

PRISON LETTERS

EPHESIANS, PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, PHILEMON

Devotional Thoughts

Everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ.

Philippians 1:12-13

Making the Most of Devotions

Devotions are meant to be a conversation – God speaks to you through His Word, and you talk to Him in prayer. The goal is not just to know the Bible – it is to grow closer to God. True spiritual maturity is a life transformed by Jesus. Make

a commitment each day to ask for the Holy Spirit's help to remember and live what you have learned.

These devotional thoughts are meant to help you understand God's Word and how it applies to your life. Read the verses in your own Bible or Bible app. A pen and journal are helpful to write out your thoughts and answers to the questions.

Below is a simple structure to help you make the most of your devotions.

PRAY & LISTEN

Begin with prayer, asking God to help you understand His Word.

Take a posture of listening to what God wants to teach you.

READ

What are the verses about?

Read slowly and more than once.

Pay attention to key words, phrases, or characters.

REFLECT

Why is this important?

Think about principles being taught and why they matter.

Understand what is revealed about God or human nature.

RESPOND

How can I live this in my life?

Find ways that the biblical principles can be applied into your life.

Create plans to live out what you have learned.

PRAY & ACT

Respond to God based on what you have read.

Ask for God's help to remember and live what He has taught you.

DISCIPLESHIP*FELLOWSHIP*MISSION



d e v o t i o n
EPHESIANS 1:1-14

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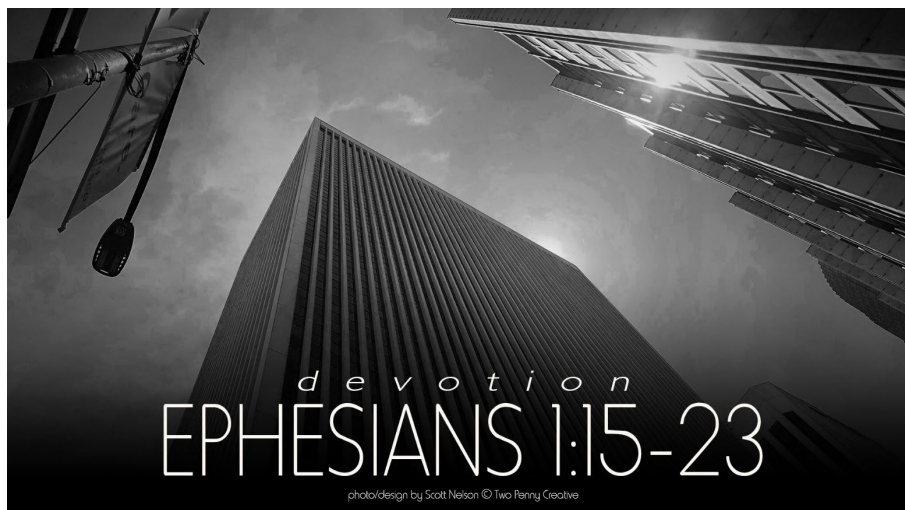
READ EPHESIANS 1:1-14

You are chosen and part of God's plan. These verses teach us that we are part of something bigger. God's plan is to bring this world back to His will—with all authority given to Christ and every heart coming home to the Creator. When we trust in Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing the inheritance of God's promise. We are God's children and part of God's plan; it is His pleasure and good will to bring us into His plan. All of this brings Him praise and glory. Even though human hearts have rebelled against God, He loves us and has a plan to bring us back.

Do you realize that you are chosen? Accept that you are special and let that soak into your self-worth.

Do you know that you have the Holy Spirit? Then don't accept that you are powerless. You have the power of God living inside of you, changing you.

Do you realize you are part of God's bigger plan? Then see your life with gratitude and praise the Lord. Even the struggles we have—which are real—can't thwart the will of God. He can make everything—even the bad things—work for our good. Praise Him!



READ EPHESIANS 1:15-23

Jesus saved all of who we are—including our minds. What we think matters. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be given wisdom so they would grow in their knowledge of God. He prayed they would have God's light so they could understand God's hope. He also prayed they would understand God's power—the power that raised Christ from the dead and now lives in us.

We don't just need knowledge; we need the spiritual understanding that comes from the presence of God's Spirit in our lives. Knowledge takes time: to read books, do devotions, and get advice from godly mentors. True understanding goes beyond knowledge; it includes reflection and action. Only when we experience God's presence and power in life do we gain wisdom for life. We are God's people, and He wants us to know Him and experience His power.

What is your plan to learn more about God? How can you make sure you live out what you have learned?



READ EPHESIANS 2:1-10

We are united with Christ, who is seated in heaven. We have His power to overcome the selfishness and sin that corrupt and bring death. We have His strength because Christ overcame death. We are saved by God's grace. This means there is nothing we can do to earn or deserve His forgiveness and salvation. Let that sink in. There is no one so bad that they can't be saved; there is no one so good that they don't need God's forgiveness. We are saved by grace.

We can't earn salvation, but we can respond to it. To put it in Paul's words: we aren't saved by good works, but we are made to do good works. As we receive salvation (Christ living in us), we live it out—and this includes action. As we grow closer and closer to Him, we are able to do more and more good—which is what God had planned for us. These verses paint a picture of us being united with Christ, and Christ is in heaven, so we are with Him in heaven. We are united with Christ who overcame sin and death, so we can overcome sin and will overcome death. We can leave our old lives and live new lives—doing good, blessing this world, and living out His mission with Him.

Reflect on the phrase "saved by grace through faith." Why is this important to you? Where do you need His power to overcome sin, laziness, or wrong thinking?



READ EPHESIANS 2:11-22

All our divisions can end at the cross. In Paul's day, there was a huge division between Jews and Gentiles. This division had lots of history and hate behind it. The death of Jesus ends the divide between humans and God, and it tears down the walls that humans build between each other. Through the death of Jesus there can be peace. Christ destroyed the wall that divided Jews and Gentiles—the old covenant has been fulfilled, and all people can now come to the Father through the Spirit. The Gentiles are invited into the promises of Israel. The Lord is making one new, united people.

Our world is still divided: economic disparity, age differences, racial tensions, politics, social issues, and more. Christ can end all our divisions. This doesn't mean we ignore problems or injustices; it means we seek to see all people the way Jesus does. It starts with forgiveness. We have been forgiven, and in gratitude, we forgive others. It is hard to forgive your enemies, but we can do it with Jesus. In Christ, there is no us and them—it is just us. The cross ends all divisions if we will follow Christ.

Are there any people you struggle to forgive? How can you live out these verses today?



READ EPHESIANS 3:1-13

Paul saw it as his mission to share God's Good News. Something new had happened in Christ: Gentiles could be part of the people of God without first becoming Jewish. In Christ, Jews and Gentiles could be part of the promises and blessings of God's people. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the old covenant was fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God had come; the new covenant is now available to all cultures. In God's mercy, He saved Paul, and Paul understood that it was his purpose in life to share God's mercy and Good News to the ends of the earth.

All Christians are called by God to share the gospel (Matt 28:19-20). Sadly, many Christians ignore the command of Christ and miss out on the joy of sharing His hope. Some of us are scared because our world has taught us to keep silent about Jesus. An easy way to start sharing Christ is to listen. Ask people questions, and genuinely be interested in the answers. People like to share about themselves. Secondly, don't give advice but take the time to pray; this invites God into the conversation. From there, it is easier to invite someone to church, a Bible study, or a deeper faith conversation. Our world is longing for listeners. Listening shows love.

Can you give God 10 minutes a day to listen to someone? God has given us mercy so that we can share His mercy with the world. How can you extend God's mercy to others today?



READ EPHESIANS 3:14-21

Only Christ can fill the emptiness and longing of the human heart. These verses show that Christ can live in our hearts and fill us with His power and love. Through His power we begin to understand God's infinite love for us. Because our LORD possesses unlimited resources; He never tires of us asking for "more" of Him. We can ask God for physical, emotional, and moral strength. Increasing our dependency on Christ, we grow in a greater awareness of Him working in "all" areas of our life. The result – our emptiness is filled with God's presence and His love. The result, our longings are fulfilled as we live out our purpose in His mission with His mighty power.

Christ is the fulfillment of every human longing. Think about your desires and longings—how can you find ultimate fulfillment in Jesus? In what way have you experienced Jesus renewing your strength? How can you share your experience with others?



READ EPHESIANS 4:1-16

The Church is not made to work like a business, sports team, or any other group. The Church is the Body of Christ. The Church is made up of God's children—those called by Him and filled with His Spirit. There should be humility and unity with peace and love. We have been forgiven and so we forgive. The Church is not perfect; if forgiveness is to happen, there must be something to forgive. God's Family is where we speak the truth in love, growing the courage to confront what needs to be dealt with, the patience to deal with the minor differences, and the wisdom to know the difference. This is unity full of variety and personality. Our unity is not in uniformity but in our love for Christ and our commitment to follow Him.

Christ has come and given gifts of leadership to His Church—gifts to proclaim and build unity and grow maturity. Every part of the Body is empowered to work together so that the Body grows and is full of love. The Church is not about our power but about His power through us. It is not about our talents but about His gifts in us to unify His Body. It is not about our ambition or pride but about His mission—to bring the whole world into His love.

What are your thoughts about the Church—the good and the bad? Reading these Bible verses, how does God want you to be involved in your local church?



READ EPHESIANS 4:17-32

Everyone is invited to the love of Jesus, and everyone is challenged to change. Earlier in this letter, Paul wrote how Jesus tore down the wall between Jews and Gentiles. This didn't mean that the sinful parts of the Gentile lifestyle (including lies, lust, and impurity) are what God wants. Our world confuses love and acceptance. Love does not accept everything in the loved one; true love always works for the best in the other, even when it includes conflict. Love is active and strong; it does not passively accept everything in others but works for what is good. Who are the people you love enough to challenge?

God wants a good life for every person. In Christ we have the motivation and power to throw off our destructive habits and live out the good life God has for us. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit lives inside of us, transforming our thoughts and attitudes. We can respond to God's love and want to change—getting rid of lying, gossip, anger, bitterness, stealing, and laziness. These are selfish actions we think will make us happy, but they only leave us empty and hollow out our souls. The Spirit fills us and leads us to true life.

What are the old habits that God wants you to throw off?



READ EPHESIANS 5:1-14

Followers of Christ are children of the light. This isn't our light but His light shining in us. His light exposes the dark areas of our souls, and His love gives us the courage and strength to change. We can make the choice to follow our Savior and allow Him to transform us; this includes big decisions and daily habits. If we keep our minds focused on Jesus, and His sacrifice for us, we can turn away from the self-serving bent of this world (idolatry) and truly worship our God with grateful hearts.

Jesus is calling us closer to Himself. The light of Christ can change our lives if we will let it in. We can't compare ourselves to others and become complacent. Our decisions matter. Verse 10 says, "Carefully determine what pleases the Lord."

Are you trying to use God to get what you want? Or is your life—desires, words, and choices—living out what God wants?



READ EPHESIANS 5:15-20

Some people act as if faith and thinking are opposites. These verses show that walking with Jesus includes a life of wisdom: using our minds—filled with God's Spirit—to make wise choices and have godly attitudes. The Holy Spirit can change everything in our lives. Our attitudes can be changed because we are filled with thanksgiving. Instead of complaining, we can sing praises to the Lord. The Spirit changes our perspective and gives us hope, even in hardships.

We are also called to be wise, knowing God's will and making the most of every opportunity to share our faith. We need to know how to use our time and how to make good decisions for the Lord. Knowing we will be forgiven does not mean our choices don't matter; we have the power to overcome our selfishness.

How do you see faith and thinking working together? What does it mean for you to be careful how you live and make the most of every opportunity with Jesus?



READ EPHESIANS 5:21-33

Every relationship changes when we put Christ first. Jesus taught His followers to love each other the way that He loved them. Paul explained that in all Christ-centered relationships there is a level of submission—giving up our rights to serve each other. Husbands and wives are to love and serve each other. Men and women are not the same; they have different needs. Husbands and wives are called to listen to each other and meet each other's needs in love.

Marriage is tough. When we put Christ in the center of marriage, it changes for the better. Christ can give us a listening ear when we feel misunderstood; He can help us love even when we feel wronged; He can give us the strength to forgive. Put Christ first. Pursue Him every day and soak up His love for you. As you live out His love in you, every relationship will change.

If you are married, how can you live out these verses in your relationship today? If you are single, how can you put Christ first in your life and trust Him with all your relationships?

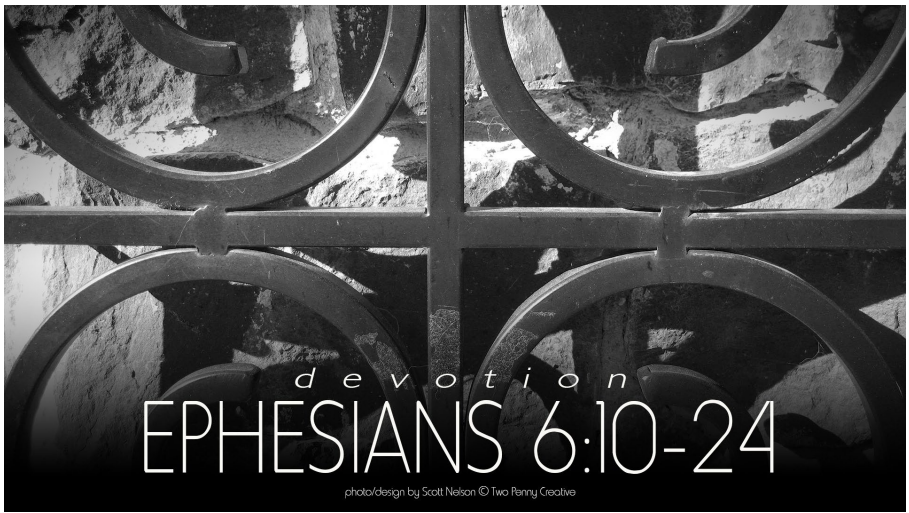


READ EPHESIANS 6:1-9

Following Jesus means doing what is right, even when it is hard. Paul instructed children to obey their parents, and he told parents not to provoke their kids to anger. He did not condone slavery but subverted the institution by teaching that we are all slaves of Christ; we are brothers and sisters in faith. Masters were to treat their slaves with respect and slaves to serve as if they were serving Christ. These are not easy commands! Following our Savior means that we can, with His strength inside of us, overcome our frustrations and do what is right. The way of Christ gives us strength even in the face of selfishness and pride.

Relationships are hard, and when we are wronged, it often brings out the worst in us. When we focus on Christ, we can do what is right even in the face of injustice. He endured the scorn of those in power. He overcame. There will be times with family, friends, or co-workers where we will feel justified in doing the wrong thing—because of the wrong actions of others. Our wrong then justifies their next wrong—and on it goes. In Christ we can have healthy boundaries, speak the truth in love, and stand for what is right.

When have you responded badly in the past, and what can that teach you about yourself? What can Jesus teach you about responding to injustice and selfishness?



READ EPHESIANS 6:10-24

God has empowered us to stand up to attacks. We have faith, salvation, and righteousness as a defense against accusations. We don't have to believe the lies thrown against us. We have the word of God and prayer to fight back with God's presence and truth—always in hopes of winning over those who would seek to hurt us. Our battle is not against people; we are in a spiritual battle.

We have the armor of God so that we can stand strong. Often, when we are under spiritual attack, we pull back from the battle. Satan doesn't need to destroy us, just get us out of the fight. If we crumble under the attack, he has done his job. Paul was in prison but still writing and doing God's work. He was not defeated, even when on trial for his life. We have the strength in Christ to stand up, stay in the battle, and overcome. When the attacks come, put on His armor and stand strong. God is with us.

What spiritual battles are you fighting right now? Look back over the list Paul gives. Are there any “holes” in your armor? How can others help support you while you are in the battles?

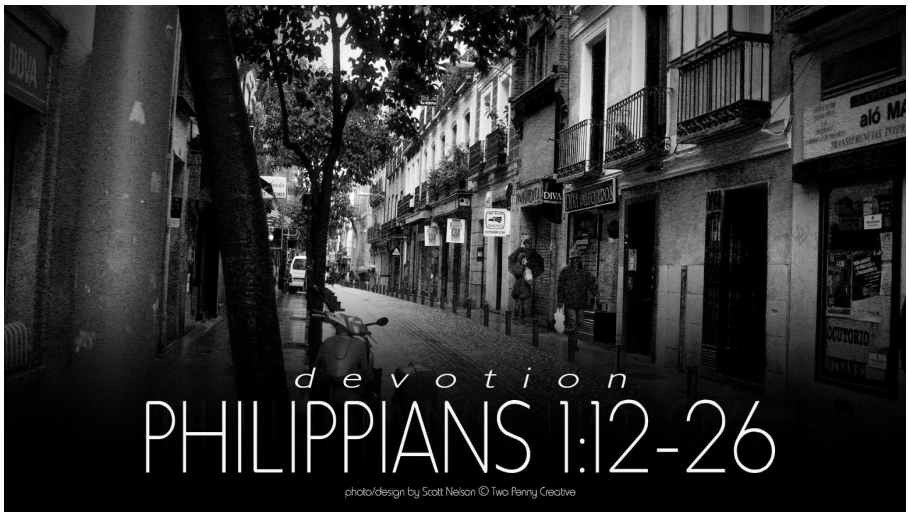


READ PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

Once you become a Christian, then what? Many people are confused about this because they thought the goal of life (or Christianity) was to be forgiven. The goal of life is to be closer to Christ, and the day we accept His forgiveness is just the beginning. Salvation is a living relationship with our Creator, transforming our thinking, actions, attitudes, and whole being.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. He felt a special closeness with the Philippian church, who had supported and encouraged him for many years. He saw them growing more and more through their faith, and he prayed they would continue to grow in love, knowledge, and purity. He knew God was working in them and would continue to work until the day Christ returns. God is still working in you. Keep making the choices—even the hard ones—to be close to Him.

How is the Lord working to refine your character? What are some practical ways you get closer to Christ?



READ PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26

Having our eyes on Christ will keep our heads up in the hardest times. Paul was on trial for his life, but he was not overwhelmed with discouragement. He did not even complain! Paul saw his imprisonment as an opportunity to present Christ to the emperor in Rome. He was even willing to die as a testimony to the world. Because he focused on Christ, he saw the bigger picture and did not give in to despair.

We all go through hard times. Will we allow Christ's presence to give us strength? It is good to cry out to God in our low moments, and it is fine to feel frustration (just read some of the Psalms). But don't forget that we have the power of the Holy Spirit living inside of us. We are loved. Even if we die, death is not the end. Christ is with us in our suffering and will carry us to His side when we die. And He will put people around us to love, support, and challenge us.

What difference does it make in your life, knowing that Jesus understands and is by your side in the storms?



READ PHILIPPIANS 1:20-30

How can we stay encouraged when life brings us down? For Paul, being a Christian meant joining in the suffering of Christ for the world. Paul was in prison, and the Philippians faced opposition. He encouraged them to stay strong, living as citizens of heaven. Paul faced death, but he stayed strong by trusting in God. He understood how his suffering furthered the gospel.

We will go through hard times in life. Jobs will be lost, relationships will go awry, cars will break down, and things will fall apart. Jesus offers us His strength so that we won't fall apart as well. He won't take away the struggles of life, but He is with us and gives us His strength. Following Christ means we will go through more hardships because the way of the world is tilted against the sacrificial way of Christ. As His followers, we run into hardships and fight injustices, yet we do not despair because we walk with the Resurrected One.

In what ways are you dealing with discouragement right now? How can the example of Paul, who was persecuted yet stayed encouraged in Christ, help you today?



READ PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

Jesus gives us an attitude solution—even if we don't think we have an attitude problem! We can have encouragement from belonging to Christ, comfort from being loved, and unity from the Holy Spirit. When we have these attitudes, we have God's strength, and our hearts become tender and compassionate. Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death, following God's will, and was exalted back to His throne in heaven. Jesus is the Risen One; when we focus on Him and imitate Him, our attitudes change.

Here is a secret in life: our attitudes follow our actions. Too often we are waiting to “feel” like doing what is right. Actions are a matter of will, and once we decide to do what is right, our attitudes will follow. It can be hard to have a good attitude, especially when life beats us up. But our attitudes can change based on what we are focused on and what we choose. If we focus on Christ—His love and how he humbled Himself to death—we can have His attitude. If we choose to follow Jesus—even when it is hard—we can have His strength to overcome. His life is stronger than death. When the storms come, and they will come, turn your thoughts to Christ: His death and His love. Choose to follow Jesus no matter what is happening or how you feel.

When do you have an attitude problem? How can you focus more on Christ every day and throughout the day?



READ PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

Some of these verses seem downright impossible. Rejoice even if we might lose our lives? Shine like stars in a dark and corrupt world? And the hardest one: no complaining or arguing? These commands seem unreasonable until we look at verse 13—it is God who is working inside of us to change our desires and actions.

The result of truly following Jesus is JOY—joy that the world can't give, and the world can't take away. This doesn't mean we are never frustrated or upset (Jesus had real emotions). Joy means that we remember the light of God, even in the darkness. We know that nothing can stop God's love. Paul could rejoice even when his life was on the line because it was an offering to the Lord, a declaration to the world of the power of salvation.

Jesus has given salvation as a free gift, and He calls us to follow Him, working out and living out our salvation. We honor our Savior with our lives, even as He empowers us and gives us the desire to obey. When we make choice after choice to follow Jesus, eventually even the impossible is possible. Someday even complaining could disappear from a person's life.

Which one of these impossible commands will you work on, with Jesus? Today, will you let Jesus change your attitude and actions?



READ PHILIPPIANS 2:19-30

One of the best things about serving Christ is the amazing friends we make. There is a deep connection we have with those who love Christ. Serving Jesus together causes that connection to go even deeper, as we give our lives for His Kingdom's cause.

Working on a team to accomplish God's will is a big part of Paul's joy in Philippians 1 and 2. In these verses, two co-workers in the gospel were described by Paul. They lived worthy of the gospel, had the attitude of Christ, and shined like stars. They were both devoted to Jesus and to His work. Timothy was incredibly loyal and authentically caring, faithfully serving with Paul for many years. Epaphroditus traveled far and almost died for the work of the gospel. These are two great examples of giving our lives to serve our King. The goal is not just serving but fully surrendering our lives for His Kingdom which includes working together in building God's Kingdom.

If you don't have a way that you are serving in ministry, jump in, and make the time to really make a difference. If you are serving already, find a way to really connect with people and grow deeper than just "doing the job."

How have you experienced joy by working with others on a team? How is the Holy Spirit prompting you to join in building God's Kingdom with your church family?



READ PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

What are your trophies? What are the accomplishments that you value above all? Paul had trophies, the highest honors in his culture. When he hit rock bottom, it was the best thing that happened to him. He realized that his trophies were worthless. Nothing is more important than knowing Christ. Church planting, evangelism, and writing letters were not new trophies that drove Paul forward—his first passion was to know Christ more. Paul was even willing to suffer and die to be closer to Christ.

As long as you pursue the trophies of culture you miss out on the life that is true life. There truly is nothing greater than knowing Christ—not just knowing a few things about Him but really knowing Him and being known by Him. The best thing that can happen is when we consider our trophies garbage and pursue Christ. Then we will shine with His life. This is how Paul radiated joy—even in prison.

Think about the passions and pursuits of your life. Are you pursuing Christ or your own trophies? How can you turn your passions to know Christ more and more?



READ PHILIPPIANS 3:12-21

We can't change the past, but God can change our futures. Paul did wrong and shameful things in his past. He also had some accomplishments that he once considered priceless but then considered worthless. He chose to move past his past and walk forward into a new future with Jesus. Paul traveled many miles and planted many churches to spread the good news about Jesus. His whole life was about being close to Christ. This was his calling and his new future.

These verses challenge us to walk forward with Christ. We can leave behind our mistakes because, in Christ, we are forgiven. We must leave behind our accomplishments and press on to the goal of our faith. Our past shapes us, but we are shaped even more by our future as we walk with Christ. Press on to the goal. Run the race with Christ. You are not defined by your past but by your future with Jesus.

What are some mistakes you need to surrender to Christ? What are some accomplishments you need to surrender as well? How can you let the future with Christ shape you more than the past?



READ PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

We can't follow Jesus only with our words; we must follow Him with our actions in real life. There are some real-life problems described in these verses. Two Christian leaders were disagreeing, and they were urged to work out their problem. Paul was unjustly imprisoned, but he challenged his readers to be joyful always. In this letter, Paul wrote repeatedly about the joy that comes from Christ. Having the joy of the Spirit doesn't mean Christians don't have hardships; it means we have Christ to walk with us, and guide us through the trials. As we give our prayer requests to God, we can live without worry and experience God's peace. And as we fix our thoughts on good things, we can put what we believe into practice.

Real life makes it really hard to live out what we believe. It is easier to complain to others than cast our cares on the Lord. It is easier to have a bad attitude than fix our eyes on what is good, noble, admirable, and true. The Lord doesn't offer us the easy way; He shows us the best way. It will not be easy. Christ has walked the hard road and been victorious. He lives in us and gives us strength to overcome.

How do you take your faith from only knowledge to living it out practically? What does it look like to experience God's joy, even in the hard times?



READ PHILIPPIANS 4:10-23

The verse “*I can do all things through Him who gives me strength*” was originally written in a context about generosity and contentment. Generosity doesn't come from wealth but from contentment. Paul taught and lived a life of contentment. He was in prison yet rejoiced, he could live on almost nothing, and his life's goal was to live out the call of Christ. The Philippians modeled generosity. They were not the richest people, but they continually gave to God's work.

People often think they will be more generous when they have more. But generosity comes when we understand the secret of living in every situation; it comes from having the joy that only Christ can give. That is why those with very little are often willing to give so much away. As a person focuses on Christ, they can give away more, live with greater simplicity, and experience greater joy.

How does focusing on Christ help make a person more giving? Where in your life is God calling you to greater contentment and generosity?

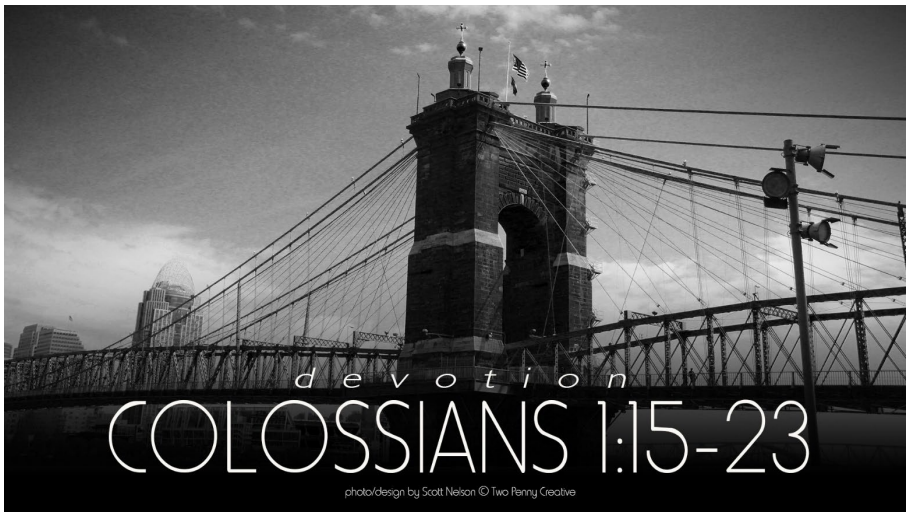


READ COLOSSIANS 1:1-14

There are more things to pray for each other than just our immediate needs. Paul prayed for the Colossians. He had not met the Colossian church, which was a plant from Ephesus, started by Epaphras. Paul thanked God for their faith and love. He prayed that God would grow their knowledge of Him and His will. He also prayed that they would be filled with God's power and joy.

Many Christians pray for each other, but they often spend most of their time praying for their immediate needs—stress, health, problems, etc. It is good to pray for these things, but these verses show there are more things to pray for, too. We need to be praying for each other to grow closer to Christ, stronger in His power, and more full of His joy. As we get closer to God, many of life's problems will get smaller which decreases fear and anxiety.

How can you be praying for the deeper needs of others today? When you ask for prayer from others, what are some deeper prayers you can ask for (God's power, joy, growth, maturity, etc.)?



READ COLOSSIANS 1:15-23

God's truth only changes our lives if we stand firm in it. These verses are a hymn about Christ's power and exalted position. Christ is fully God; therefore, the fullness of God lives in Him. He made everything, and He is supreme over all creation. He is the head of the Church and made peace with everything in heaven and earth. Paul didn't just write out the lines of the hymn; he applied them to the Colossians. They had been reconciled; they were blameless in the sight of God because they trusted in Jesus. Guilt was gone, and they had a new relationship with God that changed everything.

It is not enough to know the right things; we have to really live them out. We can take in much information, but faith isn't just knowledge: it is living trust. Faith means living out God's truth in our hearts, minds, and actions. Only then will faith really be alive to experience the power of God's Word. Too often people read the Bible but don't do anything about it. Too often a sermon is listened to, but no one asks, "What action or habit should I put into action this week?" Don't overthink it—just read God's message and put it into action.

If Christ is supreme over all creation, what can this mean in your life today? What is one verse you can remember and live out today?

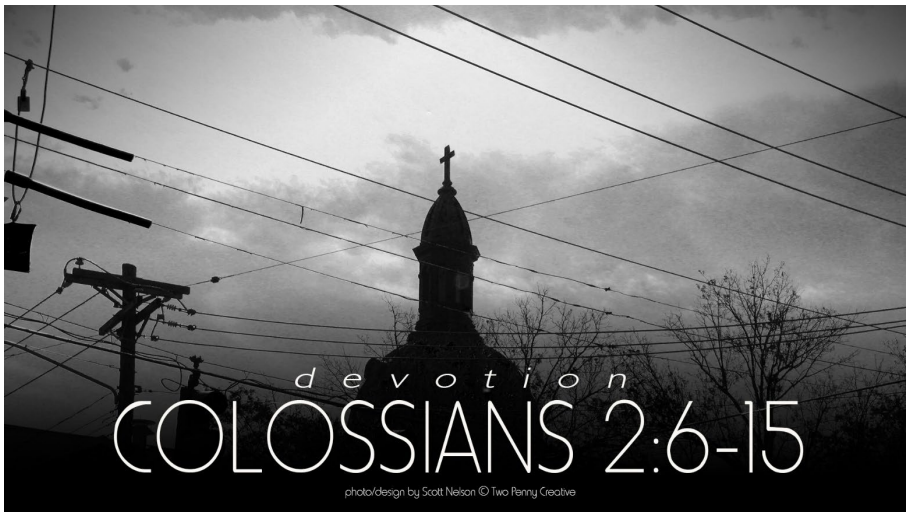


READ COLOSSIANS 1:24—2:5

Our job is to serve Christ and share His hope wherever we are. Paul worked hard to tell others about Christ. He struggled tirelessly to help people know the mystery that Christ can live inside of them. Paul was dependent on the power of Christ so that people would understand God's plan and live in His love. He warned people of false teaching that would rob them of the joy that only Christ can give.

Christ is working to grow each person closer to God. Following Jesus means that we work with Him; this is part of our calling. This happens in ministry, of course, but it also happens at work, at home, and with friends and family. Serving Jesus doesn't just happen at church; it can happen everywhere. Every day we have opportunities to live out our calling with Christ. He has filled us with His love and power to share His hope—which people so desperately need. It starts by each day focusing on our calling—to be closer to Christ and to help others be closer to Him as well. No matter where we are, we can serve in this way. Live out your calling today.

Our job is to serve Christ and share His hope wherever we are. How are you doing at your job? How can you live out your calling today?

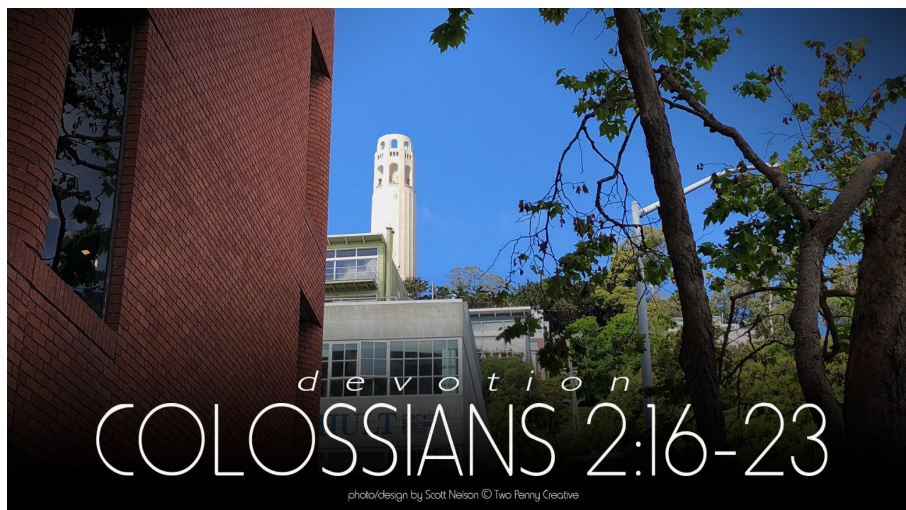


READ COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

Do you remember when you first gave your life to Jesus? Remembering that first love helps grow our roots deeper in that love. As time goes on, it is easy to forget our first love and water down His truth with the deception of the world. It is good to realize again and again how much God loves us: Jesus died for us, we are forgiven, His hope gives us strength, and He is with us in our pain.

The Colossian Christians were being tempted to give into false teaching. The crooked thinking was based on the power of the world—which was shamed by the victory of Christ on the cross (v.15). One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter was to warn the Colossians about the false teaching. He encouraged them to grow their roots in the faith they were taught and be strong in their first love.

What is your story of being saved by Jesus? How can you remember and live out your first love for Jesus today?



READ COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

Shadows or reality: which will you follow? The Colossians were giving ear to false teaching because it looked so pious—with harsh discipline, special ceremonies, angel worship, and a unique diet. These things appeared spiritual and wise, but they were only shadows. Following these human rules leads to pride. The reality is Christ; following Him connects us to our Creator and leads to fulfillment. We don't need arrogance—trying to prove our worth by being better than others—because we are fulfilled by the Source of life and love.

Other religions and philosophies are not all wrong; they are shadows. All truth is God's truth. But our goal is not to follow the shadows that lead to pride. Only the living Christ can give us true fulfillment. Tragically, even many Christians follow the shadow of human rules and piety, living with arrogance and not overflowing love. As we talk to those who are following other religious rules or their own rules of living, we can affirm their longing for God and point them to the Reality beyond the shadows. Jesus is fully God, and He lives in us, so we can have the fullness of God's love inside of us, living lives of overflowing joy. Connect to Christ and His life and live out that reality each day.

Honestly, are you more focused on the rules or on Jesus? Rules are still helpful. How can you follow God's rules but point people to a living relationship with God?

CHANGE THE FUTURE

devotion
COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

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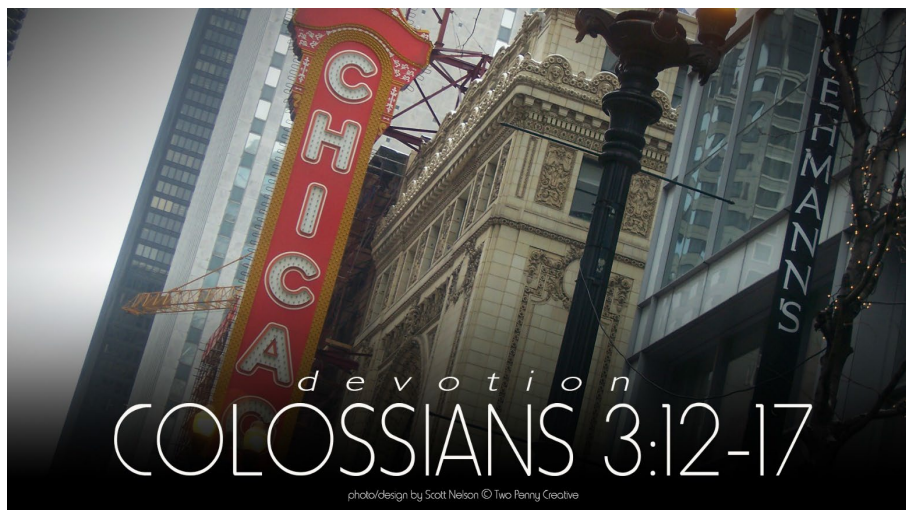
READ COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

Not everything we think and feel is good and right. There is a lot of our old lives still lurking inside. When we became Christians, we died to our old lives, and our true lives are with Christ in heaven. As we focus on Him, we live out the life of heaven—a life of contentment, peace, encouragement, truth, purity, and joy.

This is easier said than done. Verse 3 says that we have (already) died with Christ; verse 5 says we need to put to death the earthly things inside of us (not yet done). We live with the reality of “already and not yet”; we are already purified, and not yet completely pure. We need to live out the reality of the cross and resurrection, choosing each day to follow Jesus and put to death the selfishness living inside of us. Jesus lives inside of us, helping us live out this sacrifice, but He will not force us to choose Him. We must make the daily decisions to go His way. We follow Christ, who chose the cross and overcame sin and death.

The world regularly tells us that selfishness is good. We are told lust is good because it sells, that greed is good because it helps the economy, and that rage is good because we are venting. Powerful people prey on our selfish desires to increase their own selfish power. Everything we think and feel is not right; humans’ nature has been corrupted. Lust disconnects us from humanity, greed pulls us away from beauty and what really matters, and rage hurts others and acts like our feelings are more important than the feelings of others. We have to choose each day to ignore the lies and half-truths of a world that wants to exploit us and damage our souls. This starts by focusing our thoughts on Christ and surrendering to His way of freedom and love. God has given us life, and we have all we need in Him.

What are some of the areas of sin and selfishness you are battling right now? How is Jesus helping you in this battle?



READ COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Clothes are part of how we interact with the world: our clothes are part of our appearance, and clothes can change how we feel (think of “dressing up”). These verses talk about being clothed in the apparel of heaven. Bible scholars think that early Christians, when they were baptized, took off old clothing, entered the water, then were dressed in new clothing (probably a white robe). This was symbolic of leaving the old life, attitude, and actions behind, while putting on the new life of Christ. We can clothe ourselves with gentleness, mercy, kindness, humility, and patience. Jesus freely offers us all of this “clothing.” What virtues do you need to add to your wardrobe?

We are forgiven by God, and His forgiveness changes everything. We can forgive others and be patient with each other’s faults. It is sometimes hard to accept that God has fully forgiven us, hard sometimes to let go of guilt and shame. It is even harder to live out forgiveness, being patient with the faults of others and forgiving them in love. God wants us to have peace, even if it sometimes takes hard work. Avoiding the issues won’t solve them. Lay down your guilt and grudges and live a life of forgiveness.

What grudges do you need to release and forgive?

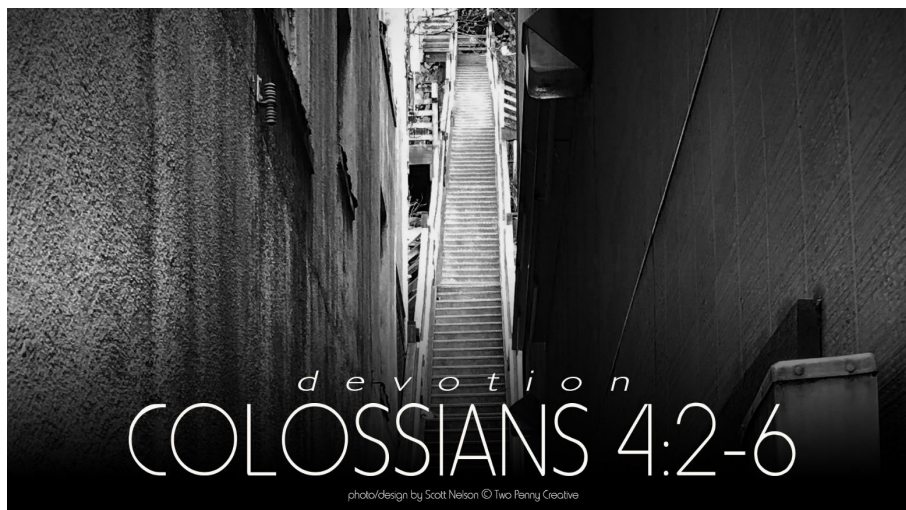


READ COLOSSIANS 3:18—4:1

All our relationships are transformed when we love Jesus. Marriages change because Jesus is in the center. We submit to each other because Jesus served us and submitted His will to the will of the Father. We love sacrificially because that is the love of Christ. Child and parent relationships change because of Jesus—there is obedience and understanding, even when it is hard. How we work and lead also changes because we love our crucified and risen Lord; we work hard because we follow Him.

These verses were written into a particular culture, but they have timeless principles. Christianity does not export a superior culture; it values cultures as good expressions of the humanity God created. The universal truths of Christ will look culturally different in different times and cultures. Paul was speaking to three cultures at once: Jewish, Greek, and Roman. In Paul's day, society was very tiered: men were the highest, with women, children, and slaves all on a lower level. He showed how Christianity made sense and is good in any culture. But he also showed how the gospel transcends and subverts cultures: he never condoned slavery, and he pointed to the fact that there is a Master in heaven (who has set the captives free through His sacrifice). He also subverts the thinking in his day about wives and children being "lower"—all relationships are viewed in light of Christ, who loves us all and taught us to call each other brothers and sisters with one Father.

Living out these verses is the hard part. The gospel is still transcending and subverting our cultural understanding of relationships. In our culture the biggest relationship we misunderstand is the relationship with ourselves. Can we—in a culture that tell us to do whatever we want—live like we have a Master? Can we submit—in a world that says the most important desires are our own? Can we love like Jesus?



READ COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

We are called to share God's hope. These verses give us some practical ways to witness: pray, live wisely, and have grace-filled conversations. We need to consistently pray for opportunities to share God's hope. Most of our prayers are just about our needs or the needs of others. God is also asking us to pray for opportunities to share His hope. And we need to be thankful! Are you making the most of the opportunities God is giving you to share His love and truth?

Our lives need to show that we are followers of Christ. We don't have to be perfect, but we do need to keep our focus on Christ and authentically live out what we believe. We also need to be ready for God to answer our prayers—He will give us opportunities to listen to the struggles of others, pray for them, and share the hope of Christ. Listening is so powerful, and people are longing for others to listen to them.

Will you give God 15 minutes a day to let yourself be interrupted with those who need God's hope and love?



READ COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

We are not called to walk alone. As we do the Lord's work, we grow an incredible bond with our partners in ministry. Paul had so many people that he was connected with, amazing co-workers who encouraged and supported him. They also did amazing ministry on their own. There was a church planting movement in the area of Colossae: this church had been planted from Ephesus and partnered together to plant at least two other churches (Laodicea and Hieropolis). They were all connected to each other, and this connection made their ministry stronger.

For many people, their deepest hurts in life have been from a pastor or a co-worker in ministry. A deep bond is formed, and when hurt happens, it cuts deeply. Many get so hurt that they never serve again. When we are hurt, we must find a way to be healed by Christ, connect with others, and serve again. We are not meant to walk or serve alone.

What are you doing to form deep bonds with other Christians? How is your life making a difference in the church and for God's mission?



READ PHILEMON 1-7

If faith is genuine, it permeates every part of our lives. The letter of Philemon is different than any other letter we have from Paul. It is a personal letter, not a letter addressed to a church. Paul knew Philemon personally, and he was thankful to God for his love and generosity. Paul even asked Philemon to prepare a guest room for him (v.22), hoping he would soon visit Colossae where Philemon lived. Although they were friends, Paul was willing to ask a bold favor for the sake of the gospel. He was asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus, his runaway slave who had come to Rome, found Paul in prison, and given his life for the work of the gospel. Paul wanted Philemon to live out the freedom of the gospel, set Onesimus free, and allow him to support Paul in Rome. Paul lived out the fullness and freedom of the gospel in every part of his life.

We are called to do the same. Relationships can't blind us to injustice. Comfort can't close our eyes to the problems of the world. It is too easy for us to know about Jesus but never really follow Him with our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. God doesn't just want to save our minds; He wants to save our souls. This means our will—our desires and decisions. This is the last area to be surrendered in any human heart; we would rather give God Sunday mornings, Bible studies, finances, or even our emotions—rather than surrender our will to His way of freedom.

What can help you live out what you believe? What parts of your life is Jesus asking you to surrender to Him?



READ PHILEMON 8-16

How should Christian leaders motivate people to action? How should Christians follow their leaders?

Paul was writing to Philemon, a Christian brother from Colossae that Paul knew. While in prison in Rome, Paul also got to know a runaway slave named Onesimus, who became a Christian and was very useful to Paul. Onesimus was Philemon's slave. Paul wrote this short letter to ask a bold favor: he wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus with kindness (and probably to release him). Philemon had the legal right to punish Onesimus, but Paul asked him as a Christian brother to do the right thing. Since we have this letter, we can safely assume that Philemon kept this letter and did what Paul asked.

Christian leaders lead best when they appeal to what is right and don't resort to demanding. Paul could have demanded his request to Philemon (who in a sense owed him, v.19), but he asked it as a favor, appealing to Philemon to do the right thing. The goal is not to appeal to a personality but call people to follow Christ and do what is right, even if it is counter cultural. We all need good leaders to spur us on. We are called to follow godly leaders as a way of ultimately following Christ. We never surrender our thinking but use wisdom to discern the will of God. We then follow Christ no matter what.

Who are godly leaders that you allow to speak into your life? If you are a leader, how can you make sure that you don't make demands on people, but appeal to what is right?



READ PHILEMON 17-25

The eternal law of God transcends cultural laws or human opinions. In Christ we are a new creation, and every human relationship we have starts with this new creation. There is no slavery in the new creation, and humans are not exploited or used. In this letter we can see how Paul practically worked out the eternal law of new creation while still living in the cultural (and often brutal) world of Roman law.

Onesimus was a runaway slave. Paul did not force Philemon to end his slave ownership; Paul subverted the very institution of slavery by calling Onesimus a beloved and useful brother. Paul appealed to the “debt” that Philemon owed him as an apostle, and asked Philemon to act out of love. Paul didn’t force Philemon or break any Roman laws, but he appealed to Philemon to live out the new creation—where there is neither slave nor free, only God’s children loving each other, serving each other, and choosing to follow Him.

We are called to live out the new creation in our day. Our world still has slavery, human trafficking, and commercial exploitation. We can’t force people or use tactics of shame because that is not the way of new creation. We teach and live out the law of love that transcends our culture. The way of Christ, when lived out by humans, is stronger than the powerful people that see their fellow humans only as a means of furthering their own power.

What are the parts of our culture that the Lord is trying to transform? If you can’t use force or shame, how can you be part of the change?



*Let your roots grow down into Him,
and let your lives be built on Him.
Then your faith will grow strong
in the truth you were taught,
and you will overflow with thankfulness.*

COLOSSIANS 2:7



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“To transform religious and irreligious people into Fully Devoted Followers of Christ.”