

Principles of Interpretation – Overview of Colossians

Agenda:

8:45 – 9:10	Check-in, Food	
9:10 – 9:15	Welcome	Kenneth Maresco
9:15 – 10:20	Principles of Interpretation & Overview of Colossians	Don DeVries
10:20 – 10:30	Break	
10:30 – 11:20	Principles of Interpretation & Overview of Colossians	Don DeVries
11:20 – 11:30	Break	
11:30 – 1:00	Leading a CG Bible Study, Q&A	Kevin Rogers

Why is Understanding How to Rightly Interpret God’s Word Important?

1. *Interpretation happens (even if we are not aware of it).*
 - a. Scenario #1: Friend sees you at work or church and says, “How are you doing?”
Scenario #2: Your car is flipped over on the highway and you are trapped inside; the paramedic rushes over and asks, “How are you doing?”
 - b. Someone tells you: “You need to discover the rest of God.” Do you need to discover things about God you don’t know or the kind of rest that only comes from God?
 - c. The same is true as we read God’s word. We are making interpretive decisions every time we read and study God’s Word.
 - i. Gal. 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is *neither male nor female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” – Since all are on equal footing in Christ, does this mean that roles in the home and church have been abolished?
2. *Interpretation matters to God.*
 - a. Jesus saved some His most scathing rebukes for the Scribes and Pharisees – the ones entrusted to interpret, teach and to apply God’s law to His people.

- i. Luke 11:52 “Woe to you lawyers! For you have *taken away the key* of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you *hindered* those who were entering.”
 - b. Our motive should be to be good students of God’s word and learn all that is necessary to enable us to accurately and effectively interpret God’s word.
 - i. 2 Tim. 2:15 “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, *rightly handling* the word of truth.”
- 3. *Accurate interpretation guards us from error and wrong thinking.*
 - a. Most doctrinal errors and heresies come from a wrong thinking and a faulty interpretive grid. (e.g., “faith” movement; universalism; Christ’s sacrifice reinterpreted as divine “child abuse” that was neither a guilt offering nor satisfied the wrath of a holy God; egalitarianism (abolition of roles in the home and church); open theism (God doesn’t know the future and changes his mind, etc.))
- 4. *Accurate interpretation guards us from being captive to the subjective.*
 - a. Unknowingly, and usually unintentionally, our subjective experiences can become more authoritative than Scripture (dreams, prophecy, impressions from the Lord, the Holy Spirit’s, interpretation of Scripture, etc.) I call this “Holy Spirit hermeneutics”. The practice and discipline of mining the treasures of Scripture through sound interpretive principles forces our subjective experiences to be submitted to God’s Word.
- 5. *Accurate interpretation bridges the gaps between the biblical writers and us. (We are separated from the writers by 2000 – 3500 years).*
 - a. Historical Gaps – What is a talent or a denarius? What is a satrap? Who was King Xerxes?
 - b. Cultural Gaps – Why was Peter nervous about eating reptiles and birds (Acts 10) or the Pharisees so upset that Jesus and His disciples didn’t wash their hands before eating (Mark 7)? These were rooted in the laws and practices of what was clean and unclean – an obedient Jew avoided the unclean.
 - c. Literature Gaps – We don’t write letters like Paul or poetry like David or speak oracles of judgment like Isaiah or prophesy like Daniel.
 - d. Geographic Gaps – why were Jesus and His disciples always “going up” to Jerusalem regardless of the direction they are headed?

What is Biblical Interpretation (also called Biblical Hermeneutics)?

1. *Definition: Biblical hermeneutics (from the Greek word hermeneia – interpretation) is the craft (or skill or science) of interpreting the Bible.*
 - a. “Hermeneutics [generally] is the science that teaches us the principles, laws and methods of interpretation.”¹ “Biblical interpretation/hermeneutics” focus on scriptural interpretation.
2. *Biblical interpretation involves two steps:*
 - a. Step 1 – Understanding the passage.
 - i. To understand the passage, you must seek to understand the *original meaning* of the text as it was intended by the *original author* and understood by the *original readers* or hearers. (Exegesis: from the Greek word “ex” – out of, and “*hegeistha*” – “to lead or guide”. Exegesis explains or brings out the meaning of the text.)
 - ii. WARNING: A common mistake is to read into the text something that is not there. That’s called eisogesis: “eis” means “into”; thus “eisogesis” involves making Scripture say what we want it to say instead of allowing Scripture to speak to us.
 - b. Step 2 – Application: applying biblical principles to our lives today.
3. *The Essential Role of The Holy Spirit:* All the principles and methods we talk about must be done in complete dependence on the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is required at all stages of the process.
 - a. The Holy Spirit inspired men to write the words of Scripture.
 - i. 2 Timothy 3:16 “All Scripture is *breathed out by God...*”
 - b. The Holy Spirit is the illuminator of Scripture.
 - i. John 16:13 “When the Spirit of truth comes, *he will guide you into all the truth...*”
 - c. The Holy Spirit is a willing helper to those who study Scripture.
 - i. Kevin DeYoung wrote, “The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures can help us understand them correctly and live them out fully. This step is not a perfunctory ritual; it is the wind in our sails blowing us toward good interpretation. We desperately need the Spirit to give us humble hearts and teachable minds that we might hear God’s voice in the Scriptures.”²

¹ Louis Berkhoff, *Principles of Interpretation*, p. 11.

² Kevin DeYoung, *Freedom and Boundaries*, p.34.

Step #1: Understanding the Passage

Tool #1: Getting the Big Picture

An Overview: In any study process, it is helpful to get an overview of the material before diving into some of the details. The details will make much more sense when you understand the big picture.

To begin to get the big picture, read through the book you are studying many times. As you read it, with paper and pen in hand, ask yourself these kinds of questions to get a general overview of the book and why it was written:³

- a. What do I learn about the author?
- b. What do I learn about the recipients?
- c. Are there any background details – history, politics, geography, or customs – given?
- d. What words, phrases or ideas are repeated?
- e. Why did the author write this book?

1. *Colossians: What do I learn about the author?*

- a. Paul and Timothy are cited as the authors (1:1). Interestingly, the opening thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-14) use the third person “we”. However, beginning in 1:23, Paul uses first person throughout the rest of the letter. And in 4:18, Paul says that he writes “this greeting with my own hand” (from 4:7-18). It is likely that Timothy was with Paul and was Paul’s secretary (“amanuensis”) as the Apostle dictated this letter to him.
- b. Paul wrote this letter from prison (4:3, 18). Paul was imprisoned multiple times – Philippi (overnight), Jerusalem (brief); Ephesus (?), Caesarea (2 yrs.), and Rome (2 yrs.). From which imprisonment did he write this letter? We don’t know, definitely. We do know that Paul wrote 4 letters from prison, 3 to Christians in the same general area and delivered by the same carriers. Tychicus and Onesimus carried 3 letters from Paul to the Colossians (4:7), the Ephesians (Eph. 6:21-22) and to Philemon (v. 11). Most commentators believe Paul wrote all three letters during the same imprisonment and assume it was while he was under house arrest in Rome (Acts 27-28), but there is growing support for these letters being written from Paul’s imprisonment in Ephesus. This would have made the writing of this letter around A.D. 62.

³ Colin Marshall, *Growth Groups*, p. 33-34.

- c. Paul did not plant this church. Instead, this church was birthed through the gospel proclamation of Epaphras, a fellow Colossian (1:6-7). Most commentators speculate that Epaphras was converted during Paul's 3 years stay in Ephesus. Acts 19:10 states, "that *all the residents* of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." Epaphras probably was converted during that time and returned to Colossae to preach the good news of Christ.
- d. Paul had never visited Colossae (2:1). What he knew about the church, the evidences of grace and the concerns about the false teaching, came from Epaphras (1:8) who was with Paul while he was imprisoned (4:12).

2. *Colossians: What do I learn about the recipients?*

- a. The recipients were called "the saints and faithful brothers (or brothers or sisters) at Colossae" (1:2). Epaphras had clearly brought a favorable report because Paul commended them for their love, faith, hope and evident and growing fruit (1:3-6).
- b. Were the recipients Jews or Gentiles? Probably Gentiles. The letter doesn't say, explicitly. But the ways Paul describes the Colossians would lend support that this was a mostly, if not entirely, a Gentile congregation.
 - i. Conversion language: Of their conversion, Paul said that they were "qualified...to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (1:12). They were "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred...to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (1:13). They were also described as "alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." (1:21) and "dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh" (2:13). This kind of conversion language is more applicable to Gentiles who were outside of God's covenant people than to Jews.

As well, these verses sound familiar to passages in Ephesians 2:12 that describe the conversion of Gentiles: "you were at that time *separated* from Christ, *alienated* from the *commonwealth* of Israel and *strangers* to the *covenants of promise*, having no hope and without God in the world."

- ii. Paul's ministry: Paul also spoke of his own ministry that God chose him to make known "how great among the *Gentiles* are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (1:27)". This particular calling was highlighted because it was probably a mostly Gentile audience.
- iii. Former lifestyle: In addition, the sins that they once practiced by the Colossians before they came to Christ – "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness" (3:5) – was more typical of Gentiles than Jews.

- c. Some wrong thinking and practices were causing a drift? It appears that the recipients might have been in danger of drifting away from the centrality of their faith in Christ. “See to it that no one *takes you captive* by philosophy and empty deceit, *according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits* of the world, and *not according to Christ*” (2:8). Several verses (2:8, 2:16-23) appear to be dealing with some wrong ideas and practices being taught some by false teachers.
3. *Colossians: Are there any background details – history, politics, geography, or customs – given?*
- a. False teaching information. The only background given is some details of the false teacher’s philosophy and practices. Because some of the false teaching seemed to include a mixture of pagan (philosophy, asceticism, angel worship) and Jewish practices (observance of holy days, food regulations), it is likely that the city of Colossae had a diverse Jewish and Gentile population.
- b. Secondary Sources. In addition to what is in the letter, commentaries, Bible encyclopedias or study Bibles can provide helpful historical background information. Below are some historical details from some commentaries.
- i. Geography:
1. Colossae was located in the Lycus Valley (Asia Minor) of modern-day Turkey.
 2. Neighbors included Laodicea (12 mi. W), Hierapolis (15 mi. NW) and Ephesus (120 mi. NW). Colossae was close enough to Laodicea to be instructed to send this letter to Laodicea and have the one from the Laodicean church read (one of Paul’s lost letters?).
- ii. Socio-economic:
1. Most important city in its area in 3rd and 4th century B.C. Had declined in importance in Paul’s day.
 2. Principle Industry was a thriving textile industry, known for dark red wool: “Colossian wool”
 3. Wealthy population (like their neighbor Laodicea – “your say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing...” (Rev. 3:17))
 4. Large Jewish settlement in B. C. 213. Jewish population still existed in Paul’s day. (May help explain some of the Jewish elements of the false teaching)
 5. Located on well-traveled east-west highway that brought many different kinds of ethnicities, philosophies and religions to the region. (Also helps us understand some of the elements of the false teaching).

- c. Below is a helpful historical description from Doug Moo's commentary:

“In his classic commentary on the letter, J.B Lightfoot claimed that ‘Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed.’ Colossae has not always been so insignificant a city. Located in the Lycus River valley of west-central Asia Minor, Colossae was apparently the most important city in its vicinity in the fourth and third centuries before Christ. It was known as being the center of a thriving textile industry, to the point that a certain kind of high-quality dark red wool was known as “Colossian wool.” Its prominence was due especially to its location at the crossroads of two well-traveled highways: one that ran east and west, connecting the coastal cities of Ephesus (120 miles to the west) and Sardis with the interior east; and another running north and south. When, however, the latter road was moved west to pass through Laodicea, Colossae began to decline. In Paul’s day it was not as large or important as the neighboring cities of Laodicea (twelve miles to the west) or Hierapolis (fifteen miles northwest). Both these communities also had Christian churches (see Col. 2:1), and Paul wrote a (now lost) letter to the Laodiceans (see Col. 4:26). An earthquake devastated the area sometime in the early 60s. We know that Laodicea was quickly rebuilt (as Tacitus suggests; and see Rev. 3:14-22, probably written in the 90s) and that Colossae eventually was rebuilt also, though we do not know how quickly. The city has been in ruins (which have never been excavated) for centuries.

Geographically, Colossae belonged to the region of Phrygia and in Paul’s day was part of the Roman province of Asia. Its location on an important highway at a time of considerable mobility and the mixing of different ethnic groups that typified the Roman Empire meant that the population of Colossae was very diverse. A majority were undoubtedly Gentile, but we have good reason to think there was also a substantial number of Jews. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III (“the Great”) had settled two thousand Jewish families in the general area in 213 B.C (*Antiquities* 12.3.4). And the Roman man of letters Cicero, in the first century B.C, refers to the Roman seizure of a significant amount of money contributed by Jews in the area to support the Jerusalem Temple (the “temple tax”; see Cicero’s letter *Pro Flacco* 28). The diversity of population and exposure to the latest ideas via travelers on its major highway meant that Colossae was a place where many different religious and philosophical viewpoints thrived and probably mixed together. This diversity helps explain the apparently syncretistic religious movement that was affecting the Colossian Christians and that gave rise to the letter. At the same time, as we will see below, this diversity makes it notoriously difficult to pin down the exact contours of this movement.”⁴

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, pp. 26-27.

4. *Colossians: What words, phrases or ideas are repeated?* In their book on understanding God's word, Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays state, "One of the most critical skills needed in reading the Bible is the ability to see the details. Most of us read the Bible too quickly and we skip over the details of the text. However the meaning of the Bible is intertwined into the details of every sentence. Our first step in understanding a biblical text is the observe as many details as possible."⁵

As I read through Colossians several times, here's the repetition I observed.

- a. "in Christ": ("in/through/from/by him", "in/from whom", "of/according to his"): (1:15-23; 1:27; 2:2-3; 2:6-7; 2:9-15; 3:1-4) – about 65x (read 2:9-15)
 - i. Seems like Paul wants to root this church in their identity in Christ and to make sure they understand that Christ is all sufficient, all-powerful and all they need.
- b. "all": about 17x (e.g., "Christ, in whom are hidden *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3); "Christ is *all* and in *all*" (3:11)) – also: 1:9, 1:11, 1:15-20 (read these verses)
 - i. Christ is supreme, sufficient and preeminent.
- c. "fullness": 2x – "in him all the *fullness* of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19); "in him the whole *fullness* of deity dwells bodily" (2:9)
 - i. All that God is, Christ is.
- d. "knowledge": 5x – "filled with the *knowledge* of his will" (1:9); "increasing in the *knowledge* of God" (1:10); "to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the *knowledge* of God's mystery, which is Christ" (2:2); "in who are hidden all the treasure of wisdom and *knowledge*" (2:3); "being renewed in *knowledge* after the image of its creator" (3:10)
 - i. Could the false teachers be teaching a superior knowledge than what was not found in Christ? Paul wanted to remind them of the source of true knowledge.
- e. "wisdom": 5x – "filled with...all spiritual *wisdom*" (1:9); "Him we proclaim...teaching everyone with all *wisdom*" (1:28); "in who are hidden all the treasure of *wisdom* and knowledge" (2:3); "These have an appearance of *wisdom*...but are of no value" (2:23); "teaching and admonishing one another in all *wisdom*" (3:16)
 - i. The false teachers may have appeared wise but it is wisdom separate from Christ. The Colossians have infinite wisdom in Jesus.
- f. References to spiritual beings: "whether thrones or dominions or *rulers or authorities*" (1:16); "you have been filled in him, who is head of all *rule and authority*" (2:10); "He disarmed the *rulers and authorities* and put them to open

⁵ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Journey Into God's Word, Your Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible*, pp. 23-24.

shame” (2:15); “Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and the worship of *angels*” (2:18)

i. Seemed like Paul wanted to impress on the Colossians that Christ is Lord and Ruler over both human authorities and the unseen demonic rulers and authorities. As well, Paul wants the Colossians to know that the power over death of the forces of darkness was broken at the cross. They are no longer a threat.

g. References to the “gospel” (“reconciliation”, “redemption”, “blood”, “cross”): 1:4-6; 1:18-28; 2:11-15

i. Paul commends them for the good fruit of love and faith borne from receiving and believing the gospel. As well, Paul reminds them of the hope of the gospel that they will stand before the Lord holy and blameless if they persevere and hold fast to the genuine gospel.

h. References to the church (with the accent on Christ being head of the church): “He is head of the *body, the church*” (1:18); “I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’ afflictions for the sake of his *body, that is, the church*” (1:24); “not holding fast the Head, from whom the whole *body*, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.” (2:19); “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one *body.*” (3:15).

i. Once again, these verses point back to the centrality of Jesus. He is the Supreme Head of the church. To him we must cling.

i. Practical instructions for Christian living: to put off sinful practices and put on righteousness (3:5-17). Practical instruction for relationships – husbands and wives (3:18-19), children and parents (3:20-21), slaves and masters (3:22-4:1). Practical instruction for prayer, thanksgiving, wisdom and words (4:2-6).

i. Grace doesn’t just save us, it makes us new creations and transforms our lives at a very practical level to reflect the “image of its creator” (3:10).

5. *Why did the author write this book?*

a. The Bible’s authors wrote their narratives, poems, proverbs, prophecies, gospels or letters with a specific purpose in mind.

i. Sometimes the author’s purpose is explicit:

Luke 1:3 – 4 “it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, *to write an orderly account for you*, most excellent Theophilus, *that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.* (see also John 20:30-31, 1 John 5:13, Gal. 1:6-9)

- ii. Sometimes the author's purpose is more translucent

Judges 21:25 "In those days *there was no king in Israel*. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Ruth 4:13, 17 "So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife...and she bore a son...They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."

- b. Sometimes the author's purpose is completely unclear. In the absence of a purpose, you have to do some detective work and hunt through the book for clues and themes about why this book was written. This is the case for many of Paul's letters, including Colossians.
- c. *Understanding New Testament Letters*: Letter writers in the New Testament are engaged in a long-distance conversation. The letters we possess in the Bible are one side of that conversation. Thus in Colossians, Epaphras (Col. 4:12) has told Paul about this little flock – their faith, their love, their good fruit – and about some concerns he has. Paul's letter to the Colossians is Paul's side of the conversation. The other side of the conversation is the false teacher's. Since we don't have a letter from them telling us what they believe, we have to surmise their teaching and practices from what Paul wrote. (Let's read Col 2:1-4, 8, 16-23)
- d. *Verses that are relatively clear about the author's purpose*:
 - i. The false teachers were teaching a "philosophy" that was nothing but "empty deceit" (2:8). What this philosophy entailed is unclear. However, a philosophy, at least, implies some coherent system of belief. Whatever it was, it is deceptive and hollow.
 - ii. It depends on "human tradition" (2:8).
 - iii. It is "according to the elemental spirits (or principles) of the world, and not according to Christ" (2:8). "Elemental spirits" may refer back human tradition. It may refer to Jewish practices (cf. "elementary principles" in Gal. 4:9-10; Heb.6:1-2) Whatever the meaning, it is "not according to Christ".
 - iv. False teachers were advocating certain food restrictions – "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (2:21) – and observance of particular days – "festival or new moon of a Sabbath...These are the shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (2:16-17). These practices appear rooted in some aspects of Judaism.
 - v. The false teachers were advocating certain ascetic practices, probably fasting (2:18, 23). They were treating their bodies with "severity" trying to stop the indulgences of the flesh.

- vi. The false teachers advocated the “worship of angels” (2:18). We are not altogether certain what this means but 2nd century practices are possible. At that time in Jewish circles, God was regarded as so majestic, holy and transcendent, that angels were revered as mediators between God and man.

But also at that time, a fundamental feature of first-century Hellenistic culture was extreme anxiety about the world and one’s place in it. W.T. Wilson captures this cultural anxiety well:

“It seemed that the universe, in all its vastness and intricacy, was beyond human comprehension or control, being governed instead by a host of wrathful gods and indifferent supernatural powers. Human beings could do little more than struggle against the relentless tide of “Fate.” For them, personal and material insecurity, not to mention moral and spiritual indeterminacy, characterize the human condition, which often amounts to little more than fruitless search for meaning that ends with death and oblivion...

Often abetting this “common core” was the belief that the very fabric of the universe suffered from some sort of irreparable rift. The two fundamental realms of reality that make up the universe, the celestial and terrestrial, are set in opposition to one another on account of some cosmic crisis, variously described...

In response to this unsettled state of affairs, mortals sought some understanding of and access to the supernatural powers that controlled their lives, often via intermediary or demonic beings or through mystical experiences. This would involve discovering some sort of effectual means for appeasing, worshipping, or manipulating these powers in order to obtain a degree of protection or in order to escape the corrupted, terrestrial world, either in this life or the next.”⁶

- vii. The false teachers were proud and made much of their visions (2:18).
- viii. The false teachers claimed to be believers but were not holding fast to Christ (2:19)
- e. *Verses that are less clear about the author’s purpose:*
 - i. The false teachers could have possibly been using the language of “fullness”, seeking to find spiritual fullness through visions and certain practices. Paul counters saying that Christ is the fullness of God in bodily form (1:19, 2:9).

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, p. 59. (Quoted from W.T. Wilson, *The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle of the Colossians*).

- ii. The false teachers could possibly be undermining and denigrating Christ, especially in comparison to other spiritual beings. Fifteen times “all” was used to reference the preeminence of Christ. Sixty-six times, the supremacy and complete sufficiency of Christ is mentioned.

- f. *So what was Paul’s purpose in writing Colossians?* What had probably happened is that some teacher or teachers within the church began advocating a belief system of superior wisdom and knowledge, greater spiritual insight (visions) and superior spiritual fullness. It appeared to have elements of both Judaism and pagan mysticism. Full spiritual life could be obtained through the worship and deification of angels, heavenly visions and certain ascetic and Jewish practices. Christ was not enough. Christ was not preeminent or supreme. Christ could not protect them from the unseen spiritual world. Something else beyond Christ was needed for the fullness of spiritual life.

In his commentary on Colossians, Doug Moo offers the following assessment of why Paul wrote Colossians:

“The false teachers were probably people from within the Colossians Christian community who were bragging of their ability to find ultimate spiritual “fulfillment” via their own program of visions and asceticism. This program was drawn partly from Judaism, particularly in its focus on rules about eating and observing certain days. They were preoccupied with spiritual beings, probably because they viewed them as powerful figures capable of having a significant influence on their lives... The false teachers were appealing to spiritual beings, visions and rules to find security in this very uncertain universe. In doing so, they were questioning the sufficiency of Christ. They may have done so directly, but it is more likely that their questions about Christ were implicit in their approach and that it is Paul who draws out the implications of this “philosophy” for Christology. The false teachers were so preoccupied with their own program for spiritual fullness that they were separating themselves from the only true source of spiritual power: the Lord Jesus Christ, the one in whom God in all his fullness is to be found and the one through whom God has accomplished the reconciliation of the world. Here is the essence of the false teaching: it is “not according to Christ” (2:8)...Any teaching that questions the sufficiency of Christ –not only for ‘initial’ salvation but also for spiritual growth and ultimate salvation from judgment –falls under the massive Christological critique of Colossians.”⁷

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, pp. 59-60.

Tool #2: What is the structure of the book?

1. Since Scripture comes to us as various genres of literature, considering how the author is communicating his thoughts and ideas is very important to interpreting a passage or an entire book accurately. When considering the structure of a passage or a entire book, ask yourself these questions⁸:
 - a. Are there any literary devices that help determine the structure? (bookends, [Matt. 5:3 and 5:10], linking words like “for” / “therefore” (result or consequence); repeated phrases)?
 - b. How has the author broken the material down into sections? (Advice: best to ignore verse, chapter, paragraph breaks and headings)
 - c. How do these sections fit together?
2. *Structure of Colossians*:
 - a. The key verses that frame the content of the entire letter is 2:6-7. The “therefore” in 2:6 is a hinge in the letter that essentially divides the main body of the letter into 2 sections.
 - i. “Therefore just as you *received* Christ Jesus...” points the Colossians back to the own experience of the gospel’s power (1:3-8), to Paul’s prayer to walk worthy of the Lord of this gospel (1:9-13), to the preeminence and supremacy of Christ in creation and redemption (1:15-20), to the hope of the gospel on that final day (1:21-23) and to Paul’s gospel ministry to the Gentiles (1:24-2:5).
 - ii. The “therefore” also points forward. “Therefore, as you received Christ...so *walk in him*, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” Paul has borrowed the word “walk” from the wisdom literature of Proverbs. It connotes a lifestyle, a pattern of life. After confronting and dismantling the deception of the false teacher’s practices and beliefs, Paul emphatically stated that the preeminent and supreme Christ should make a difference in every area and every aspect of our lives – identity, thinking, conduct, words, and relationships.
3. *Outline of Colossians*:
 - I. Greeting (1:1-2)
 - II. “Just as you have received Christ Jesus...(1:3-2:6a)
 - A. The Powerful Gospel of God’s Son (1:3-23)

⁸ Adapted from Nigel Beynon & Andrew Sachs, *Dig Deeper, Tools for Understanding God’s Word*, chapters 4 and 5.

1. Thanksgiving for the gospel's power and fruit in the lives of the Colossians (1:3-7)
 - a. Prayer to grow and walk worthy and pleasing to the Lord (1:8-14)
2. The heart of the gospel: the Supremacy of Christ in creation and redemption (1:15-20)
3. The hope of the gospel: presented holy and blameless before Christ (1:21-23)

B. Paul's Stewardship of the Mystery (1:24-2:5)

1. The mystery made known: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:24-27).
2. Paul's labors to proclaim this mystery, "which is Christ" (1:28-2:5)

III. "So walk in him..." (2:6b-4:6)

A. Of Primary Importance: Remain Centered on and in Christ (2:6-7)

B. The Threat to Remaining Christ-centered: False Teaching (2:8-23)

1. Believer's Identity: Spiritual fullness, union and forgiveness in Christ (2:8-15)
2. The deceptiveness of false teaching and practices (2:16-23)

C. Living a Christ-centered Life (3:1-4:6)

1. Christ-minded and heavenly focused (3:1-4)
2. Put off practices of the "old self" (3:5-11)
3. Put on practices of the "new self" (3:12-17)
4. Christ-honoring relationships (husband/wife; parent/child; master/slave) (3:18-4:1)

D. Instructions about Prayer and Conduct (4:2-6)

IV. Closing and Personal Notes (4:7-18)

A. Paul's Messengers (4:7-9)

B. Greetings from Paul's Companions (4:10-14)

C. Final Instructions and Benediction (4:15-18)

Tool #4: What are the main themes of this book?

1. This is an opportunity to take a step back and consider all that you have observed and ask, what are the main ideas that the author is trying to communicate?
 - a. The key theme of this letter is the centrality and supremacy of Christ over creation and over redemption (1:15-20; 2:9-20)
 - i. Christ is presented as uniquely God – he is the very “image of the invisible God” and “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:19; 2:9). Christ is head of the church (1:18; 2:19) and is “seated at the right hand of God” (3:1). These and other passages display Christ as divine.
 - ii. Christ is also preeminent (“firstborn”) over creation. Christ existed before creation (1:17a) and all things were made by him, through him and for his purposes (1:16). Christ sustains all of creation (1:17). And one day all of creation will be reconciled to himself (1:20).
 - iii. Christ is also supreme over the new creation. In Christ, we have “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:14; 2:13). Through the blood of His cross he has made peace and will one day reconcile all things to himself. (1:20). It is Christ’s physical body that has reconciled the Colossians and it is before him that they will be presented holy and blameless (1:22). On the cross, Christ canceled “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands” (2:14).
 - iv. John Piper wrote, “The sun of God’s glory was made to shine at the center of the solar system of our soul. And when it does, all the planets of our life are held in their proper orbit. But when the sun is displaced, everything flies apart. The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of [Christ] to its flaming, all-attracting place at the center.”⁹
 - v. In the face of Epaphras’ concern that the centrality, supremacy, and preeminence of Christ was being displaced by his fellow Colossians, Paul wrote this letter to place the Son of God’s glory back in the blazing center.
 - b. A second major theme is that Christ is the believers’ all-sufficiency and identity. Christians are united with him in his death, resurrection, new life and his fullness (2:9-14; 3:1-4). In other words, Christ is all they need.
 - i. For believers, Christ’s sufficiency and our identity in him is woven into the fabric of this letter. The Colossians’ faith is in Christ (1:4; 2:4). The kingdom to which they have been transferred is the “kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). Paul’s ministry is empowered by Christ (1:24, 28-29) and the mystery that God has now disclosed is “Christ in you, the hope of glory”. (1:27) or simply “Christ” (2:2). Christ is the one in whom are “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). And believers have been “filled in him” (2:10) and have been “raised with Christ” and are “hidden in him”

⁹ John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, p. 15.

- (3:1-3). Christ is our "life" and we will one day "appear with him in glory" (3:4). We are united with Christ in his death and resurrection in baptism (2:12) and "made alive together with him" (2:14). For the believer, in belief and practice, "Christ is all in all" (3:11).
- ii. Puritan John Flavel once wrote, "Christ [is] the very essence of all delights and pleasures, the very soul and substance of them. As all the rivers are gathered into the ocean...so Christ is that ocean in which all true delights and pleasures meet...His excellencies are pure and unmixed; he is a sea of sweetness without one drop of gall."¹⁰
- c. A third theme is that Christ is Lord over the cosmos and sovereign over every spiritual being (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15).
- i. The "all things" that were created in Christ include "things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" (1:16), a reference, to all spiritual beings. And the "all things" that Christ will one day reconcile include "things...on earth or in heaven" (1:20). As well, Christ is "head of all rule and authority" (2:10), another reference to all spiritual beings. But over demonic forces, Christ has "disarmed the powers and authorities" (2:15), triumphing over them through the cross. Through Christ's death, God has provided for their ultimate subjection. They are defeated powers and hold no sway over believers who belong to their sovereign Lord.
 - ii. "These is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence [or the whole domain of the cosmos] over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" – Abraham Kuyper
- d. A fourth theme is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:3-8; 1:21-27)
- i. The gospel is called the "word of truth" (1:5), the "grace of God in truth" (1:6) and the "word of God" (1:25). The gospel's power has produced the good fruit of "faith in Christ" and "love for all the saints" in the Colossians (1:4) and is "bearing fruit and growing" (1:6) throughout the known world. The gospel also has the power to deliver from the domain of darkness and transfer believers to the "kingdom of his beloved Son" (1:13). It has the power to reconcile to God those who were once "alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." (1:21-22). And the gospel holds out hope that one day we will be presented before Christ "holy and blameless and above reproach" (1:22).
 - ii. Paul was entrusted as a minister this gospel, to make known its mystery, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:2). And for its advancement, Paul asks for prayer for open doors to declare "the mystery of Christ" (4:3).

¹⁰ John Flavel, *The Whole Works of John Flavel*, Volume 2, "Method of Grace", Sermon XII, p. 215.

- e. A fifth theme is that practical Christian living is rooted in Christ (1:18; 2:19; 3:1-4:6).
- i. Spiritual growth does not come about by a rules-oriented lifestyle. This is the very thing the false teachers were promising – ultimate spiritual experiences through the adherence of their man-made rules and human traditions (2:16, 20-23). Spiritual growth and practical Christian living must be rooted in Christ - in relationship and union with him.
 - ii. We must hold fast to Christ, who is the “head” who supplies power and nourishment for growth (2:19). It is by our union “in him”, that the “new self” is “renewed...after the image of its creator” (3:10). In Christ is all “wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). As believers, we have been “filled in him” (2:10), “buried in him...raised in him” (2:12) and are “hidden with Christ in God” (3:3). Because he is our “life” (3:4), we are to set our “minds on the things...above”(3:2).
 - iii. On the basis of our union with Christ, we are to “put to death” the sins and idols of the “old self” (3:5-9) and “put on” the practices of the “new self”(3:10-17) – “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness...patience” (3:12) and the like. Christ is to be honored in our relationships: husbands “love your wives” and wives “submit to your husbands” (3:19-19); children “obey your parents and fathers don’t “provoke your children: to the point of discouragement (3:20-21); and slaves are to obey their earthly masters and masters are to “treat...slaves justly and fairly” (3:22-4:1). Pray with thanksgiving and for gospel advance (4:2-4) and watch your conduct and speech, especially with outsiders (4:5-6). In summary, “and whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the God the Father through him” (3:17).

Tool #4: What is the context?

1. Illustration: “stolen bases...awarded”.
2. *The Bible is literature*. To apply this tool we must read the Bible as literature. It was written with words put together as sentences, combined into a paragraph and joined with other paragraphs to create logical units of thought and logical arguments to convey a message.
 - a. Principle #1: What is the “normal meaning” of the words and sentences?
 - i. The “normal meaning” treats nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, prepositions etc. according to the standard rules of English grammar.
 - ii. Figures of speech (simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification) are interpreted according to their “normal usage” in English grammar.

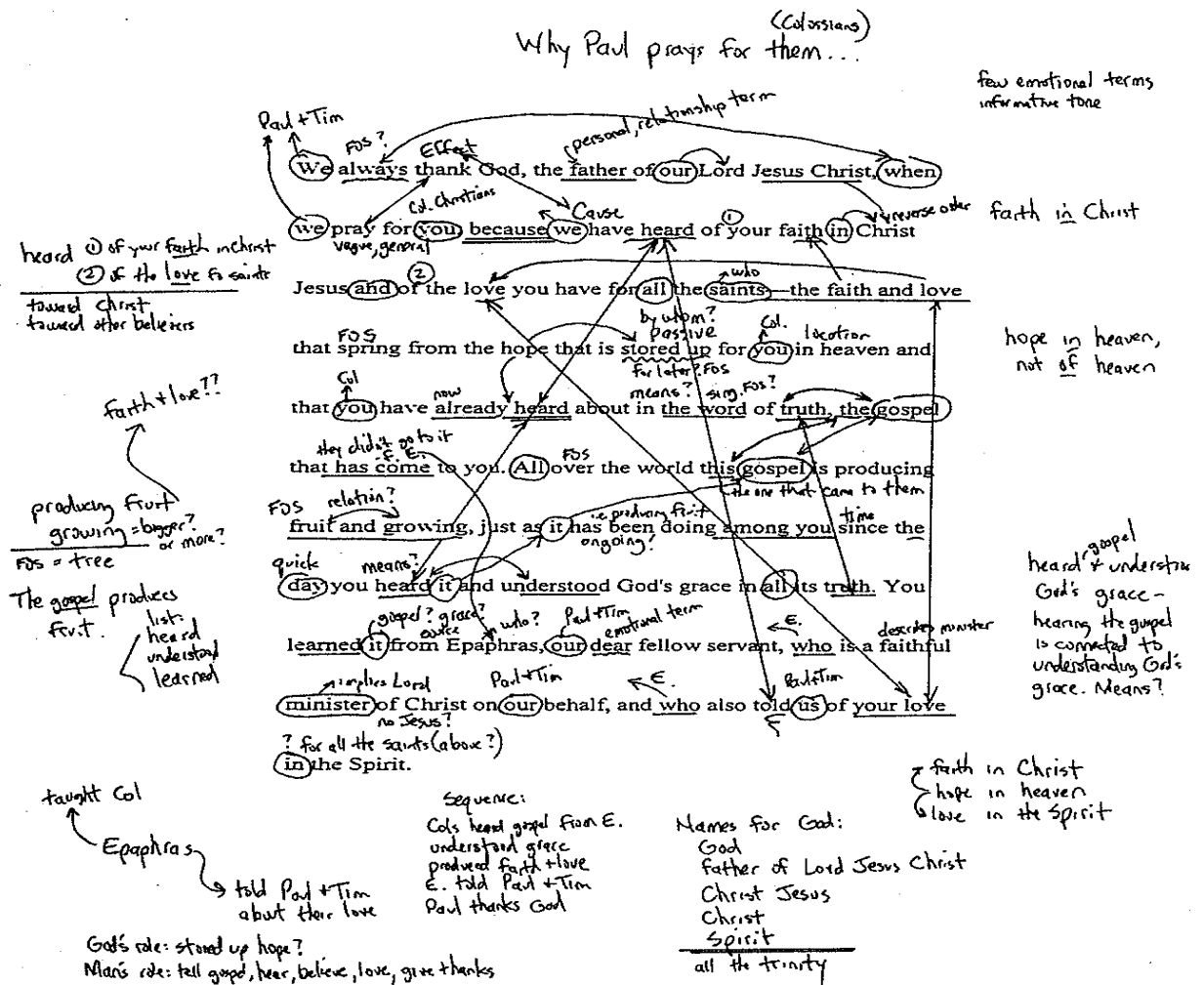
- iii. Words must be studied in their context. For example, “justified” in Romans 3:28 and James 2:24 are the same word but mean something very different in their respective contexts. Paul uses it to describe our legal standing before God. James uses it to mean demonstrate or vindicate – your works “justify”/demonstrate your faith.
 - b. Principle #2: Understanding the context involves understanding “the words, sentences, and paragraphs preceding and following a passage...[It] locates a passage within the larger purposes of a book.”¹¹ *The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture.*
 - i. How does this verse fit into the immediate context?
 - ii. How does this passage fit into the nearby paragraphs or chapters?
 - iii. How do these paragraphs and chapters fit into the book?
 - iv. How does this book fit into the Bible?
3. *Example #1: Colossians 1:15 “He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn** of all creation.”*
- a. Does “firstborn” mean that Jesus was not eternal but had only a physical origin, like the rest of humanity? (The Arian heresy and the Jehovah Witnesses say it does)
 - b. Are there other uses of the word “firstborn” in Colossians that would help our understanding? Col. 1:18, Jesus is the “**firstborn** from the dead...” Since Jesus is the first one with a resurrected body, the word seems to mean that he is not only first among many, but also first in a primary way as “head of the body” and “in everything preeminent”.
 - c. Would other passages in Colossians support or deny Jesus’ deity? (“He is the image of the invisible God” (1:15a); “For by him all things were created...all things were created through him and for him” (1:16); “he is before all things” (1:17a); “in him all things hold together” (1:17b) “in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:19). Conclusion: All that God is; Jesus is. (See also Heb. 1:1-4; John 1:1-4)
 - d. Is this word used elsewhere in the NT or OT? Yes, 132 times in the OT and 8 times in the NT. At times in the OT, “firstborn” does mean the first to come out of the womb. But more often, the “firstborn” is used for those who have a place of prominence and preeminence in the family. The firstborn received the inheritance and was to lead the family when the father passed. It was used of Israel (“Thus says the LORD, Israel my *firstborn*” - Ex. 4:22) and king David (“I will make him the *firstborn*, the highest of kings of the earth” - Ps. 89:27).

¹¹ Daniel Doriani, *ESV Study Bible*, “Interpreting the Bible: An Introduction”, p. 2561.

- e. Conclusion: given other passages (in and outside of Colossians) the word “firstborn” is not a reference to Jesus physical birth but to his supremacy or preeminence.
4. *Example #2: Colossians 1:20 “and through him to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”*
- a. This verse speaks of reconciliation. Jesus is the agent of reconciliation (“through him”) and the agent of peace (“making peace”). The object of reconciliation is himself (“to himself”). The means of that reconciliation is through Jesus’ shed blood on the cross (“by the blood of the cross”). So what is he going to reconcile to himself? “all things whether on earth or in heaven”. Does that include creation and fallen angels and fallen humanity as well as redeemed humanity? Some universalists would say, “yes”.
 - b. What is the immediate context?
 - i. Preceding this verse: Jesus is preeminent and supreme over all creation (1:15-17) and over redemption (1:18-20)
 - ii. Following this verse: The Colossians, once alienated are now reconciled and will be presented holy and blameless, if they persevere in the faith.
 - iii. Conclusion: Implication is that without Christ’s death they would have remained alienated. (“all things” might not include those alienated)
 - c. What is the larger context of Colossians?
 - i. The gospel was heard, understood and received. Only then did the Colossians know the hope laid up for them in heaven. (1:3-7)
 - ii. Those who live a persistent, sinful lifestyle will experience the wrath of God on that final Day. (3:5-6).
 - iii. Conclusion: Hope comes to the believer; wrath and punishment is reserved for the sinner. (“all things” seems to exclude sinners)
 - d. What is the larger context of the NT?
 - i. Wrath is reserved for those dead in their trespasses and sins (e. Eph. 2:1-3)
 - ii. Reconciliation comes to those who are saved by grace (eg. Eph. 2:4-9)
 - iii. When the Lord returns, creation will be freed from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-22)
 - iv. Ultimately, the Prince of Peace will establish his reign in the new heavens and new earth, wherein all creation will be made new and God’s people will dwell. Sinners will be cast into the lake of fire. (Rev. 21:1-8)
 - e. Conclusion: Colossians 1:20 does not mean that unregenerate humanity and fallen angels will one day be reconciled. Reconciliation is only for redeemed humanity, but will also one day include all of creation subject now to the bondage of sin. Because of the cross, one day, “shalom” will reign over redeemed humanity and all of creation.

Tool #5: Ask lots of questions of the passage¹²

- What words are repeated?
- What pronouns are used?
- What verbs are used? Are there any verbs with emotional overtones?
- Are any items compared or contrasted with each other?
- Are there any lists?
- Is there any cause and effect?
- What are the actions/roles of people and the actions/roles of God?
- Are there any figures of speech used – simile, metaphor, personification, or hyperbole?
- What conjunctions are used – and (joins items), for/since/because (reason), but (contrast), therefore (conclusion/reason)?
- What is the structure/outline of this passage?
- How does this passage fit into the whole book?
- What themes and doctrines are present in this passage?



¹² Questions and diagram adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Journey Into God's Word, Your Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible*, pp. 24-39.

Step #2: Application

1. *The Bible applies to every area of our life.* David Powlison writes, “It is a marvel how personally the Bible applies. The words pointedly address the concerns of long-ago people in faraway places, facing specific problems, many of which no longer exist...Nothing in the Bible was written directly to you or specifically about what you face. We are reading someone else's mail. Yet the Bible repeatedly affirms that these words are also written for us: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4). Application today discovers ways in which the Spirit reapplies Scripture in a timely fashion.”¹³
2. *Interpretation without application leads to self-deception.*
 - a. We can deceive ourselves that we are growing in godliness just because we know more. But we have not changed until the truth has made a difference in our heart, our attitudes and our actions.
 - i. James 1:22 “But prove yourselves *doers of the word*, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”
3. *Questions to help with application:*
 - a. What issues does this passage raise that are relevant to my life?
 - b. What kind of response does this passage call from me? Are there...
 - i. Examples to follow?
 - ii. Commandments to obey?
 - iii. Sins to forsake?
 - iv. Promises to claim?
 - v. Principles to live by?
 - vi. New thoughts about God, Christ or the Holy Spirit?
 - c. How does God invite me to experience Jesus by this passage?
4. *Below are some possible applications from Colossians:*
 - a. How do my prayers compare with Paul's at the beginning of the letter (1:9-14)? Could the substance of Paul's prayer for the Colossians better inform the content of my prayers?

¹³ David Powlison, *ESV Study Bible*, “Reading the Bible for Personal Application”, p. 2572.

- b. In what ways am I tempted to center my life around something other than Christ? Is Christ all I need? Is Christ all-sufficient to me or am I tempted to look for help, comfort or pleasure in other places?
- c. How am I tempted to place my identity in things other than Christ – in my relationships, my performance, my success, my possessions, my reputation? How can rooting my identity in Christ transform my thinking and behavior?
- d. When circumstances don't go well or trials and suffering attend my way, do I really trust that Christ is the supreme and sovereign ruler over all of creation, including my circumstances?
- e. How can believing the truths that I am filled with the fullness of Christ and united with Christ in his death and resurrection help me in my battle against sin?
- f. Where am I tempted to make my Christian life rules- and discipline-based instead of based on my vital union with Christ?
- g. How can meditating on the truth that I am a new creation in Christ – I have died to my old self and been raised to new life – impart hope and faith that I can grow and change?
- h. How am I tempted to allow the culture and the world erode my faith and the centrality of Christ in my life?
- i. Paul repeatedly encouraged the Colossians to be thankful. Is my life complaint-based or thanksgiving-based? How can I grow in becoming someone characterized by thankfulness?
- j. What am I setting my mind on; what am I seeking? What does it look like for me to “seek the things above” and to “set my mind on the things above?” What changes do I need to make?
- k. With the help of the Holy Spirit, what particular sin(s) am I presently seeking to “put off”? What am I currently asking the Lord to help me “put on”?
- l. Where do you need to grow as a spouse, a parent, an employee or employer?

Recommended Additional Resources:

1. *Dig Deeper, Tools For Understanding God's Word*, Nigel Beynon & Andrew Sachs.
2. *Journey Into God's Word, Your Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible*, J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays.
3. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Douglas J. Moo, The Pillar New Testament Commentary series.