



COLOSSIANS

A ST. JOHN'S BIBLE STUDY

Welcome to Colossians

Colossians is a deeply encouraging book! The Apostle Paul writes to a young church so “that their hearts may be encouraged” (2:2). Though Paul had never met them, the letter is full of thankfulness and joy for the faith and love the Colossians have for Christ and his body, the church. But even more, Paul is thankful for the treasures that are theirs in Christ. Paul’s key reason for writing to them is to assure them of these treasures so that they will grow deeper in Christ.

“In Christ”: no phrase better sums up the message of this lovely letter. Paul is keen that all of the Colossians understand the fullness and freedom of life in Christ; “for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him.” At the center of this book is a glorious vision of the greatness of Jesus. He is the reason for and ruler of all creation, and of the church, his new creation. In him we are saved, and in him we are transformed. The reason why Paul is so concerned to keep the Colossians rooted in Christ, is because he has heard from his friend Epaphras that there are people in the Colossian church who are deluding believers with clever arguments. In their desire to grow deeper in spiritual experience and wisdom, and to put off sinful ways, they are under threat of being taken captive all over again by observing empty practices that undercut what has already been accomplished in Christ.

The encouraging news is that true transformation comes only from our connection to Christ, and this way of growing is not apart from Christ by some new trick or practice, but by going

deeper in him. This is the key to ongoing transformation and is true for ALL Christians, for Christ “is all and in all” (3:11). The writing team of these studies has been praying that you will be deeply encouraged and that “you will be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him and growing in the knowledge of God” (1:9-10). God bless you as you study this marvelous letter!

THEMES TO WATCH FOR:

Encouragement.

This is a letter written to new Christians spurring them on towards continuing in a faith that is rooted in Christ, and firm in its trust of his grace.

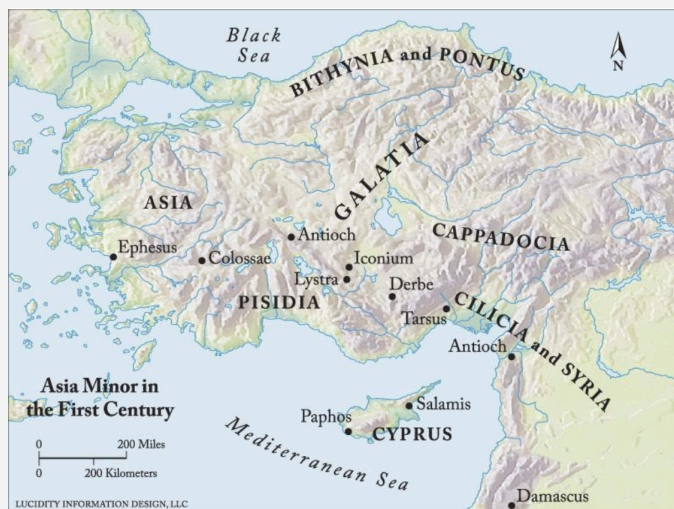
Warning.

This church is feeling the allure of special religious practices which contradict the person and work of Christ.

Supremacy.

The absolute supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ is both the main source of Paul’s encouragement and also the argument for the Colossians to remain faithful and disregard the new teachings.

WHERE'S COLOSSAE?!



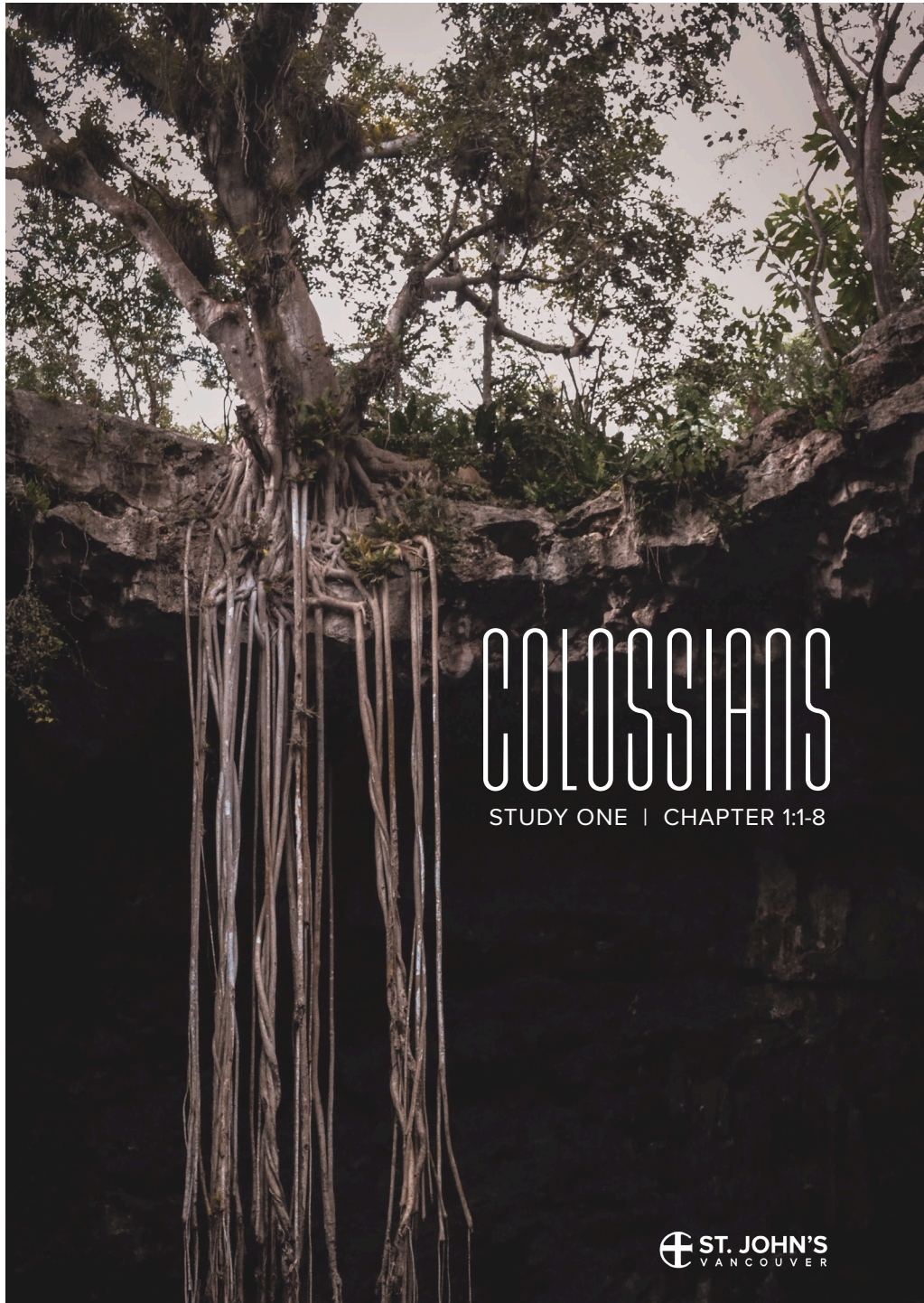
Colossae was a smaller city in the Lycus valley, along with Laodicea and Hierapolis, which Paul mentions in 4:13 (not shown on the map). It is possible that these churches were started by some of Paul's students in Asia Minor (Acts 19:8-10). Colossae remained a significant city during the Byzantine Empire, and was eventually destroyed during the Turk and Mongol invasions.

SPECIAL THANKS

The bulk of this study guide was written by our Artizo interns. They put in massive amounts of work throughout the early summer to help get us into Colossians this fall, so that here in this letter, we might hear what Christ is saying to his Church. Thanks in alphabetical order to Andrew Buchanan, Katy Der, Tom Douce, Lucy Li, Willie Shain-Ross, and Emma Song-Carillo. Special thanks to Tom and Willie for their additional editorial acumen in sharpening and shaping these wonderful studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Before phones and the Internet, letter writing was one of the most significant ways to have a long-distance relationship. This genre of letter-writing (epistle) is well documented in the ancient world, and offers an invaluable glimpse into everyday life. The relationship we see here is between the apostle Paul and a group of new Christians. While Paul is in prison, he has received news about this church from his friend Epaphras and he has decided to write a letter to them. Full of affection and concern, he introduces himself to the believers in Colossae (whom he likely has never met before), and grounds their relationship in the relationship they share in Christ.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

What does Paul include in his greeting to the Colossians?

Who is Epaphras and what is his relationship with the Colossians ?
(See 4:12-13 also.)

What do we learn about the Church of Colossae from this passage?
Why is Paul thankful?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- › Repetitions
- › Transition words (but, therefore, if, etc.)
- › Images/metaphors
- › Commands
- › Warnings
- › Contrasts
- › Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- › Big Bible Words
- › Themes from the book
- › Are there any unfamiliar terms or concepts? (See the Study Notes for help with this)

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- › What is the tone of the passage?
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- › What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Read Galatians 1:6-10 and Philippians 1:3-11. How do they compare with Paul's opening lines here? What is the tone of the Colossian introduction?

What is the nature of Paul's relationship with the Colossians (2:1-5)? Why do you think he is writing this letter?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what's the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

Paul an apostle...

The title of “apostle” was meant for those whom Jesus had specially chosen (Luke 6:13). Paul is making a very important claim about his spiritual authority here.

...and Timothy our brother...

Timothy was Paul’s protégé and companion. If Paul himself wasn’t visiting a church he would often send Timothy. Another fellow worker with Paul was Epaphras, who is mentioned in v.7 of this passage, and also in 4:12. He may have been responsible for helping start the church at Colossae.

...to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae...

The city of Colossae is part of a three town cluster at a major crossroads in Ancient Turkey, alongside Hierapolis and Laodicea. The recipients of this letter were probably Gentile Christians, living in a highly religious pagan environment.

...Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Most ancient letters began exactly as Paul’s did: (1) identify the writer, (2) identify the intended audience, (3) give a greeting.

“Grace to you, and peace” is how Paul often begins his letters. He combines the typical Hellenic greeting (grace) with the standard Hebrew greeting (peace) to remind the Colossians of the rich fullness of God’s welcome in Christ.

1:6 “Bearing fruit” is an extremely common image within the Bible, both as a symbol of life and blessing from God.

- In the Old Testament for example: Gen 1:28, Psa 1:3, Jer 11:16.
- Fruitfulness, or the lack thereof, is also a major theme of Jesus’ teaching, e.g., Matt 7:16, Mark 11:14, John 15.
- Paul also uses this metaphor quite regularly, e.g., Rom 6:21, Gal 5:22, Phil 1:11
- Note here though, it is the “word of truth” that is bearing fruit and multiplying in the whole world. In the book of Acts 13: 24 Luke speaks of the word of God “increasing and multiplying” as the Gospel is preached, and despite all obstacles, grows and brings life. This is the same reality Paul has seen in the Colossian church.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

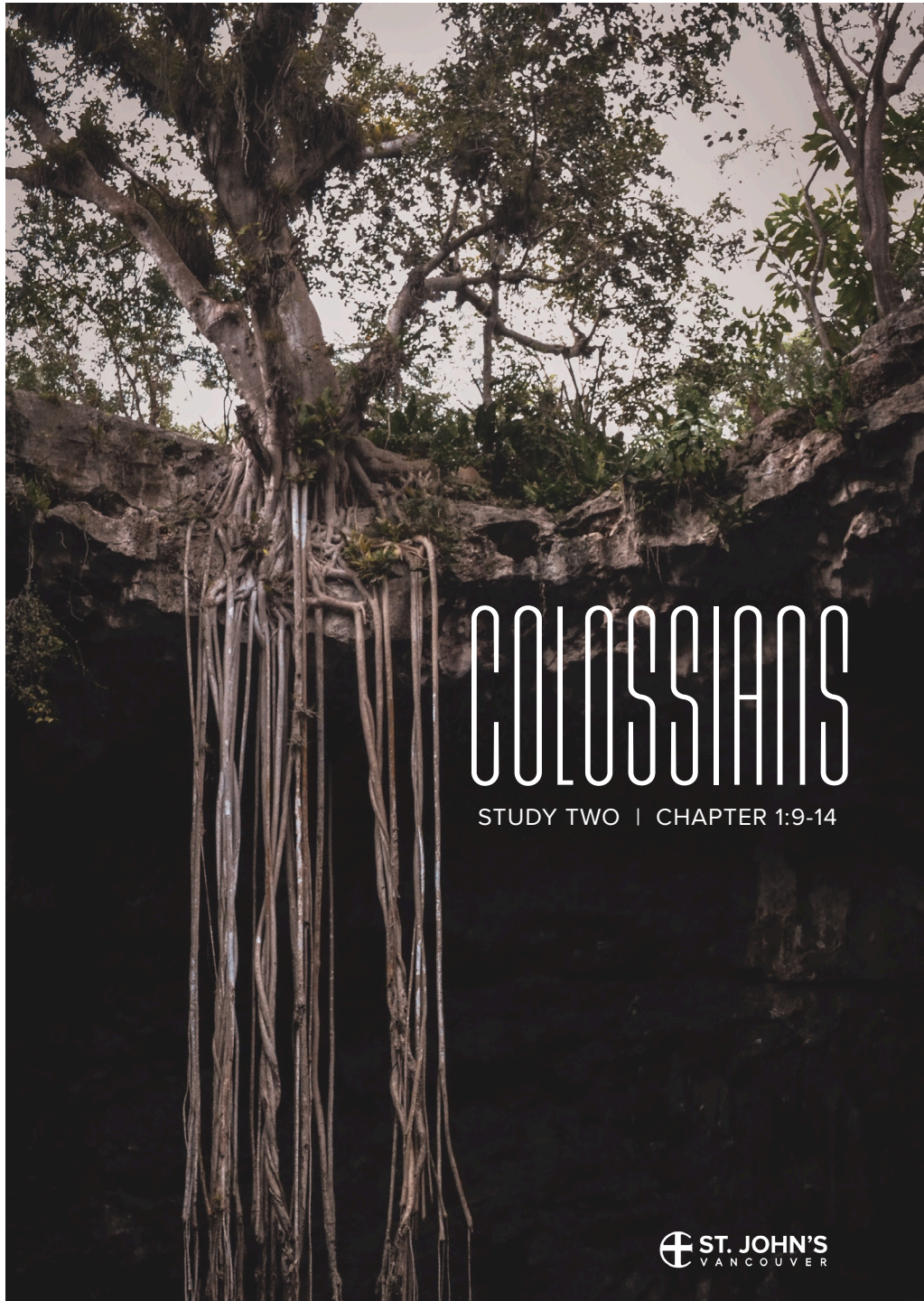
In this passage, faith and love spring from the hope that God has in store for us (v.5). How does this hope encourage our faith and love?

What does this passage tell us about the Gospel?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

How do you see the power and fruit of the Gospel at work in your life, in your group, and in the Church?

What do you hope for in your group's time together in Colossians? Pray for these things.



INTRODUCTION

In last week's passage, Paul thanked God for the faith and love of the Colossian church.. Deeply moved by the fruit of the Gospel in their lives, Paul turns to pray for them in today's passage. His prayer begins to develop some of the major themes of the letter and paints a picture of the maturity and life in Christ that Paul wants to cultivate in the Colossians. While Paul's prayer for spiritual maturity may be grounded in some of the specific problems identified in the Colossian church, it is also an excellent model for our own prayer life. How are we transformed by Christ? How do we endure amidst the challenges of life? Some of these questions which are at the centre of this letter find the beginning of their answers here in this prayer.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

How would you divide this passage? Following the verbs in their past, present, future tense may be helpful.

For what specific outcomes does Paul pray on behalf of the Colossians?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

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Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Why do you think the letter begins with prayer?

What are Paul's concerns and goals in this prayer? What would the church look like if these prayers were fulfilled?

Vv.13-14 transition from Paul's supplication and intercession to praise, and lead into the next passage (1:15-23). How do these verses help us to understand the prayer as a whole?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
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- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

1:9 “that you may be filled...” Fullness and richness are key ideas in Colossians. See 1:19, 24; 2:9-10; 3:16 for example.

1:9 “...with spiritual wisdom.” Spiritual wisdom is another important theme in Colossians and is directly related to the Colossian temptation to follow other teachings which claim to offer special insights into the life of faith. See 1:28, 2:4, and 2:20-23 in particular. Paul wants the Colossians to understand very clearly that wisdom is found in Christ, and in Christ alone.

1:10 “bearing fruit in every good work...” We’ve seen the idea of fruitfulness already but here is refers to the believers themselves. Refer back to last week’s study.

1:12 “the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints of light” Paul is keen to stress that it is by God’s will, through the person and work of Christ, that the Colossians have been considered worthy of being in relationship with him, joining all the other saints. With that relationship comes the inheritance of everything belonging to the Son of God, now being the inheritance of those who belong to the kingdom of that same Son.

1:13 “He has delivered us...” This language recalls God’s rescue of Israel first from slavery in Egypt and then from cap-

tivity in Babylon. Paul envisions humanity outside of Christ as being helplessly within the “domain of darkness”, under the evil rule of Satan (see Eph. 2:1-3, 6:11). Believers are rescued from this world order (Gal. 1:4) and brought under the dominion and protection of Jesus. The image of light is appropriate here, for Paul elsewhere speaks of the light of the Gospel shining in the darkness and penetrating the blindness of those who are perishing (2 Cor 3:15,4:4-6;6:14; Eph 5:8-14, Phil 2:15; 1 Thess 5:5).

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

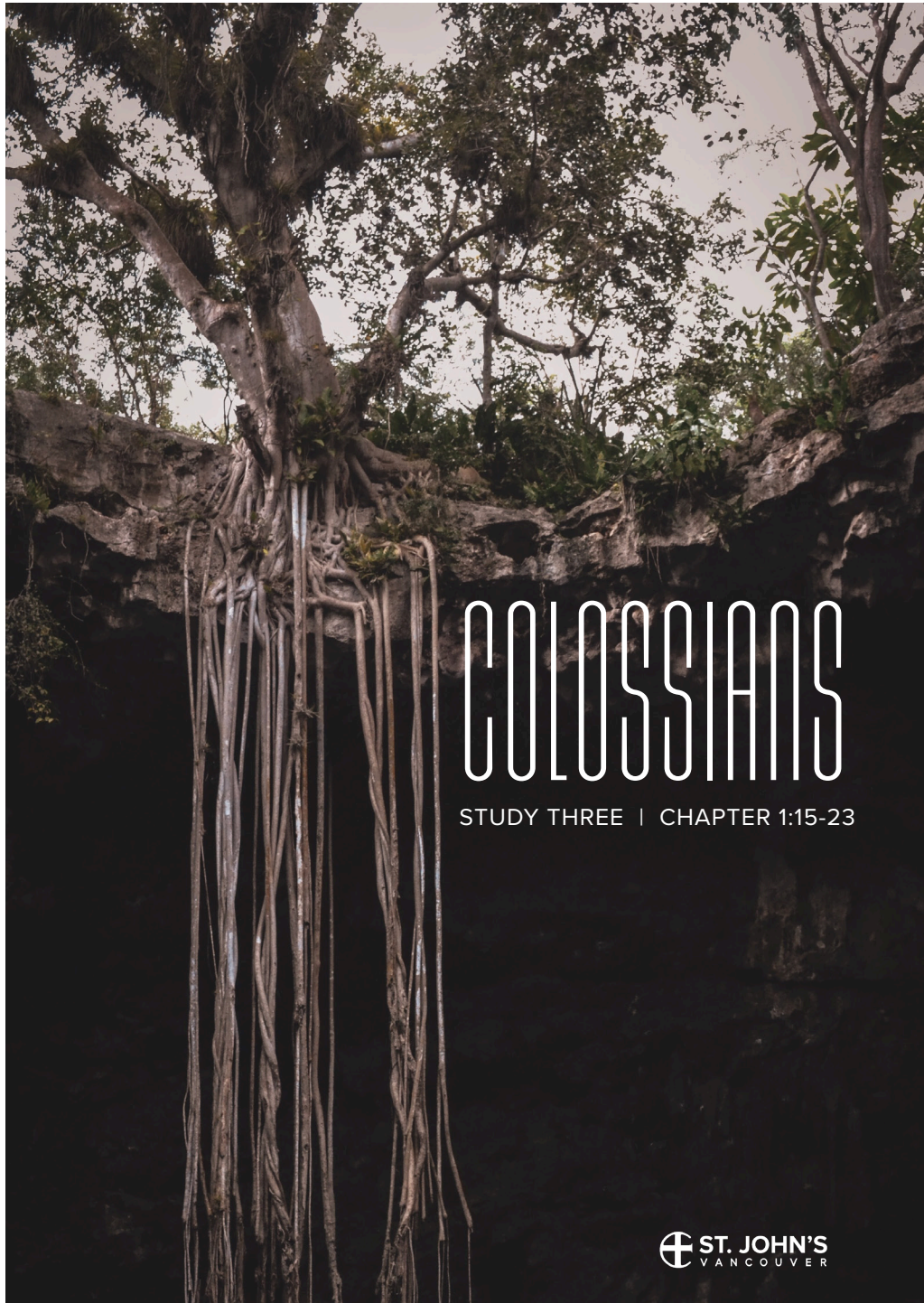
What does this prayer reveal about what God wants to do in us? What does this prayer reveal about how God does this in us?

What imagery is used to describe salvation vv.12-13? What does it reveal about our life in Christ?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

In your own story, how have you experienced being “delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom”?

Paul prays for the Colossians, indicating that it is God who ultimately does the work of spiritual transformation in us. What desires, behaviours or actions might you ask God to be working on in you with regards to walking “in a manner worthy of the Lord”?



INTRODUCTION

“When people are big and God is small” would not be a bad title for the letter to the Colossians, or, more accurately, “when people are big and Christ is small.” The troubles in the Colossians’ church appear to stem from an inadequate view of Jesus. This means, practically, that they do not believe that Christ is sufficient to transform their lives, and they have no assurance about their identity and place in the plan of God.

To redress this, Paul gives us in vv. 15-20 one of the most astounding pieces of writing about Christ and his majesty. Full of Old Testament allusions, and beautifully structured around the two occurrences of “He is “ in v.15 and v.18, this passage is thought by some scholars to be an ancient hymn already in circulation amongst the early church and quoted here by Paul. It must be remembered, however, that the high theology here is included not just for its own sake but to immerse the believers in all the wonder, worship and wisdom of God in such a way, that they may “live lives worthy of the Lord”.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

How many different descriptions of Jesus do you find?

Prepositions (in, through, for, by, etc.) are a big part of this passage. What prepositions are connected to Christ?

How would you divide up this passage? Why?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

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Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed



2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Read 1:1-14 and 1:24-29. What do these verses add to our understanding of what Paul is writing in this passage to the Colossians and why he is writing it?

In v.19 Paul writes “In Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”. See also 2:9, and John 1:14-18. What do these descriptions of Christ tell us?

Read Psalm 89:27. What does this teach us about what Paul is saying when he calls Christ the “firstborn”?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
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Ⓑ So what’s the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.



Study Notes

There are a lot of loaded statements in the short little hymn that Paul writes in vv.15-20. Here are a few explanations to help you get started:

1:15 “He is the image of the invisible God.” In Genesis 1:26 God says “Let us make mankind in our image.” In a veiled way, Colossians 1:15 points to the Incarnate Christ as the one who perfectly bears the image of the Father, and also establishes Christ’s pre-existence as the eternal Son of God (See John 1:1-4 as another example). In the Old Testament, God clearly stressed the importance of recognizing that he had never been seen (e.g. Deut 4:12). In Christ, the invisible God has been perfectly revealed!

1:15 “Firstborn of all creation” signifies that Jesus is the heir of all things, and this title speaks of Christ’s supremacy over his creation. It is not that he himself was created (See v.16.), but that he is the goal of creation, and that all of creation belongs to and is fulfilled in him. Psalm 89:27: “I will make my first born the highest of the kings of all the earth.”

1:18 “He is the beginning, firstborn from the dead” - Because Christ was the first to receive a resurrection body, he is not only the firstborn of all creation, but also the firstborn of all new creation. Everyone who submits to his lordship belongs to him and will follow him into his kingdom, the new creation, the church. Because his death and his resurrection have made all this possi-

ble, he has been made supreme, first in all things- on earth and in heaven!

1:19 “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” - Christ is the person in whom all attributes and activities of God are perfectly displayed. “All the fullness” indicates that, as the perfect image bearer, there was nothing of God’s character that was lacking in Christ. The language of dwelling reminds us of the tabernacle from the Old Testament, where God would descend to be with his people (See also John 1:14) Now, in Christ, the fullness of God is seen and known only in Christ..

Structuring the Passage

Paul structures this section very carefully, and there is some evidence that he is making use of an early Christian confessional statement. Here’s one way to break it down:

vv. 1:15-17: Christ’s supremacy in creation

vv. 1:18-20: Christ’s supremacy in the new creation

vv. 1:21-23: Our full participation in the new creation

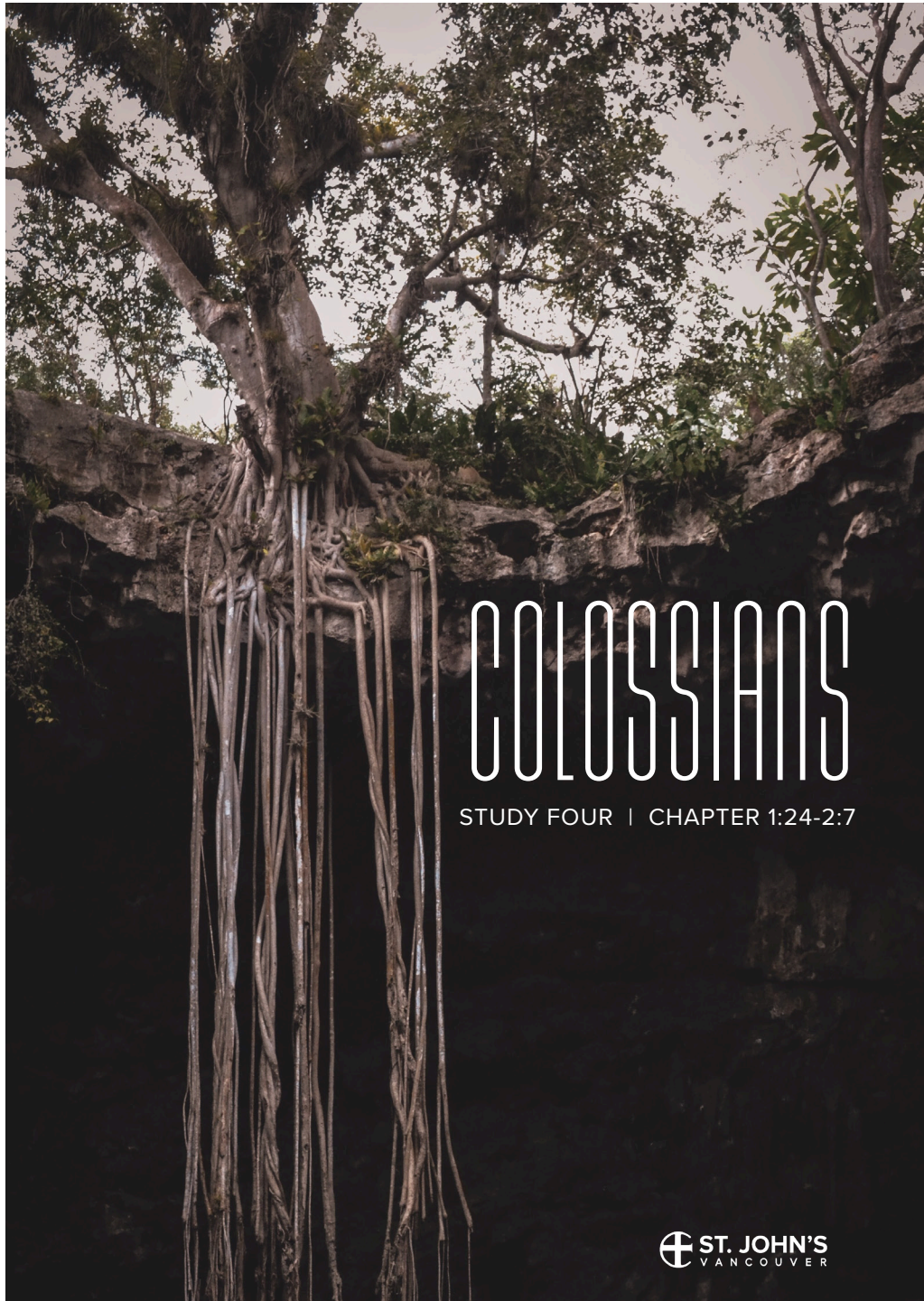
3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

What aspects of who Christ is and what He has done for us are emphasized in this passage?

Why do you think Paul writes this before tackling some of the Colossians' struggles?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

Paul is concerned that the Colossians continue in the faith they started out with. What, if anything, is currently challenging your stability and growth in Christ? If there is nothing currently, share something from your past. How does this vision of Christ help?



INTRODUCTION

After reminding the Colossians of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, "in whom all things were created" (1:16), and through whom all things are recreated (1:21-22), Paul turns his attention to his own ministry for the church. This is the church which is at the centre of God's plan for all things, the Body of which Christ is the Head. In order to assure the Colossians, he expounds on the mysteries of the gospel, the treasures found in Christ, and the hope of glory. By appealing to our bountiful inheritance in Christ, Paul winsomely reminds the Colossians to stand firm in this inheritance and calling.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

Make a note of the different terms and “feeling” # words Paul uses to describe his ministry.

What images and titles does Paul use to describe Christ in this passage?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

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Ⓑ Look Closely At

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- › What does the structure reveal?
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Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

In the previous passage, Paul described the supremacy of Christ and his reconciling work (1:15-23). What are the ways Paul responds to Christ in his ministry?

In this passage Paul reveals more about why he is writing to the church in Colossae. What are Paul's hopes for the church and for the Christians there? Why is Paul so eager to express his desires for them?

Paul states that the "mystery was hidden for generations" (1:26). What is the "mystery" now revealed? What does Christ's revelation mean for Paul and the rest of the biblical story?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what's the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

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Study Notes

1:24 “I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body...” This is a tricky phrase that deserves a bit of explanation. Paul is not saying that the suffering in his life is somehow perfecting what began with Christ and his work of redemption. Rather, he is pointing out that when he suffers for the sake of the church, he is continuing the ministry which Jesus established with his life, death, and resurrection as the Suffering Servant. Now that Christ has ascended to his throne, all Christians, including Paul, continue Christ’s ministry, and participate in its completion by suffering for his sake.

1:26-27 The word “mystery” appears several times in this passage. From the Greek *mysterion*, it describes how God’s redemptive plan for humanity was kept hidden in God until it was fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The typical meaning of mystery is one of the reasons that Paul uses the word here, because in the Roman Empire at this time underground groups who practiced a “mystery religion” were quite common. These groups behaved as elite secretive clubs, and prided themselves in teaching special knowledge to a select few. It is quite possible that the Colossians were falling under the sway of this mindset, being tempted to act as though they belonged to a club with special practices and hidden knowledge. The word “mystery” does not mean that God’s redemptive plan is still hidden from us, quite the opposite: the mystery has been plainly revealed in Christ! (2:3). Paul writes more about this “mystery” in Ephesians 3:3-8

1:27 The phrase “in Christ,” or “in him,” is a key component of the letter, occurring thirteen times. Paul wants to emphasize how our life and identity as Christians is completely united with our Lord. The “Christ in you” of 1:27 describes a related reality of our faith: when we are in Christ, Christ is also in us. It highlights the deep relationship Jesus has with all believers. We are intimately joined to Christ, united to him and drawing all our life from him. He is not Christ “over there” but Christ is in us and we are in him. And understanding and living in this truth, is the key to stability, joy and maturity as Paul will spell out in the next part of his letter.

1:28 Glory is an important attribute of God, signifying his awesome and utter transcendence over the created world. Paul will use this word again in 3:4: “When Christ who is your life appears, then you will appear with him in glory.” In the Old Testament, glory carries connotations of weight or privilege or overwhelming splendour. In the New Testament glory has a similar meaning, but is more focused on the idea of radiant splendour.

2:1 “those at Laodicea...” Laodicea was a sister church of Colossae.

2:6 “rooted, and built up...and established in faith” is a beautiful image of life in Christ. Though these words occur only here in the New Testament, they recall to mind the image of a healthy tree (Psa 1) or vine (John 15). The idea of being established and built up is also common in the New Testament: e.g. Matt 7:24-27; Eph 2:20-22; 1 Pet 2:5. Paul desires that the Christians grow deeper into Christ and become stable and steadfast.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

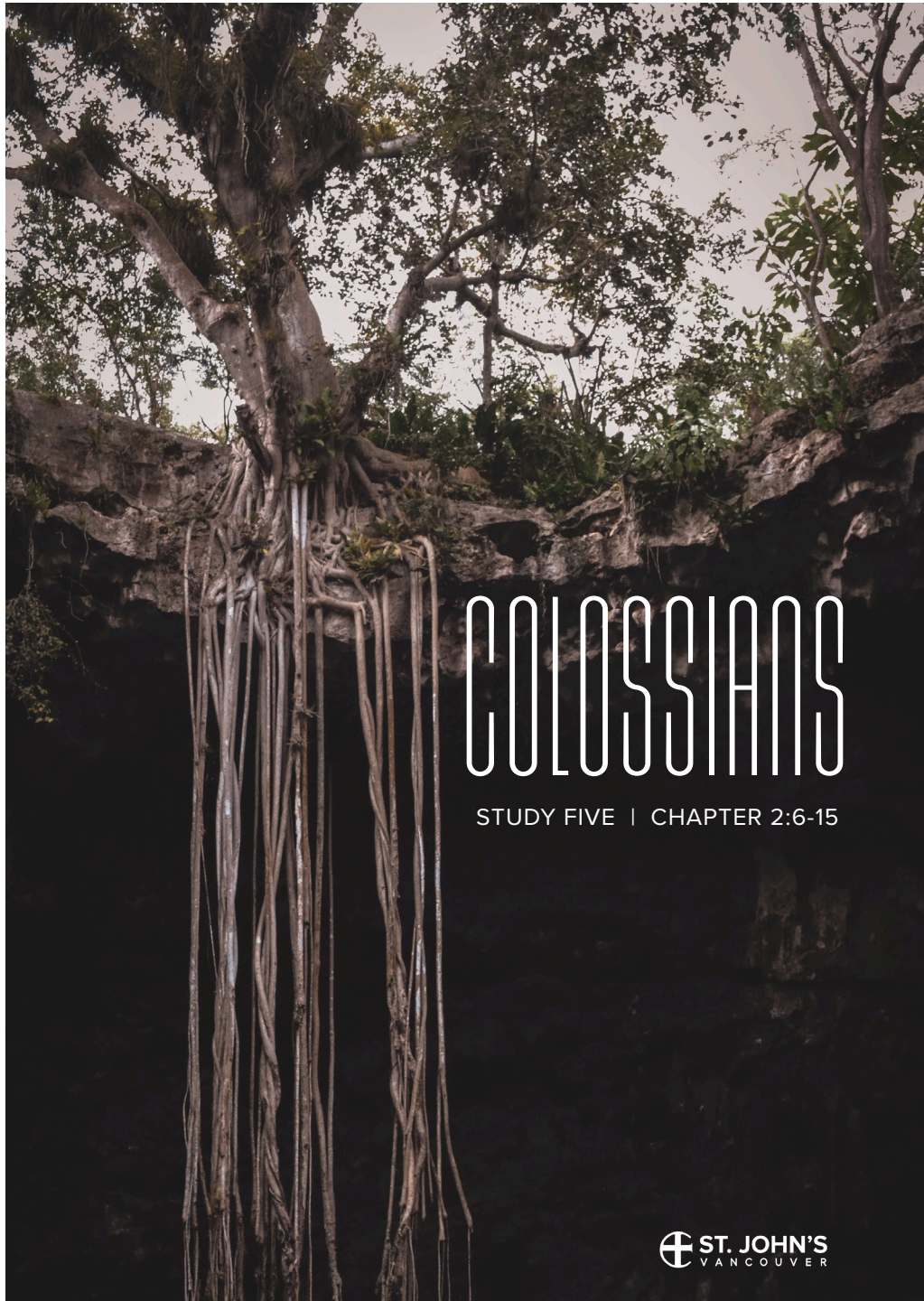
What does this passage tell us about Christ? How does this passage show the transforming power of Christ?

In 1:27, Paul uses the phrase “Christ in you”. Paul uses this imagery of being in Christ throughout this book. What does this reveal about Christ’s relationship to his people?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

Paul uses the words ‘riches’ and ‘treasure’ to describe Christ. How can these descriptions encourage you today and throughout your week?

The imagery of roots expresses an active way of growth. As a tree matures, the roots actively grow deeper into the ground so that the tree may continue to mature and bear fruit. What are ways you could actively grow deeper in Christ this week?



INTRODUCTION

In this passage we begin to get a clearer picture of the reason Paul is writing. Paul is concerned that the Colossian church is in danger of falling into spiritual captivity by submitting to false teaching, which he openly states in vv.4 and 8 of this chapter. He will continue to elaborate on this danger throughout the letter, but here in this passage, instead of directly attacking specific aspects of the false teaching, he points the Colossians to the tremendous reality of being “in Christ”, and he urges them not to return to their old way of living. Instead, these Christians simply need to take hold of what is now theirs through Christ.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

What verb tenses (past, present, future) does Paul use in this passage?

Take note of every mention of someone/something in opposition to Him.

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

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2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Why does Paul now emphasize that “in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily?”

Paul uses several images to show how we are united to Christ. What does each one reveal about this union?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

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- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
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- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

2:6. “Therefore walk...” Describing the life of faith as a path, or a way of walking, is a common metaphor in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament (e.g. Deut 19:9; Psa 119:3; Mic 6:8). Jesus also picks up on this metaphor with some of his parables (e.g. Matt 7:13-14), and in John 14:6 teaches us that he himself is the way.

“...just as you were taught.” Receiving and passing on God’s revelation to his people is a crucial idea throughout Scripture (e.g. Deut 6:7; 2 Tim 2:1-2). Paul exhorts the Colossians to continue in what (and in whom) they were taught, because what they have received is more than mere human traditions (2:8).

2:10 “Rule and authority” came up earlier in the letter when Paul spoke about all thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities being created by Christ (1:16). The term probably refers to angelic powers which many thought ruled the nations of the world. It is not entirely clear in the letter, but this idea is somehow connected to the false teaching the Colossian Christians have heard, to which Paul is responding. We get another reference to the issue with the false worship of angels in 2:18. The precise nature of these dominions and authorities is never spelled out, but Paul is clear that Christ rules over all of them.

2:11–12. Circumcision is a Jewish ceremony that signifies initiation into the old covenant, according to Genesis 17:10-13. It is still practised among observant Jews. Paul makes an important connection in these verses between circumcision and bap-

tism. To quote Charles Spurgeon: “The Jew boasts that he is a circumcised man, but you have spiritually all that circumcision meant literally. Even though you have not wounded your flesh, you have more than that, for you have the death of the flesh and your very flesh has been buried with Christ. All that circumcision can possibly mean you have in Christ.”

2:13–14. Under the old system of the law, the people of God had their trespasses (offenses, sins) forgiven when they repented and offered sacrifices on the annual Day of Atonement at the Temple (Lev 16:29-30). Paul’s point is that this is done away with through Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. The complete sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice is also a major theme in the book of Hebrews (Heb 10:1-18). Previously, Gentiles, outside the nation of Israel, could not participate in these ceremonies of atonement, but because of Christ the entire system is fulfilled and superseded. All are welcome to be forgiven.

2:15 Here Paul is making reference to a ceremony that would have been well known in Colossae, in order to paint a vivid picture of Christ’s victory over the powers of darkness. A common tactic in the Roman Empire, when an army returned to the city after victorious combat, was to parade the conquered leaders in front of the people. This both shamed the opposition and bolstered the people’s identity with the empire that was protecting them.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

What do vv.9-12 emphasize about the Gospel?

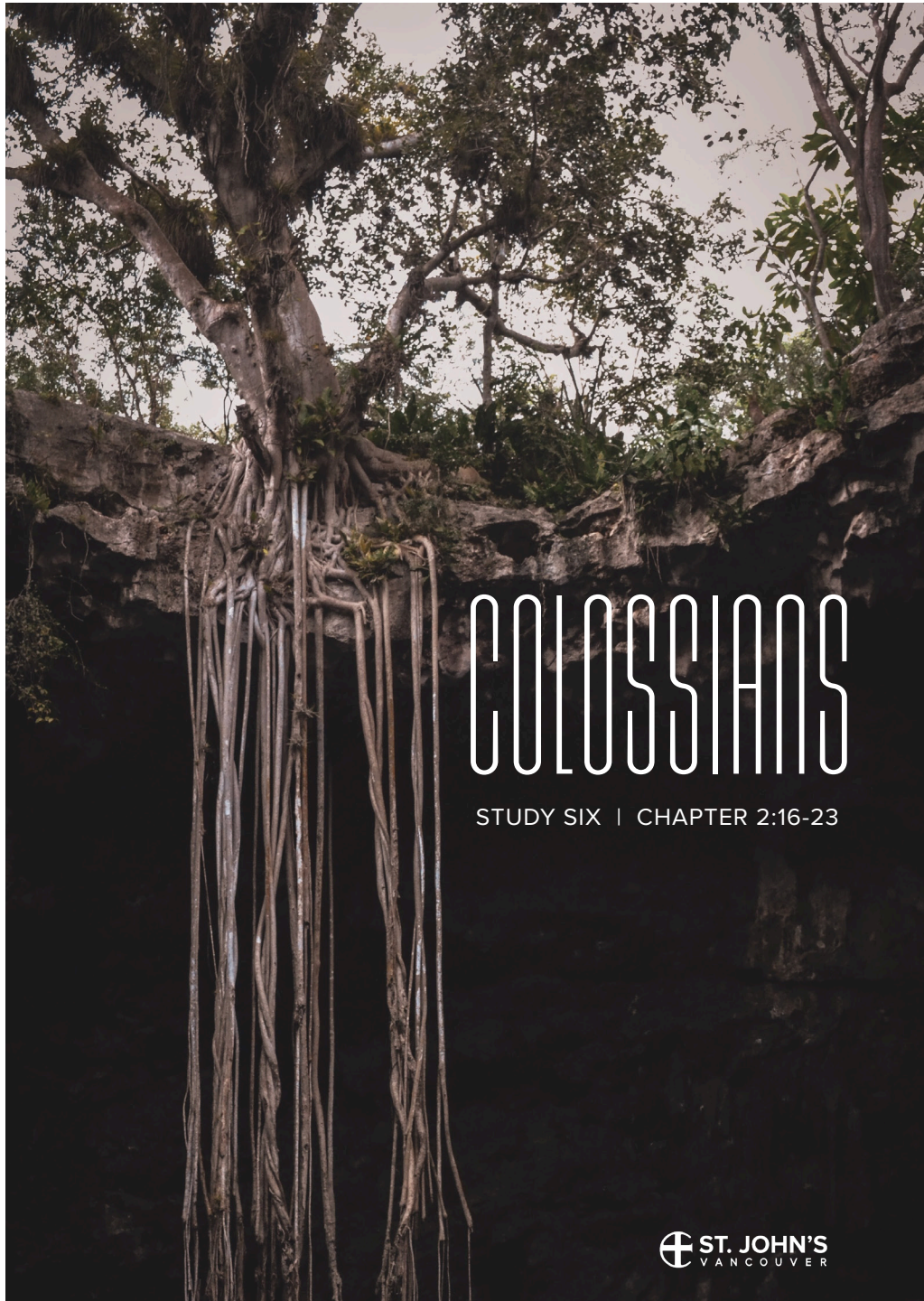
What do vv.13-15 emphasize about the Gospel?

How do these two sections above relate to each other?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

How might you be captive to something other than Christ?

How does knowing that you have been filled with all the fullness of Christ (v.10) transform and encourage you?



INTRODUCTION

As Colossians has progressed, Paul has warned about the “plausible arguments” (2:4) and “philosophy” (2:8) that pose a danger to the church in Colossae. The passages from last week and this week (that is, 2:6-23) form one argument against the danger. The Colossians, keen to grow and deal with the effects of daily sin and temptation, are being tricked into practices that have an “appearance of wisdom” in tackling such problems. In last week’s passage Paul emphasized the deep spirituality of believers’ union with Christ, who is supreme and victorious over all powers. The wonder and wisdom of being in Christ far outstrips any competing wisdom and eliminates any need for “Christ plus” practices to deal with the “indulgence of the flesh”. In this week’s passage, Paul makes a more direct attack on the other “wisdom” that poses a danger to the Colossians.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

What imagery or metaphors does Paul use in this passage?

What contrast(s) is Paul making...

- In vv.16-17?
- In vv.18-19?
- In vv.20-23?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- › Repetitions
- › Transition words (but, therefore, if, etc.)
- › Images/metaphors
- › Commands
- › Warnings
- › Contrasts
- › Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- › Big Bible Words
- › Themes from the book
- › Are there any unfamiliar terms or concepts? (See the Study Notes for help with this)

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- › What is the tone of the passage?
- › Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- › Create a heading or picture for each section
- › Note key verses
- › What does the structure reveal?
- › What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed



2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

How do the following themes connect our passage to earlier verses?

- Wisdom (vv.3, 8, 23)
- Death & life (vv.12-13, 20)
- Authority (vv.10, 15, 16, 19-22)

In light of these and any other connections you have seen, why does Paul say “therefore” in v.16?

What is the danger of the philosophy (or philosophies) discussed in the passage? (There may be more than one thing.) What is Paul’s answer to it?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what’s the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

2:16 “...in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” These are Jewish observances taken from the Old Testament law. Leviticus 11 gives us a major collection of Jewish dietary laws. The observance of particular festivals is laid out in Leviticus 23-25, Numbers 28-29, and Deuteronomy 15-16. The issue of whether or not Christians had to observe Jewish dietary laws was settled at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, but other issues of food and drink occasionally crop up, e.g. Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8.

2:18 “...insisting on asceticism.” Practices of physical self-denial were common in the ancient Hellenic world, especially amongst groups which took a dim view of the physical world, like the gnostics. These ascetic practices could also incorporate themselves into various pagan religions, and many people used fasting or other forms of physical discipline to seek spiritual power or to induce a revelatory experience. This fits well with the end of the verse, where Paul warns against people pursuing “visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.”

2:18 “...worship of angels...” Scholars aren’t certain what this points to. The grammar can mean either worshipping/venerating angels or joining angels in the worship that they do. Refer to the comment on 2:10 in Study 5 for a bit more information about the supernatural elements in this chapter.

2:20 “you died to the elemental spirits of this world...” This

term can mean several things, and it is not clear which is intended in our passage. It could refer to personified forces of nature, to spirit beings, or (more commonly) to elementary/basic principles, i.e., in a secular sense of the word. Paul also mentioned elemental spirits briefly in 2:8, where they are linked to empty philosophies that have nothing to do with Christ. It is worth noting that Christ also died to these elemental spirits in his crucifixion and resurrection, so at the very least we can say that Paul is trying to make a distinction between pre- and post-resurrection life.

What exactly is/are the bad idea(s) that Paul attacks in Colossians? There isn’t really a consensus among Bible scholars about exactly what religion, sect, or philosophy Paul is fighting against here. It may be a form of Jewish mysticism, Gentile mysticism, or a mystery cult. It seems to contain elements of Judaism heavily influenced by Colossae’s religious culture, which was intense and sometimes frenzied, with a focus on ecstatic experiences. Most likely, it is a mix of all these influences - a syncretistic cultural mix. Because Paul is not specific (there are no false teachers groups named) we are more able to see the reality of the same “type” of religious/cultural mixes that influence us in our own context and may threaten our own stability and joy in Christ.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

Paul talks about “growth that is from God” (v.19). How is this growth different from the “growth” that Paul is critiquing?

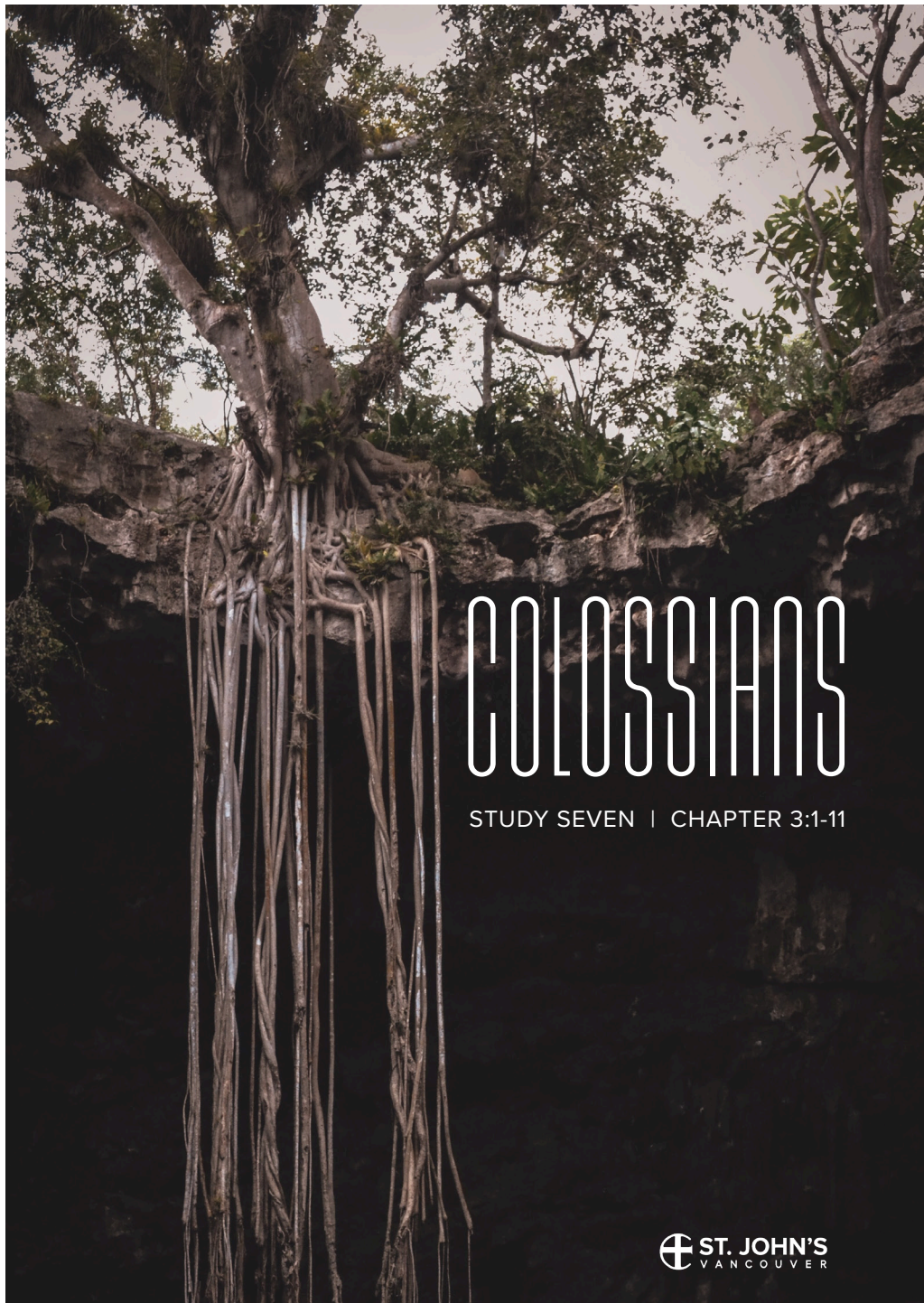
4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

Paul has been concerned that the Colossians might fixate on Jesus-less spiritual practices, experiences, and special insights, and not be fixed on Christ. Reflecting on the big idea of the passage, and your life in Christ:

What are some current ideas in Vancouver that offer wisdom or spiritual experiences, yet which fail to take our connection with Christ seriously enough?

Have you ever sought wisdom or spiritual experiences in such ways?

Given the dangers facing you, what can you do to hold fast to Christ as your head?



INTRODUCTION

Having established the new life that Christ has brought the Colossians into, by dying and being raised with him, Paul lays out some of the trail markers on the path of true growth that God gives. Instead of following teachings which have the appearance of wisdom, Paul wants the Colossians to hold fast to Jesus Christ, the one who alone is the source of life and nourishment in God. In this week's and next week's passages, Paul establishes more clearly what it looks like to be "in Christ", and how this relationship of being "raised with Christ" shapes our daily life and its habits.

This week's passage is focused on the old things that we put to death in Christ. Next week's passage will focus on the new things that we put on in Christ.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

Make a list of the commands and the reasons Pauls gives for them.

Notice contrasting words and commands in this passage. What Paul is emphasizing here?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- › Repetitions
- › Transition words (but, therefore, if, etc.)
- › Images/metaphors
- › Commands
- › Warnings
- › Contrasts
- › Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- › Big Bible Words
- › Themes from the book
- › Are there any unfamiliar terms or concepts? (See the Study Notes for help with this)

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- › What is the tone of the passage?
- › Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- › Create a heading or picture for each section
- › Note key verses
- › What does the structure reveal?
- › What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Reread 2:12-23 to help remind you of the context for this passage. How would you structure this passage? Make note of the “if” in v.1, and “therefore” in v.5.

How should our identity in Christ change our lives ?

In Ephesians 4:20-21 Paul uses the same imagery of “putting off and putting on”. Read that passage and meditate on the image Paul is creating for transformation. How is it different to the way the false teachers were suggesting growth works in Col 2:16-23?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what’s the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

3:1 “If then you have been raised with Christ...” This is striking language! Paul is arguing that all Christians, by virtue of their baptism (2:12-13), are already participating in Christ’s resurrection, even while they await their new resurrection bodies. This is precisely why death is not the final word on our lives. The significance of this reality is discussed by Paul in Romans 6:1-11, Galatians 2:19-20, and perhaps most significantly, 1 Corinthians 15.

3:1 The distinction between “...the things that are above” and “things that are on earth” maintains the contrast Paul has been working at in this letter. Already we’ve seen reference to “the domain of darkness” (1:13), “human tradition” and “elemental spirits of the world” (2:8). These are all part of the system of “things that are on earth” that threaten to take the Colossians captive all over again. All of these things have been overcome by Christ, the one with whom the Colossians “have been raised,” rendering them empty and powerless. The contrast is not between physical and spiritual life (as the false teaching seems to assume), but between a Christ-less and Christ-filled life.

3:5 “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you...” continues the contrast noted above. Translated woodenly from the Greek, Paul exhorts the Colossians to “consider as dead therefore the body parts which are upon the earth.” The image is of an old, Christ-less, self being put to death along with all those things that are passing away because of the victory won by Christ.

There is no place for these destructive behaviours in the new resurrection life of Jesus. The same image is found in Romans 6:6.

3:5-8 “sexual immorality, impurity, passion...” The list of things which are left behind on earth is by no means exhaustive, but serves as a stern example of sinful behaviours. There was a significant problem in the church with sexual immorality during the first century, such that Paul explicitly condemns it on multiple occasions, e.g.: Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 5:11, 6:9; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3 etc. Probably not much has changed!

3:9-10 “put off the old self...and put on the new self...” In the early church it was frequently the case that a candidate for baptism would take off the old clothes they were wearing, and then, after coming up from immersion, would be given a new set of clothes to wear. The new clothes would be white to signify the purity of the new life they had entered. The idea of an old and new self has deep roots in the prophetic expectations of the Old Testament. See for example Ezekiel 18:31. Paul makes use of similar language in 2 Corinthians 5:17. In Christ there is new life!

3:11 “Greek, Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free...” Paul is giving us a list of people who had little in common with each other, and would not typically associate. He makes a similar list in Galatians 3:28. Greeks and Jews were religiously opposed to each other. A barbarian was a person who did not speak Greek and was generally considered uneducated and brutish, outside of human culture. Scythians were an ancient nomadic people inhabiting middle Asia, east of Colossae, and would have been seen as a particular kind of barbarian. We’ll learn more about the distinction between slaves and freemen in Studies 9 and 11.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

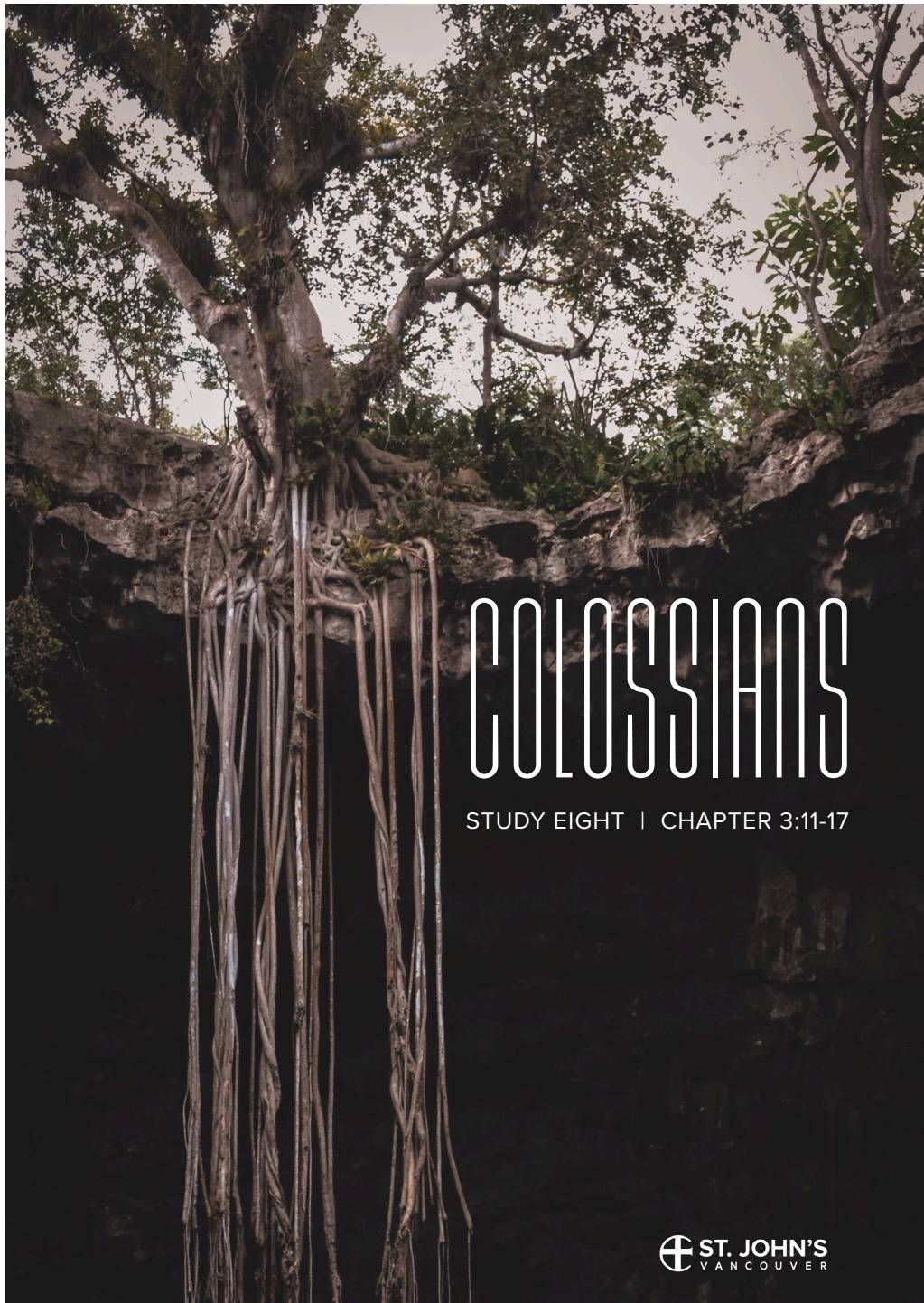
How do the contrasts in this passage help us understand our new reality in Christ?

What does gospel transformation look like in this passage? What unique emphases does this passage bring?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

Paul exhorts us to seek the things that are above, and set our mind on them continually. How do you do this in your life?

In light of our new life with Christ, Paul teaches us to continually put away certain things. Are you currently tempted by, or struggling with any of those mentioned by Paul?



INTRODUCTION

How do we grow as Christians? How do I become more like Christ? What if my Christian life has grown stale and cold? Where is the remedy? Answers to these questions come in the lovely wisdom and encouragement found in this letter. For all people and for all kinds of people the riches of Christ are the same. No one has been short-changed because for everyone, whether “Greek or Jew...” “Christ is ALL and in ALL” (3:6)! This means that new life is possible in Christ because of Christ. Continuing on from last week’s passage, Paul draws out more implications of our being “alive with Christ.” There are things that belong to the “life of death” from which we have been gloriously delivered, that need to “put off” daily and determinedly. In today’s passage, Paul focuses on the positive “putting on” of Christ-like habits, seeking and pursuing him in our day to day. This week however, there is a growing emphasis on our life together in the church.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

What are all the commands in this passage?

How would you describe the tone of this passage?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- › Repetitions
- › Transition words (but, therefore, if, etc.)
- › Images/metaphors
- › Commands
- › Warnings
- › Contrasts
- › Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- › Big Bible Words
- › Themes from the book
- › Are there any unfamiliar terms or concepts? (See the Study Notes for help with this)

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- › What is the tone of the passage?
- › Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- › Create a heading or picture for each section
- › Note key verses
- › What does the structure reveal?
- › What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Is there anything surprising about what resurrection life looks like here? How would you define the different qualities which Paul exhorts us to put on?

In Greek, all of Paul's commands are addressed to a collective audience (not a singular "you"). Make note of the commands specifically about community life. What dimension does this add to our thinking about growth in Christ?

Today's passage is part of a larger section from 3:1-17. How does Paul begin in 3:1-4? How does this relate to today's passage?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what's the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

3:12 “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved...”

Describing the community of faith as holy, chosen, and beloved, goes all the way back to Deuteronomy (Deut 7:6-11), and is how God chooses to describe his people as they enter into covenant with him. Often in the Old Testament, the people were asked to consecrate themselves (e.g. Lev 11:44), but Paul uses the verb “put on” here instead. This is not an insignificant choice, because the consecration has already happened in Christ. To speak of Christians as holy entails an identity: we are worthy to enter the presence of God because of Christ; and a purpose: we are set apart to worship God and serve as his ambassadors on earth.

3:12 “compassionate hearts” translates more literally as “merciful bowels.” Paul’s intent is not to disgust, but to drive home the point that true compassion involves fully empathizing with another person. The Greek verb for “compassion” has the same root as the word above, and is regularly used to describe the reaction which Jesus has when he sees the suffering of the crowds (e.g. Matt 9:36; Mark 9:22). English uses a similar idea when we speak about a “visceral reaction” (our viscera are our guts) which comes from deep within ourselves.

3:13, “one another”, “each other”- Paul has no vision for growth apart from our life together in the body of Christ. The local church itself is the place where the full expression of life in Christ is experienced and learnt and growth in faith and love becomes a reality.

3:13 “as the Lord has forgiven...” This notion of our forgiveness towards others mirroring or imitating God’s forgiveness towards us was an important feature of Jesus’ teaching on earth (e.g. the Lord’s Prayer in Matt 6:9-13), and is also mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 4:32.

3:14 “And above all these put on love.” The centrality of love as the greatest commandment, and as the central aspect of God’s character, is the great theme running through the core of Scripture. When Jesus is asked by a scribe to summarize all the Old Testament law in Matthew 22:36, he responds with Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: love God with everything you are and have, and love your neighbor as yourself. This same reality pops up regularly in Paul’s letters, e.g., Gal 5:6; 1 Cor 13:13; Rom 13:9-10 etc. Out of love come all the other spiritual fruits.

3:15 “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” The Greek verb for “rule” here describes an active process of control. Christ’s peace is not an abstract force, but a governing will, keeping out the chaotic powers of darkness.

3:17 “And whatever you do...” Paul has given us a rich description of life in Christ, but he has no intention of being exhaustive. These lists here in Colossians 3 are not a Code of Rules, but rather a collection of guiding principles to help us live “with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (1:9).

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

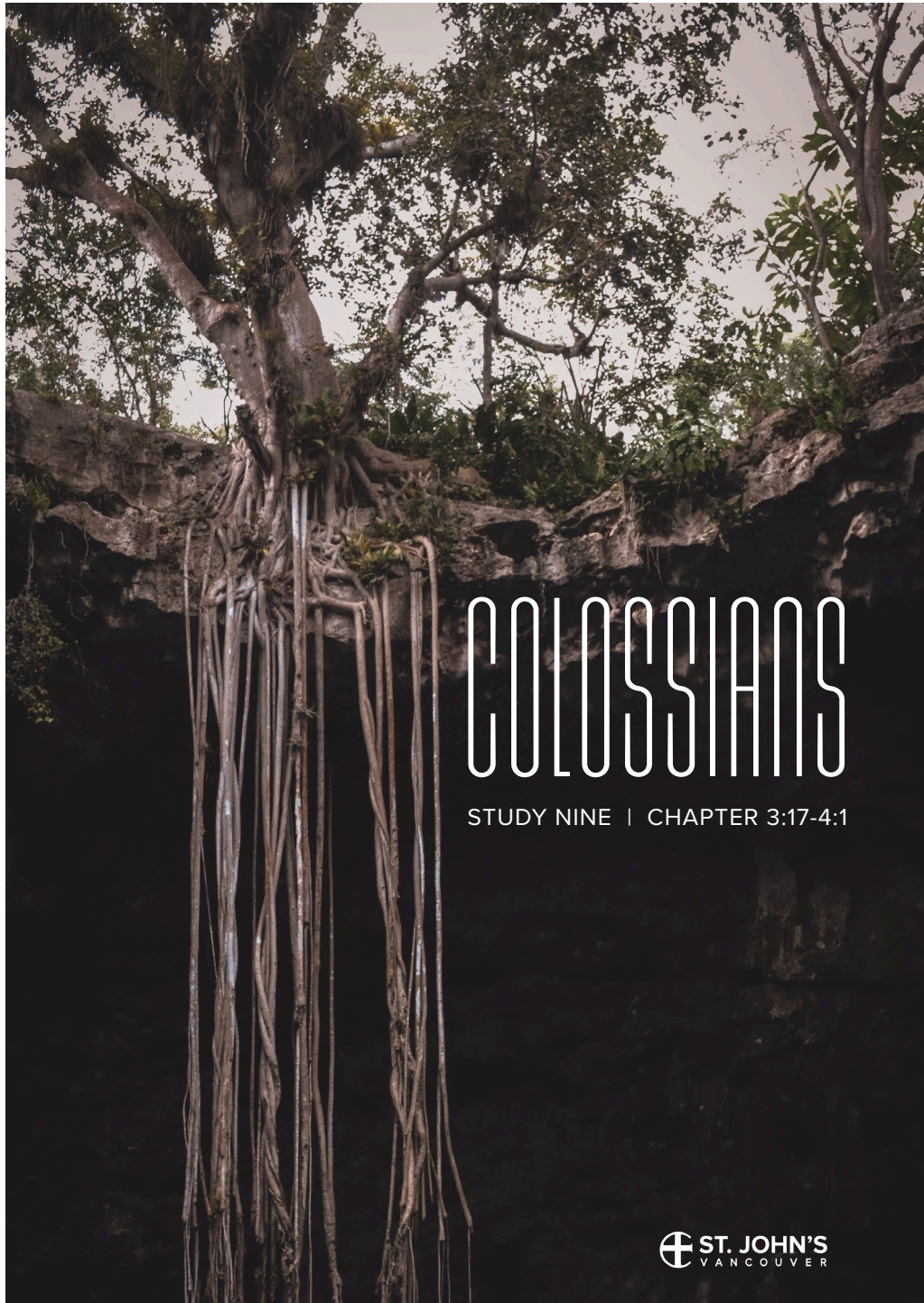
Each command in this passage flows into and out of the other, as Paul describes what it looks like to be “filled in him” (2:10). What does this reveal about Christian behaviour?

Even here, with a list of particular behaviours to “put on,” the reality of our connection to Christ is never far away. What is so important about this?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

How does the dynamic of putting on and putting off habits actually work in your Christian life? Share with others an example of something you are currently seeking to bring under the rule of Christ in your life.

Many of the instructions here are focused specifically on our conduct towards other Christians. What is one thing will you seek to do for your brother or sister “in the name of the Lord Jesus” this week? What is one thing you will do for a friend outside the Church?



INTRODUCTION

Over the last two weeks, our studies in Colossians 3 have centered on Paul's command to "put to death what is earthly" and "put on" the things of God. Chapter 3 continues to put legs to the theology expressed earlier in the book. Today's passage concerns itself with the household and the workplace (see notes). If Christ reigns supreme, His Lordship extends over all our relationships. If we are to live lives submitted to God, we must carefully examine our relationships and "put on Christ" - that is be Christ-like - in all of our dealings.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

What relationships does the passage address and what instructions are given?
Take a moment to list them.

What reasons are given for each instruction?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- › Repetitions
- › Transition words (but, therefore, if, etc.)
- › Images/metaphors
- › Commands
- › Warnings
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- › Are there any unfamiliar terms or concepts? (See the Study Notes for help with this)

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- › What is the tone of the passage?
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- › Create a heading or picture for each section
- › Note key verses
- › What does the structure reveal?
- › What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Paul described our new life in Christ in 3:11-17. In our passage, how does the 'new life in Christ' transform relationships?

Who does the text say we serve as we work (3:22-4:1)? How does this reality change the way we work or serve others?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what's the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

v.18 “Wives, submit to your husbands”. Jesus gives life to a new community of love - the church, His own body. His love also defines the marriage relationship for His people. Paul teaches that the genders are complementary and a man and a woman are equal before God. Yet in marriage, God has called the husband to exercise leadership. This leadership is not absolute, for the husband is not to be followed if he calls his wife to sin. Nevertheless, the husband’s leadership role gives him the initiative in direction his family in glorifying the Lord, to which his wife responds. A Christian wife is called to grateful acceptance of her husband’s care and leadership.

The workplace. Slave/bondservant relationships in the Roman world do not hold a ‘one-to-one’ equivalent with today’s workplace environment and employer/employee relationships. However, the commands toward slaves and bondservants in the New Testament can serve as a helpful guide for Christians in positions of both authority and submission in the workforce today. Hence, the commands for slaves and bondservants have been applied to the workforce for our Bible study setting.

Slavery in the Roman world: Slavery was a key institution of Roman economic life. Slaves held diverse positions and performed a wide range of roles in Roman life. Race did not play any part in it. The situations of slaves in the Roman world varied greatly. Many faced immense brutality while others received education and wielded power over both other slaves and free people.

Household slaves (like Onesimus who we will read about in Philemon) actually tended to have greater social mobility than free peasants. Sometimes free people in difficult circumstances would even sell themselves into slavery in order to improve their lot.

Manumission of slaves (i.e. masters granting them freedom) was very common. However, there was no abolitionist movement, and opposition to slavery in principle was very rare.

Slave-master relationships in New Testament teaching: Some other passages of particular interest concerning slavery are 1 Corinthians 7:20-23, 1 Peter 2:13-25, and (less directly) James 2:1-9 & 5:1-6. Other passages with teaching on the matter include Galatians 3:27-29, Ephesians 6:5-8, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, and Titus 2:9-10.

Distinctions of social position become irrelevant in light of one’s spiritual standing in Christ. Simultaneously, as Paul’s separate instructions to slaves and slaveholders in 3:22-4:1 make clear, unity in Christ does not mandate or imply a uniformity of function or capacity. But it is important to recognize that Christ is all, and in all”. In the Pauline churches, diverse social positions continued to exist and were not subject to a uniform leveling process. Rather they become opportunities for expressing Christ’s love across traditional social boundaries.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

How did Christ exemplify this pattern of authority and submission in His life and ministry? (If you have time read 1 Peter 2:18-23)

How does Christ empower us, His church, to take up positions of authority and submission in a Godly manner?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

Do you think that these commands would have come across as counter-cultural in their original context? Are they counter-cultural today? How so?

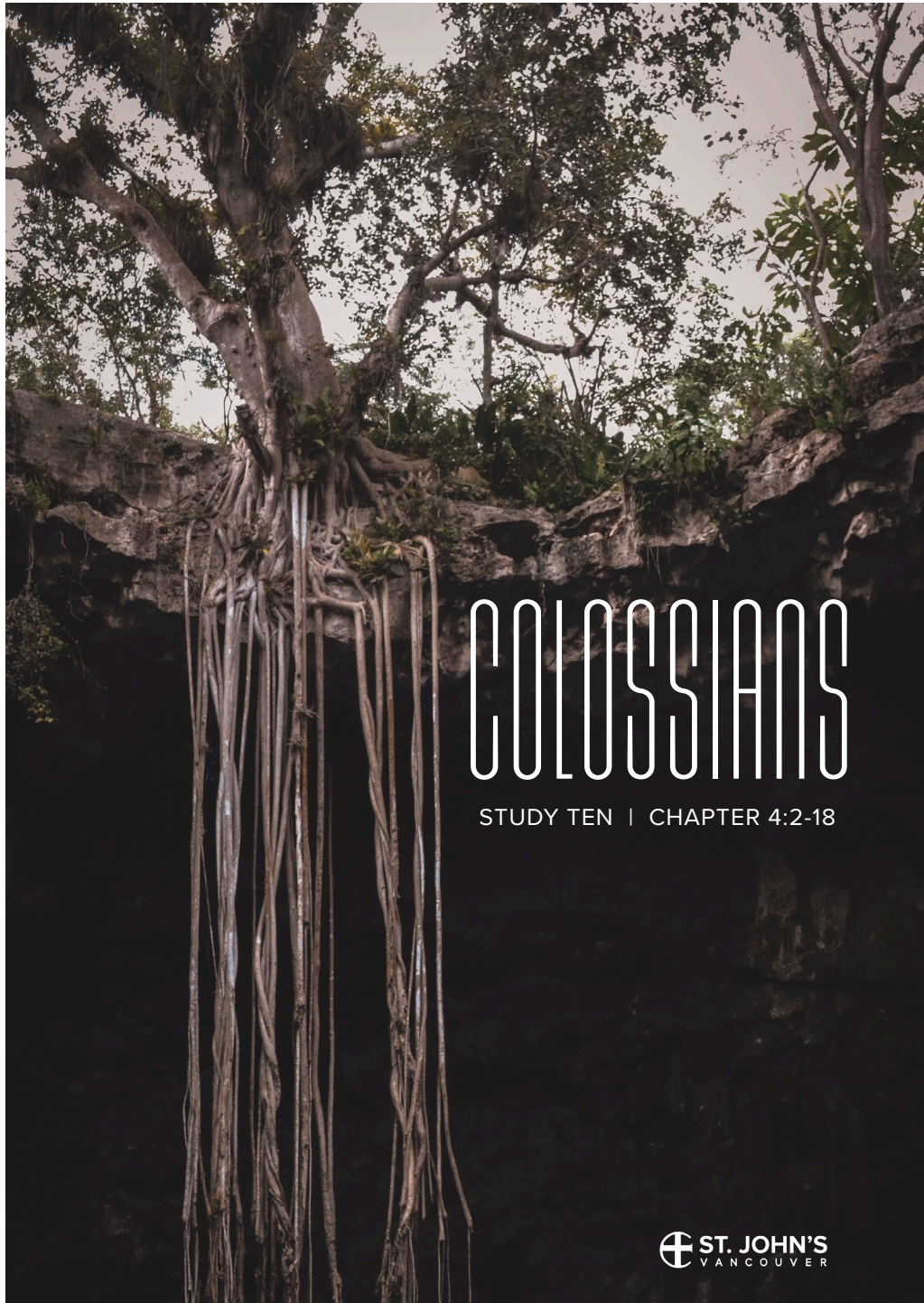
Pick one of the following two questions to focus on as you finish the study.

Work:

Read verses 23 and 24 again. Do you see your work, whether as a person in a position of authority or submission, as “for men” or as “serving the Lord Christ”? How would this shift in perspective affect your attitude toward your work and towards those you work with?

Family:

What would following the commands in verses 18-21 look like for your family? What sort of home environment would you have if your family took to following these commands together? What challenges might you face?



INTRODUCTION

Paul wraps up his letter to the church in this passage, and reminds the Colossians of God's great purposes at work in their midst whatever the circumstances. Even though imprisoned, he doesn't ask them to pray for release, but rather that he would endure in Christ and faithfully proclaim his gospel. He reminds the Colossians to conduct themselves well in public for the sake of that gospel, and he concludes with a stirring encouragement, giving personal examples of how that gospel is bearing fruit and increasing throughout the world (1:6). In Christ, the Colossians are part of God's work in the world!

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Bible Passage

COLOSSIANS 4:2-18

Ask God to help you listen to His voice as you read and study His word.

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer,
being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

3 At the same time, pray also for us,
that God may open to us a door for the word,
to declare the mystery of Christ,
on account of which I am in prison—

4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders,
making the best use of the time.

6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt,
so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities.

He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in
the Lord.

8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose,
that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your
hearts,

9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is
one of you.

They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you,
and Mark the cousin of Barnabas

(concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to
you, welcome him),

11 and Jesus who is called Justus.

These are the only men of the circumcision
among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God,
and they have been a comfort to me.

12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets
you,

always struggling on your behalf in his prayers,
that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard
for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

14 Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.

15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha
and the church in her house.

16 And when this letter has been read among you,
have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans;
and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

17 And say to Archippus,

“See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my
chains.

Grace be with you.



Study Questions

1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

What are the commands Paul gives?

List the names of the people Paul is working with, and how does he describe them?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- › Repetitions
- › Transition words (but, therefore, if, etc.)
- › Images/metaphors
- › Commands
- › Warnings
- › Contrasts
- › Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- › Big Bible Words
- › Themes from the book
- › Are there any unfamiliar terms or concepts? (See the Study Notes for help with this)

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- › What is the tone of the passage?
- › Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- › Create a heading or picture for each section
- › Note key verses
- › What does the structure reveal?
- › What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

What does Paul mean in v.3 by “the Mystery of Christ?” (1:26, 27; 2:2; see notes on Study Four)

Paul is instructing the Colossians to devote themselves to prayer, to declare, answer, speak. Why is Paul concerned with speech towards outsiders? (vv.3-6)

What does Paul reveal about the relationship between prayer and gospel proclamation?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what’s the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

What's In A Name?

There are a lot of names at the end of this letter, and many of these people are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, showcasing Paul's dependence on, and ministry with, the whole body of Christ.

- Tychicus: Acts 20:4; Ephesians 6:21; 2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12.
- Onesimus: a recent convert, who has a central role in the book of Philemon. We'll see him again in Study Eleven!
- Aristarchus: Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2; Philemon 24
- Mark the cousin of Barnabas: Paul had differed with Barnabas, on account of Mark, in Acts 15. Here we see that not only is Paul reconciled with Mark, but recommends him to the churches; a wonderful example of a truly Christian and forgiving spirit. Mark is also mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24.
- Jesus who is called Justus: we don't know anything else about him.
- Luke: the beloved doctor wrote Luke and Acts. He is mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24.
- Demas: he is mentioned in Philemon 24. Unfortunately it appears that he abandoned Paul later in his imprisonment, as we see in 2 Timothy 4:10.
- Archippus: not much is known about Archippus either, although scholarship speculates that he was a son of Philemon. He is also mentioned in Philemon 2.

A Personal Touch

In the final verse of his letter to the Colossians, Paul adds a very personal touch. Apart from this final line, it appears that Paul dictated the letter, perhaps to Timothy, Luke or Mark. This was a common technique in ancient letter writing and would not have been a surprise to his original readers. What would have stood out in this final verse is that Paul personally wrote down the final words.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

Early in the letter, Paul expressed his desire to present the Colossians “mature in Christ” (1:28) and he returns to this idea here at the end of the letter in 4:12, with a note about Epaphras’s prayers. How does this shape our understanding of how the gospel works in our lives? How can this shape your prayers for others?

What does this passage reveal about how God works through the whole church in the proclamation of the gospel?

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

We tend to think of evangelism individualistically. How does this passage impact how you see your role in sharing the gospel with others?

Reflect back on this book of Colossians and share any ways it has strengthened, changed, or deepened your relationship with Christ.



INTRODUCTION

Philemon is a small letter that packs big implications. It's unique in the New Testament for being primarily directed at one recipient, giving us a window into the nature of Paul's relationships. He wrote this letter to a house church in Colossae during the same period when he wrote Colossians, taking the theology of that first letter and powerfully living it out in real relationships. In Colossians, Paul demonstrates how Christ and his work are the key to understanding reality and true power in the universe (e.g. Col 1:15-20), a power which transforms our identities and relationships. One example of this transformation is the relationship between masters and slaves, which Paul also mentioned in Colossians 3:22-4:1. His letter to Philemon goes one step further in working out how the gospel applies to life: we see Paul helping a specific master (Philemon) and a specific slave (Onesimus, also mentioned in Colossians 4:9) live out a relationship transformed by the gospel. The letter is full of affection and warmth. As you read, notice just how tactful and indirect Paul has chosen to be in this delicate situation, even while remaining crystal clear in his theology.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

- Bible Passage
- Study Notes + Study Questions
- Prayer

Study Questions

WHAT DOES IT SAY?

Who are the people mentioned in this letter? How are they described?

Are there any other repeated words or themes that you notice?

STUDY TIPS

Step 1. What does it say?

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- › Repetitions
- › Transition words (but, therefore, if, etc.)
- › Images/metaphors
- › Commands
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- › Create a heading or picture for each section
- › Note key verses
- › What does the structure reveal?
- › What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ Share with the group something you noticed

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Read Colossians 3:12-4:1. How does Paul apply the teachings from Colossians in the letter to Philemon? What is Paul asking Philemon to do in this letter?

(vv.14, 17-18)

In verse 21, Paul tactfully suggests Philemon will “do even more than I say”. What do you think the “even more” might be, and why? Why might it be challenging for Philemon to do this?

Note that a church meets in Philemon’s household (v.1). What could the implications be for Philemon’s community?

STUDY TIPS

Step 2. What does it mean?

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and that follows straight after.
- How does this impact how we understand our passage?
- Are there any other passages of Scripture that are relevant? (See Study Notes for help with this).

Ⓑ So what’s the main idea of the passage? Share your thoughts with the group.

Ⓒ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has already revealed to you, and ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly, and love him more deeply, through the next steps of your study.

Study Notes

A Few Things Worth Noting

V.1: Paul could have emphasized his authority by introducing himself as an apostle (see Col 1:1). Instead, he introduces himself as a prisoner. This emphasizes his weakness and lowliness by worldly standards and his sacrifice for the gospel. Notice how Paul repeatedly brings up his status of being a prisoner in vv.9, 10, 13, and 23. As well, throughout the letter, there is great emphasis on the family relationships that connect people together “in Christ”.

V.6: Although today we often use “sharing your faith” to mean having evangelistic conversations, Paul probably means something different. Here, “sharing” probably means the kind of sharing that happens when someone is generous. Paul often uses this word for “sharing” (koinonia) to mean partnership or fellowship in the gospel. The words “of your faith” mean that this generosity is an outworking of Philemon’s faith in Christ. Paul is praying that Philemon’s faith would be expressed through being unselfish and open-handed, not because Philemon is virtuous, but because of his union with Christ.

V.9: The term Paul uses for “old man” is elder (presbytes). It does not emphasize being elderly or near the end of life so much as that he should be treated respectfully (and perhaps it may also make some leeway for making extraordinary requests).

V.11: There are two plays on words in this verse, layered on top of each other! First, the meaning of Onesimus’s name is “useful”, so there is a pun about his change in usefulness. Second, “useless” (achrestos) had a similar pronunciation to “Christless” (achristos), highlighting Onesimus’s new identity as a useful person in Christ.

Vv.18-19: Paul’s pledge in verse 19 is legally binding. It could include paying for lost work while Onesimus was gone, paying for replacement labor and/or slave catchers and, finally, replacing anything Onesimus may have stolen from Philemon, such as money to cover his journey.

3. WHAT DOES IT EMPHASIZE ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

In v.6, Paul prays “that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.” Paul made a very similar prayer in Colossians 1:9-12. How do the character and work of Christ show up in this letter? Think especially about how people are reflecting Jesus in their words and actions.

In Colossians 3:11, Paul said “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” Fellowship in Christ is far more significant than any of these divisions that the ancient world used to separate people and to give them identities. In Philemon, how do you see identity in Christ impacting or interacting with human institutions, relationships,

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

List some of the relationships you’re involved in. Think about the power differences and relational conflicts. Is there any way God is calling you let the gospel transform those relationships?
