



## Questions for Personal Reflection or Small Group Study

# Philippians, Colossians, Philemon

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### CATHOLIC COMMENTARY ON SACRED SCRIPTURE

In addition to the questions below, the Reflection and Application sections throughout this commentary suggest various ways of acting on the message of these letters.

#### General Introduction

1. In what sense are we “reading other people’s mail” when we read the writings of St. Paul? In what sense is this *not* the case?
2. Why is it important to treat Paul’s letters as scores (analogous to musical scores) written for oral performance? Does your answer imply something about the role of a lector in a liturgy?
3. Why did Paul become “a person of interest” for security officials of the Roman Empire? Do you see any contemporary examples that are similar?
4. Why did Paul write in Greek?
5. In what ways did confinement and custody in the first-century Roman Empire differ from incarceration today?
6. In what important ways did the format of an ancient Hellenistic letter differ from the typical format of a formal letter today?
7. In what sense did Paul experience a religious conversion on the road to Damascus?

#### Introduction to the Letter to Philemon

1. How does this letter, short though it is, exhibit the standard format of an ancient Greek letter?
2. Given that the author, Paul, wrote this letter to address a very specific occasion and not to teach perennial truths, what permanent value did the early Church likely perceive in this writing?
3. What is our clue that the addressees of this letter live in the town of Colossae?
4. Why might the city of Ephesus be a good guess regarding the place from which Paul writes this letter?
5. How does considering this letter help you understand that Scripture is the word of God in human words?

#### The Letter to Philemon

1. In what sense is this document a public letter?
2. How would you characterize Onesimus: as a runaway slave seeking refuge with his old friend Paul? or as a slave seeking Paul as a mediator for reconciliation with his master Philemon?

3. How would you characterize Paul’s primary intentions in writing this letter: to secure Onesimus’s safe reception by Philemon? to attain Onesimus’s early release so as to help Paul in the mission? or something else?
4. How has Paul become Onesimus’s “father”?
5. What do you make of Paul’s wordplay (punning) in this letter?
6. Why does Paul not simply preach the abolition of slavery in this letter?
7. Paul’s letter implies that we owe a special debt of love to any fellow Christian, no matter what their social status. How does that challenge you today regarding your relationships to fellow church members?

#### Introduction to the Letter to the Philippians

1. How does the understanding that Philippi was a Roman colony, and thus a city ruled by the laws of the city of Rome, help us hear more accurately the words of Paul as they were heard by the Christian residents of Philippi?
2. Does the Roman preoccupation with “pecking order”—the social hierarchy of Philippi’s society—remind you of anything parallel in the structure of North American culture today?
3. In what ways was slavery in the first-century Roman Empire similar to slavery in European and American history, and in what ways was it different?
4. How did some scholars come to see this letter as a kind of patchwork of several letters?
5. What insights have recently led scholars to see the letter as an organized whole?

#### Paul in Chains at Peace with His Lot (Philippians 1)

1. In light of the colonial situation of his addressees and the thrust of the Christ hymn in chapter 2, what is the significance of Paul identifying himself and Timothy as “slaves of Christ Jesus”?
2. The thanksgiving passage (vv. 3–11) is filled with implications about the relationships between Paul and the congregation he founded. How does his language reflect the ideal church relationships of any time, including those in your own faith community?
3. In verses 15–18 Paul finds comfort even in fellow Christians preaching the gospel out of rivalry. Do you see a parallel (good work done from imperfect motivation) in your experience of the church today?
4. In verses 18b–26 Paul ponders the possible outcomes of his confinement—execution or freedom. What is

the source of his remarkable equanimity? How do you understand his statement, “For to me life is Christ and death is gain” (v. 21)? What does this say about his expectation regarding life after death?

5. In verse 28, Paul tells the Philippian Christians that their ability to stand firm in the face of persecution is proof or evidence of their *salvation* (“and this is God’s doing”). Does this give you a new sense of how one experiences salvation in the ongoing life of faith, even before death?

#### The Best Example of All: The Mind of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2)

1. How does the description of Christian community in verses 1–4 set the reader up to understand the Christ story that follows in verses 5–11?
2. How do we know that Paul means what he says when he asks his readers to imitate the self-emptying of Christ in the incarnation (vv. 5–7a)?
3. When Paul writes that the further self-humiliation of Jesus’ earthy life entailed even death on a cross, the kind of execution Romans reserved for slaves (vv. 7b–8), how would this have been heard in the Roman colony of Philippi?
4. What is Paul’s point when he deliberately echoes language from Isaiah 45:23 at verse 10 (“every knee should bend . . . and every tongue confess”)?
5. What is Paul’s point in saying that the one who took on the form of a slave was given the name of *Lord*?
6. What happens when you hear “work out your [plural] salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12) with full awareness of the context in this passage? How does a *community* work out its salvation?
7. In what ways do Paul’s descriptions of Timothy and Epaphroditus present them as examples of the “mind of Christ”?

#### Paul’s Own Exemplary Experience (Philippians 3)

1. In 3:1b–11 Paul appears to belittle his accomplishments as a professional practitioner of his Jewish tradition. Yet that is not his point. He mentions his “zeal” and his “righteousness based on the law” only to say that, however much these achievements are good, his coming to know Jesus as his Messiah and Lord is far greater. Can you say the same of your own discovery of Jesus as your Messiah and Lord? If not, why not?
2. Paul writes of knowing Jesus and “the power of his resurrection” already in this life (i.e., long before his own anticipated resurrection from the dead, vv.

- 11–12). How has he shown in chapter 1 the ways in which he knows the power of Jesus' resurrection?
- In verses 12–16 Paul describes his gradual growth in Christian maturity with the metaphor of running in a race toward a goal. Does this image help you understand your own growth as a disciple of Christ? How is your Christian story like an extended marathon?
  - Paul writes: "Join with others in being imitators of me, brothers, and observe those who thus conduct themselves according to the model you have in us" (v. 18). We imitate models whose way of living attracts us. They can be family members, friends, or saints we read about. Who has been such a model of faith in your life?
  - In a Roman colony, where Roman citizenship was highly prized, how would the readers hear Paul's statement: "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 20)? Does that help you think about what it means to be a "faithful citizen" in your state or nation today?

### Instructions for the Community (Philippians 4)

- Paul exhorts two women leaders of the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche, to reconcile their differences. How is this message a lesson for church life today?
- You might summarize verses 4–9 like this: Rejoice, be thankful, accentuate the positive! How is this more than putting on rose-colored glasses?
- When Paul says, "I have learned, in whatever situation I find myself, to be self-sufficient" (v. 11), how is this something more than stoicism? Hint: re-read verse 13.
- Paul seems to be thanking the Philippian church for financial aid that they have sent to him (vv. 15–19). Does financial charity play an important part in your faith life?

### Introduction to the Letter to the Colossians

- Scholars who question Paul's authorship of the letter to the Colossians point to vocabulary not typical of Paul's undisputed letters, a "realized" eschatology, and an uncritical acceptance of the institution of slavery seen as inconsistent with Paul's treatment of slavery elsewhere. Is there a way of explaining these features that is compatible with Pauline authorship?
- Do you agree that Ephesus is a reasonable guess as the place from which Paul writes this letter?
- Given the summary description of the "philosophy" given in the introduction, can you think of anything in North American culture that presents a similar challenge to Christian life and faith?

### Paul Reflects on the Reality That the Lycus Valley Churches Share with Him and Timothy (Colossians 1)

- In his grateful reference to the vitality of the faith, hope, and love already evident in the Colossians, Paul stresses that this is all a grace of God that they had received through the ministry of their founder, Paul's delegate Epaphras. How does this way of speaking prepare the way for his point that they do not need the addition of the new-fangled "philosophy" that some fellow Christians urge them to take on?

- What is the value of recognizing that the so-called "hymn" of verses 15–20 is really an extension of a thought that begins in verse 12 regarding the action of the Father working through the beloved Son?
- Given the point of Paul's letter (assuring the Colossians of Jesus' absolute sovereignty), what is the persuasive value of celebrating the eternal Son as the agent of both the original creation of the world and also of the new redeemed creation? How does this poem address their anxiety about full protection against cosmic evil powers?
- If Paul is teaching that Christ is fully sufficient as the means of reconciliation and peace, what does Paul mean by saying "in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ" (v. 24)?
- In this first chapter of the letter, Paul has shown how the Colossians' experience of the gospel fits into the big picture of God's original creation (through the eternal Son) and then the new creation (through the incarnate and risen Son), and then the ministries of Epaphras and Paul. How does this cosmic worldview speak to the addressees' concerns about finding security in a threatening world?
- How does this cosmic picture speak to your own concerns?

### Paul Warns against an "Empty, Seductive Philosophy" (Colossians 2)

- The exponents of the false "philosophy" seem to feel that they have discovered a "value-added" version of Christianity. Paul asserts that, in fact, this way of life is a distraction from and counter to authentic Christian faith. Do you see modern examples of this kind of distraction in today's culture?
- Note that Paul is not dismissing philosophy (i.e., systematic natural reasoning). Catholic teaching has long insisted on the compatibility between faith and reason. Can you think of examples of Church teaching that employ reason to develop the authentic understanding of God's revelation?
- In verses 11–15 Paul uses four images to illustrate the radically new life they have begun in baptism: spiritual circumcision, being raised with Christ from spiritual death, the cancellation of the "debt" of past sins, and divine "triumph" over the principalities and powers (synonymous with the "elemental powers"). Which of these images do you find the most encouraging regarding the "new beginning" you have found in Christ?
- The exponents of the "philosophy" disqualify the Colossian Christians by claiming that they fail to properly appreciate laws regarding food and drink, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths (which sound like Jewish practices). The community is also faulted for not valuing angel worship, practices of self-abasement, and visions. What are these critics missing, according to Paul?
- To motivate his readers not to submit to these human traditions, Paul reminds them, "You died with Christ to the elemental powers of the world" (v. 20). What does he mean by this? Do you find this liberating? How so?
- Paul critiques the "philosophy" that threatens Christian faith as a false wisdom, whereas the Colossian converts already learned true Christian wisdom when they were first evangelized by Epaphras. How would you summarize your best understanding of authentic Christian wisdom?

### The Elements of True Christian Wisdom (Colossians 3:1–4:1)

- When Paul says, "Think of what is above, not of what is on earth" (v. 2), does he mean that Christians are not to be involved in earthly matters like raising children and making a living? If not, what does he mean?
- Even though Paul can praise the Colossian Christians for being models of faith, hope, and love (1:4–5) who share in Christ's fullness (2:10) and have "put on a new self" (3:10), he can scold them with statements like "stop lying to one another" (2:9). Is Paul being inconsistent?
- Ponder Paul's statement: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (3:16). What does this statement imply? Does it give you a new understanding of the place of singing in Christian worship?
- In verse 11 Paul writes that in the body of Christ, "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free . . ." How, then, can he instruct slaves to "obey their masters in everything," implying that master-slave roles continue in the Christian community? Hint: read the language of 3:22–4:1 carefully, keeping in mind that the Greek word for both "Lord" and "master" is the same—*kyrios*. Is there any reason for thinking that the author of the letter to Philemon could not have written these verses?

### Final Remarks (Colossians 4:2–18)

- Listen carefully to Paul's instructions: "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you know how you should respond to each one" (vv. 5–6). What would it mean for you to act in this way in your current circumstances?
- Paul speaks of Tychicus as a "trustworthy minister and fellow slave in the Lord" (v. 7), language he had also used of Epaphras (1:7; and see 4:12). In a letter in which he had declared "Here there cannot be . . . circumcision and uncircumcision . . . slave and free" (3:11), what does it mean for him to refer to each of these co-workers as "fellow slave"?
- And also given that statement in 3:11, why is it important for Paul to single out Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus as being "of the circumcision"? Is the implication that, although they are Jews, they affirm Paul's message that the Gentile converts of Colossae need not be preoccupied with food laws, festivals, or Sabbath?
- The passing reference to "Nympha and to the church in her house" (v. 15) points to yet another woman who is a leader of a house church. Can you think of other references in Paul's letters to female church leaders?
- The first half of the final verse of the letter reads, "The greeting is in my own hand, Paul's." How might this statement be important for the discussion regarding the issue of Paul's authorship of this letter?
- When you review this letter as a whole, how would you summarize its significance for the life and mission of the Church today?