accept gifts from churches so that he couldn’t be accused of preaching for money. Because of his close relationship with the Philippians, he accepted their help.

**Verse 17:** *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that is increasing to your account*

Paul made clear that he wasn’t expecting additional gifts. Continuing the accounting analogy, he emphasized he wanted fruit to accrue to their account — to enrich them spiritually.

**Verse 18:** *But I have received everything in full, and I have an abundance. I am fully supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you provided—a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.*

The gift Epaphroditus had brought Paul was more than enough to meet his needs. The phrase “I have received everything in full” translates a Greek commercial term for “giving a receipt.” Epaphroditus had delivered the gift, and Paul signed the receipt with gratitude. The words “abundance” and “fully supplied” stressed that the gift was more than adequate. With imagery drawn from the Jewish sacrificial system, he stated that the aroma of their offering (as that of a burnt offering) ascended to God and was pleasing to Him.

**Verse 19:** *And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*

Even as God had met Paul’s needs, the apostle was confident that He would supply all the believers’ needs as they remained faithful in their service for Christ. The phrase “His riches” stressed the abundance of God’s resources. The words “in glory” could refer to heaven as the storehouse of God’s resources or to believers’ final reward in heaven. The

idea could be God's "glorious riches." Believers would receive God's resources in Christ Jesus — in their faith relationship with Him. In 4:20, Paul praised God. He closed his letter with greetings to all the Philippian Christians. Christians with Paul — especially members of "Caesar's household" — sent their greetings to the Philippian believers. Paul ended as he had begun (1:2): with a prayer that Christ's grace would be with their spirit — a reminder that they were to be united.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 17

### COLOSSIANS 1:1-20

#### THE BACKGROUND

Paul began his Letter to the Colossians by identifying himself as the writer and addressing the recipients (1:1-2a). Then he stated his usual prayer that God would grant them “grace and peace” (1:2b).

In 2:3-8, Paul expressed gratitude to God for the Colossian Christians. He hadn’t established the church in Colossae [koh LAHS sih]. To our knowledge he hadn’t stopped there on any of his missionary journeys, although he possibly traveled through the city en route to Ephesus on the third missionary journey (see Acts 19:1). Epaphras, whom Paul highly esteemed as his fellow servant in ministry for Christ, had told Paul about the believers’ faithfulness and love for one another.

Paul informed the Colossian Christians that he constantly prayed for them. He reminded them that through Christ, God had rescued them from paganism and had brought them into His beloved Son’s kingdom. Through Christ, God had freed them from slavery to sin by forgiving their sins (1:9-14).

In the form of a hymn, Paul stressed Christ’s centrality and supremacy. The apostle extolled the Lord as Creator and Sustainer of the universe (1:15-17). Paul declared that the risen Christ is the church’s head and sovereign over everything (1:18). Jesus Christ is Deity; and through His death on the cross, He opened the way for sinners to be reconciled to God (1:19-20).

#### 1. FAITH FOR SALVATION (COLOSSIANS 1:3-8)

**Verse 3:** *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,*

Paul greeted his letter’s recipients and included Timothy, his coworker, in the greeting. Paul identified himself as Christ’s apostle to indicate his authority. He addressed the believers as saints and faithful brothers in God’s family of grace. He prayed that God would give them His grace and peace.

Paul informed the Colossian Christians that every time he prayed for them, he did so with thanksgiving to God. By identifying God as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul stressed Christ’s sovereignty and Deity, thus establishing early the truth that Christ was in no way subordinate to any-

one or anything.

**Verse 4:** *for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints*

Paul thanked God for the believers because he had heard about their faith in Christ and their love ... for all the saints. Epaphras evidently had given this report to Paul (1:7-8). The word “faith” conveyed the sense of trust in and commitment to Christ. Love translates the distinctive Christian term for persistent, self-giving good will that acts for others’ best interests. The word “saints” is a synonym for “Christians.” These believers’ commitment to Christ was issuing in active love for all other Christians.

**Verse 5:** *because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. You have already heard about this hope in the message of truth, the gospel*

The Christians’ love for one another sprang from the hope reserved for them in heaven. Hope has the idea of living with confident assurance, not wishful thinking. The noun has the sense of the fulfillment of believers’ salvation when they enter God’s immediate presence in heaven. The Colossian believers had learned of this hope when the message of truth was proclaimed to them. Because of the message’s absolute and unchanging nature, they were to hold to it and not become victims of false teachings.

**Verse 6:** *that has come to you. It is bearing fruit and growing all over the world, just as it has among you since the day you heard it and recognized God’s grace in the truth.*

Paul defined “the message of truth” (1:5) as the gospel that had been preached in Colossae. It was the good news of Christ’s servant ministry; His voluntary, atoning death on the cross; and His victorious resurrection. This good news of grace was bearing fruit wherever in the world that it was being proclaimed. God’s purpose was that the revelation of His grace in Christ be offered to all people, even as it had been presented to the Colossians.

**Verse 7:** *You learned this from Epaphras, our dearly loved fellow slave. He is a faithful servant of the Messiah on your behalf,*

Epaphras had taken the good news of Christ to Colossae. Likely, he was the founder and pastor of the church. He may have proclaimed the gospel in Colossae during Paul’s lengthy ministry in Ephesus (see Acts 19:1–20:1). Paul referred to Epaphras as “much loved.” Epaphras also was Paul’s fellow slave; that is, both were totally subservient to their Master, dedicated to obeying His will.

The phrase “on your behalf” can have two possible emphases. Paul could’ve meant that Epaphras faithfully ministered to him in the Colossian believers’ stead. A second possibility is that Paul was referring to Epaphras’s serving the Colossians by preaching the gospel to them. The Greek word translated “minister” is the term from which we get the word “deacon,” meaning “servant.”

**Verse 8:** *and he has told us about your love in the Spirit.*

Epaphras told Paul about the Colossian believers’ love in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit working in and among them was producing God’s kind of love.

#### 2. FAITH FOR EACH DAY (COLOSSIANS 1:9-14)

**Verse 9:** *For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven’t stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding,*

From the time of Epaphras’s report concerning the Colossian believers’ positive qualities, Paul consistently interceded on their behalf. The plural “we” could include Timothy (1:1) and others with Paul (4:10-14). “Praying” refers to prayer in general that has the characteristic of worship. “Asking” has the sense of specific requests.

Paul asked God to fill the believers with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. “Knowledge” renders the Greek term for “full knowledge” that comes from a personal relationship with God. Gnostics taught that salvation came through secret knowledge they could impart that would elevate people above worldly, material matters. Paul stressed that God revealed His will in Christ. The Colossian Christians had partial knowledge of that will; they needed complete knowledge. “Wisdom” is the grasp of general principles; “understanding” is the application of those principles to specific situations — making wise decisions. The term “spiritual” stresses that genuine wisdom and understanding come through the Holy Spirit.

**Verse 10:** *so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God.*

The purpose of wisdom from God is that believers may walk worthy of the Lord — that is, may live in such a manner that their lifestyles honor Christ and reflect His character. Believers’ Christlike behavior was to be fully pleasing to Him. In attitude, word, and deed, believers were to follow Christ’s will for them.

With four words conveying continuous action, Paul described what Christlike living involves. First, it's continuously bearing fruit in every good work. Here, fruit refers to gracious deeds of kindness and generosity prompted by God's working in believers' lives.

Second, believers are to be growing in the knowledge of God. They are to experience a deepening personal intimacy with God in which they understand and implement more of His character.

**Verse 11:** *May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy*

Third, Paul prayed that the Colossian Christians would be strengthened by all power. The Greek term rendered "power" has the sense of God's inherent, unlimited strength or ability available to believers. The phrase "glorious might" has the sense of God's sovereign strength. God's glory is His character revealed as redemptive love. Thus Paul prayed that the Colossian Christians would go on experiencing the same divine energy that provided salvation. Such God-given strength would enable believers to have endurance and patience — to persevere in the face of difficulties without grumbling or retaliating. They could continue to be faithful to Christ with joy — solid confidence in His sustaining grace.

**Verse 12:** *giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light.*

Fourth, Paul prayed that the Colossian believers would go on giving thanks to God. The word "Father" may emphasize God as Christ's Father or as believers' Heavenly Father. In either case, gratitude was to be prominent in the Colossian Christians' praying because God had enabled them to share in the saints' inheritance in the light. He had qualified them for life in eternity with Him. The term "inheritance" conveys the sense of Christians' allotted portion in God's kingdom.

**Verse 13:** *He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves.*

God deserved gratitude because He had rescued the believers from the dominion of darkness. In Christ, God had freed believers from enslavement to sin. In doing so, He transferred them into the kingdom of His Son. By identifying the kingdom as Christ's, Paul stressed the Lord's absolute sovereignty.

**Verse 14:** *We have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, in Him.*

Another reason for consistently expressing thanks to God

was His providing redemption in Christ. The earliest Greek manuscripts of Colossians (discovered after the KJV was completed) do not contain this phrase, which is why nearly all modern English versions omit it. By comparing Ephesians 1:7, however, it's clear Paul taught that Christians' redemption was achieved through Christ's atoning death. The word "redemption" came from the slave markets of Paul's day and carried the sense of liberation at cost. Christ's voluntary self-giving on the cross provided release from sin's slavery to all who would place their faith in Him. His vicarious atonement made possible redemption, which Paul explained as the forgiveness of sins.

### 3. FAITH IN A PERSONAL GOD (COLOSSIANS 1:15-17)

**Verse 15:** *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*

Paul employed a hymn to emphasize Christ's sovereignty. The apostle may have composed it, or he may have quoted a hymn Christians used in worship. Heretical teachers in Colossae contended Christ was merely one of many powers between people and God. In 1:15-17, Paul refuted their teaching by presenting Christ as Lord of the universe.

Paul asserted that Christ is the image of the invisible God. The Greek term rendered "image" conveys the idea of a perfect representation. In Matthew 22:20, Jesus used the word of a ruler's image or likeness stamped on a coin. Because God is Spirit (see John 4:24), the human eye can't see Him. He has made Himself known perfectly in Christ.

The phrase "the firstborn over all creation" doesn't indicate that Christ was the first created being. In the Old Testament, the firstborn son occupied a position of honor, privilege, and supremacy; he was first in priority. Here, the term expresses Christ's preexistent Deity.

**Verse 16:** *For everything was created by Him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.*

Christ is Lord over creation, for by Him everything was created. The words "by Him" literally read "in Him" — in the sphere of His power, influence, and responsibility. The words "heaven" and "invisible" refer to the unseen realm. The terms "earth" and "visible" designate what can be seen. The words "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" may refer to the false teachers' terms designating the highest ranks of angelic powers. Christ is vastly superior to all

created powers.

Christ was the Agent of creation; all things were created through Him. Creation was God's idea; Christ implemented the process. Christ is also creation's goal. "For Him" literally is "unto Him." Creation moves toward Him and His purpose for it.

**Verse 17:** *He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together.*

The phrase "before all things" emphasizes Christ's preexistence. He was the Agent of creation, and He also maintains it in the sense of giving it stability. The Greek term rendered "hold together" can mean both "cohere" and "have unity." Christ sustains creation and gives it harmony.

### 4. FAITH IN CHRIST (COLOSSIANS 1:18-20)

**Verse 18:** *He is also the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to have first place in everything.*

In 1:18-20, Paul stressed Christ's lordship over the church, His body — His people who actively extend His ministry in the world. The preexistent Lord over the universe is also the church's head — the Source of the body's life, who governs it and gives it unity.

The Greek word rendered "church" refers to all of Christ's followers — the universal church. In the background is the Old Testament idea of God's people, the congregation of Israel. Believers are God's people, whether assembled or scattered.

The word "beginning" stresses Christ's priority in time and power. In addition, He's the Originator of life in God's kingdom — new life made possible by grace. The phrase "firstborn from the dead" refers to Christ's resurrection as the revelation of the new quality of life He gives: resurrection life that extends beyond death. Christ's victory over death proved that He has first place in everything.

**Verse 19:** *For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him,*

God chose to have all His fullness dwell in Him. The term "fullness" could refer to false teachers' concept of a series of spiritual powers between people and God. These false teachers contended that people had to go through those powers to reach God. Paul asserted, however, that Christ is the way to God. A second possibility is that the term means "full measure" of Deity, meaning that Christ is fully God.

**Verse 20:** *and through Him to reconcile everything to Him-*

*self by making peace through the blood of His cross—whether things on earth or things in heaven.*

God's purpose is that through Christ He may reconcile everything to Himself. Everything includes humans and the universe (see Rom. 8:19-23). The word "reconcile" has the sense of restoring a relationship, of creating unity. However, this statement must not be understood to mean that every person eventually will be saved, a false teaching clearly refuted by other Scriptures (see Matt. 25:46). It means, rather, that Christ alone was God's chosen way of bringing about reconciliation.

God made peace possible through Christ's blood — His death on the cross. The phrase "things on earth or things in heaven" refers to the whole universe, material and spiritual.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 24

### JOHN 20:1-18

#### THE BACKGROUND

Jesus had been arrested, tried, and sentenced to die by crucifixion. On our Friday, He was nailed to a cross and after six agonizing hours, He died. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate the governor for Jesus' body. When Pilate granted the request, Joseph and Nicodemus quickly prepared Jesus' body for burial so the corpse could be entombed before sundown, the beginning of the Sabbath (19:38-42). Women followers of Jesus observed the preparation and the burial (see Luke 23:55).

Early on our Sunday morning, a number of women came to the tomb. John singled out Mary Magdalene in his account. Mary found the tomb empty and ran to find Peter and another disciple with the report that someone had removed Jesus' body (20:1-2). The two disciples ran to the tomb and found it empty. The second disciple saw the body's empty wrappings and believed (20:3-10). Neither disciple, however, understood the Scriptures' teaching that Jesus would arise (20:9).

Mary stayed at the tomb, where she encountered Jesus. At first, she didn't recognize Him, but when He spoke her name, she knew who He was (20:12-16).

Jesus told Mary to go announce to His followers that He would ascend to His Father. Mary obeyed and reported that she had seen the risen Jesus (20:17-18).

#### 1. DOUBTING THE RESURRECTION (JOHN 20:1-2)

**Verse 1:** *On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.*

The first day of the week was our Sunday. The Sabbath ended at sundown on our Saturday. The Greek word translated "early" designated the fourth watch of the night, 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. The phrase "while it was still dark" indicates Mary started at a time before dawn and arrived at early dawn (see Matt. 28:1). Although a group of women started out before first light and went to the tomb (see Luke 24:1,10), John focused on Mary Magdalene. She was from Magdala in Galilee and was one of a group of women who followed Jesus and helped underwrite His ministry. Luke noted that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her, an indication of His healing

her of an extremely serious condition (see Luke 8:1-3).

When Mary arrived at the tomb, she had enough light to see that the heavy stone covering the tomb's entrance had been removed. Cave tombs had a groove running across the entrance. A large circular stone was placed in the groove and rolled to block the tomb's opening to keep out animals and grave robbers.

**Verse 2:** *So she ran to Simon Peter and to the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!"*

Without entering the tomb, Mary Magdalene ran to find Simon Peter and another disciple. The other disciple, the one Jesus loved, was John, James's brother and the writer of the Fourth Gospel (21:20-24). Peter, James, and John made up the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. An intriguing suggestion concerning the reason John referred to himself as the beloved disciple is that he was indicating his warm, personal relationship with Jesus was available for all people who will place their faith in Him. Another possibility is that John's reference to himself reflected awe at Jesus' loving him in spite of his being one of the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17) — that is, a man of fiery temper.

None of Jesus' followers, including Mary Magdalene, was expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. The empty tomb puzzled her. Her natural assumption was that an unidentified they (Jews? Romans? Joseph and Nicodemus? Caretakers?) had removed Jesus' body from the tomb. She may have thought grave robbers had violated the tomb and desecrated the body. Neither Mary nor the other women who had gone to the tomb (note the plural we) knew where Jesus' body had been taken. Interestingly, Mary still referred to Jesus as the Lord, the object of her devotion.

#### 2. UNDERSTANDING THE RESURRECTION (JOHN 20:3-7)

**Verse 3:** *At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb.*

In response to Mary Magdalene's startling news, Peter and John immediately sprinted toward the tomb.

**Verse 4:** *The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first.*

They started out together, but John outran Peter and arrived first. Some commentators suggest that John was younger and therefore in better physical shape. More likely, the words colorfully state a fact: John simply was the better

and faster runner.

**Verse 5:** *Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, yet he did not go in.*

John stopped at the tomb's entrance and looked into the interior. The Greek word translated "stooping down" has the idea of bending to take a close look, of peering intently or inspecting carefully. An alternate suggestion is that the term means "to glance." John saw the linen cloths that had encased Jesus' body (19:40). Seeing the cloths may have caused John to hesitate before entering the tomb. Other suggestions are that he may have paused out of reverence or fear of becoming ceremonially defiled, or because of timidity.

**Verse 6:** *Then, following him, Simon Peter came also. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there.*

True to his brash and impulsive nature, Simon Peter arrived, brushed by John, and entered the tomb. Peter also noticed the linen body wrappings lying where the body had been. The linen strips were not strewn about; the Greek text conveys the sense that the strips lay as they were originally wound. The Greek term rendered "saw" has the idea of Peter's observing the scene but not drawing the conclusion that Christ had arisen.

**Verse 7:** *The wrapping that had been on His head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself.*

Peter also saw the wrapping that had covered Jesus' head. It lay apart from the body wrappings, folded up in a separate place by itself. The head wrapping was a handkerchief or napkin that covered the corpse's face (11:44). Both Peter and John noted the puzzling nature of the whole scene inside the tomb. The thought began to form that grave robbers hadn't taken Jesus' body. They wouldn't have taken the time and made the painstaking effort to leave the body's wrappings placed neatly. Everything in the tomb was too orderly for a body snatching. Something else must've occurred.

#### 3. BELIEVING THE RESURRECTION (JOHN 20:8-9,14-16)

**Verse 8:** *The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, then entered the tomb, saw, and believed.*

Call to mind that the other disciple refers to John, the Gospel writer, and that the verses we're studying are his eyewitness account of the empty tomb. John had reached the tomb first, but he entered after Peter had gone in and looked around. The significance of John's response as he stood in the tomb can't be overstated: he saw and believed.

The Greek term rendered “saw” is different from the word for Peter’s seeing the body wrappings and head cloth (20:6). Peter took note of what was there. John saw in the sense of understanding or receiving insight. He grasped more of the meaning of the cloths and the empty tomb.

John believed. One view is that he believed Jesus had ascended to the Father (14:28). Most commentators, however, conclude that John realized and accepted the truth of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. He took a bold step of faith. He hadn’t received an angel’s announcement, and he hadn’t seen the resurrected Jesus; but by faith he accepted the truth that Jesus was alive. I agree with interpreters who point out that He was the first disciple to arrive at that truth.

In a real sense, John believed before he saw. Even before Jesus appeared to the disciples (20:19), John was convinced Jesus was alive. For John, believing was seeing.

**Verse 9:** *For they still did not understand the Scripture that He must rise from the dead.*

Ironically, Peter and John still didn’t understand the Scriptures’ prophecy that Jesus had to arise from the dead. The Greek term rendered “must” means “it is necessary” and has the sense of a moral, spiritual necessity. God’s purpose of providing salvation in Christ required His Son’s resurrection to life as evidence of His triumph over sin and death and His ability to give life to all who would place their faith in Him.

The Scripture to which John referred was a particular prophecy, probably Psalm 16:10. The two disciples’ lack of understanding concerning this Scripture likely has a double reference. First, John’s belief didn’t spring from an understanding of Old Testament prophecy but from the empty tomb and orderly body wrappings. In fact, the evidences of resurrection shed light on the prophecy. Second, Peter’s slowness to grasp the significance of the evidences lay in his not understanding the prophecy.

John and Peter exited the tomb and returned to their homes (20:10). No doubt, John was exhilarated because of his belief that Jesus had arisen. Peter, although lacking John’s level of belief, nevertheless responded in wonder to what he had seen (see Luke 24:12).

Evidently Mary Magdalene had followed the disciples to the tomb. After they left, she remained outside the tomb, facing it and crying. She stooped to peer into the tomb and saw two angels sitting where Jesus’ body had been. They asked the reason she was weeping. She replied that Jesus’ body had

been removed and she didn’t know where it was (20:11-13).

**Verse 14:** *Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not know it was Jesus.*

Mary turned and saw the resurrected Jesus standing nearby, but she didn’t recognize Him. Interpreters have offered various suggestions concerning Mary’s failure to recognize Jesus: (1) Her tears blurred her vision. (2) Jesus’ resurrected body exhibited differences from His previous appearance. (3) She merely glanced at Him rather than taking a direct look. (4) Darkness prevented a clear view. (5) Mary was engrossed in her concerns about the body. Whatever the reason, Mary initially didn’t recognize Jesus.

**Verse 15:** *“Woman,” Jesus said to her, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Supposing He was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you’ve removed Him, tell me where you’ve put Him, and I will take Him away.”*

Jesus asked Mary the same question the angels had asked (20:13): “Woman, why are you crying?” As a form of address, the Greek term rendered “woman” could express indignation, admiration, kindness and favor, or respect. No doubt Jesus used it positively in kindness. Then He added, “Who is it you are looking for?” Interestingly, Jesus asked who, not “what.”

Thinking that only the gardener would be in the area so early, Mary seized on the possibility that the caretaker, not grave robbers, had moved Jesus’ body. If this were true, perhaps she could recover it and bury it properly. She implored the “gardener” to tell her the body’s location if He knew. Note that she assumed the “gardener” would know who she was talking about; she didn’t mention Jesus’ name but used the pronoun Him. Without thought of how she would transport a heavy body but motivated by love and faithfulness, Mary declared that she would take Him away. She would retrieve the body and give it a proper burial.

**Verse 16:** *Jesus said, “Mary.” Turning around, she said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!”—which means “Teacher.”*

Apparently, Mary had turned to look into the tomb again. That’s when Jesus addressed her by name: “Mary” (literally, “Miriam”). The familiar tone and inflection sparked instant recognition. Woman, Jesus’ general address in 20:15, hadn’t prompted Mary to look more closely at Jesus; but the warm personal sound of her name caused her to turn sharply and face Him again. She addressed Him as “Rabbouni” [ra BOO nigh], a Hebrew term that means “Teacher” or “Master.” Originally, the word had the force of “my Rabbi

(Teacher).” Mary’s response can be translated, “My dear Rabbi.” Note the tenderness and warmth of Jesus’ and Mary’s two-word exchange.

#### 4. SHARING THE RESURRECTION (JOHN 20:17-18)

**Verse 17:** *“Don’t cling to Me,” Jesus told her, “for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to My brothers and tell them that I am ascending to My Father and your Father—to My God and your God.”*

Evidently Mary had prostrated herself before Jesus and had taken hold of His feet (see Matt. 28:9). Jesus commanded her to stop clinging to Him. The Greek term rendered “cling” means “fasten to” and has the force of holding on rather than merely touching. Later, Jesus would invite Thomas to touch Him (20:27). Jesus gave the reason for His directive to Mary: “I have not yet ascended to the Father.” The old relationship between Jesus and His followers that involved sight, sound, and touch had ended. The new spiritual relationship would begin when Jesus ascended. That is, communication through the physical senses would be replaced with communication through the Spirit.

Jesus commissioned Mary to be the first evangelist (bearer of good news) concerning His resurrection. Significantly, a woman — not one of the apostles — was given this singular honor. She was to find the Eleven (Jesus’ brothers) and announce His ascension. The words “My Father and your Father ... My God and your God” are significant. God is Jesus’ Father in a unique sense: Jesus is the divine Son. Through faith in Him, people enter God’s family of the redeemed and are enabled to address God as Father (see Matt. 6:9). In His incarnation, Jesus referred to the Father as His God. The Lord also is the God of people of faith.

**Verse 18:** *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them what He had said to her.*

Mary obeyed Christ’s command and fulfilled the task He had given her. She located the disciples and excitedly announced she had seen the Lord. She delivered to them His message concerning His ascension.