

Big idea:

FCF:

Application:

1. How do you finish...?

How do you finish a letter like Colossians?

Think back over some of the themes and concerns and concepts we have looked at over the last few weeks: transfer and transformation because Jesus is able; the truth that 'Jesus is Lord' is enough; the work of people like Paul and Timothy for the whole of God's mob; the warning about false teaching that says 'Jesus is Lord' is NOT enough; the clear command to walk with Jesus as Lord; the exhortation to 'live as you are'; the whole wonder of 'putting off' and 'putting on'; life as God's community where grace rules and lives; the truth that we are 'individuals IN community'; and the emphasis on looking outward, with salty language and prayer for doors to be opened.

How do you finish a letter that talks of such deep and lofty topics?

I know that I would finish with a rallying cry to 'walk worthily of the Lord', or a searing statement about apathy, or a turn to the goodness of lifting our eyes above or some inspiring statement about the rule and grace of Jesus. But that is not how Paul closes this letter. He closes with a series of greetings connected with eight people, several towns, and a series of personal requests and commands. In one way, it seems a strange, almost anti-

climactic ending, one that seems vastly separated from the lofty and magnificent content of the letter.

But, several truths must cause us to pause and rethink this somewhat dismissive.

First, we must recognise the truth of **2 Timothy 3:16-17 – READ**. This is Scripture, it is the revelation of God and by God for the good and growth of his people.

Second, this is how Paul finishes the majority of his pastoral letters. There is something about this type of ending – more than just convention – that Paul sees it as a fitting end for letters as diverse as Romans and Colossians. In fact, after Romans, the end to Colossians is the longest and most name-rich of all his letters.

Third, the palpable warmth and generosity and fondness expressed in these words must prick our attention – what provokes such warmth and generosity?

Fourth, the themes that we have loved and enjoyed – those I opened with – will be present even in the close of this letter.

I want to suggest to you that this close to Colossians is a reminder of the ‘real community of the Lord Jesus’ – it shows the reality and the community of the people who live with Jesus as the Lord, in his kingdom.

PRAY...

The structure of the passage is very clear: verses 7-9 discuss the carriers of this letter; verses 10-14 pass on, in two sets of three, the greetings of certain men; verses 15-17 contain three commands that Paul wants to pass onto the Colossians; verse 18 is the final goodbye.

The best way to start delving into this close is by working quickly through the names in the list...

2. A closer look

The first set of names are in **verses 7-9... READ.**

Tychicus and Onesimus are the first names mentioned. They are the carriers of this letter. But they have also been sent as 'news carriers'. Paul sent them to Colossae, to people he had never met, for the express purpose of sharing news about Paul, so that the Christians in Colossae could be encouraged. It is a sign of the closeness of this community of believers – even those who have never met eagerly seek news of each other so as to be encouraged.

Tychicus, from what we know in Acts (20:4), is a native of Asia Minor. He was a companion of Paul in Acts, on at least one of Paul's missionary journeys. He is mentioned at the end of Ephesians, 2 Timothy and Titus – he is entrusted by Paul with letters, responsibilities and messages. Paul's description of him here – a recommendation aimed at a group who has never met Tychicus – is incredibly strong and warm – Tychicus is a 'loved brother, fellow-servant and a fellow slave in the Lord'. Under the

Lordship of Jesus, Tychicus is a close and highly regarded fellow-worker with Paul. Paul is not jealous of his work, nor protective of his turf – there are bigger issues and concerns than building little fiefdoms.

Onesimus is a different kettle of fish to Tychicus. He is actually a local, 'one of you'. He is the subject of the letter that was carried along with Colossians – Philemon. As we read Philemon, we gather that Onesimus is a runaway slave, who fled to Rome, met Paul and became a Christian. Paul is now sending him back to Colossae, and his master – Philemon. It is a remarkable situation. It is even more remarkable when you read Paul's description of him here (and even in Philemon) – he is 'a faithful and loved brother'. What a turnaround for a former slave, a runaway! The source of the change is the Lordship of Jesus – it is only such a reality which can change people's status so significantly. It is only such a reality that can gather escaped slaves and wronged masters into one community that forgives as the Lord Jesus forgave them.

Paul entrusts this odd couple with both the letters (Colossians and Philemon) and with the job of sharing news to encourage the local believers in Colossae.

The second set of names occurs in **verses 10-14... READ.**

These names break into two sets of three.

The first group – Aristarchus, Mark and Justus – are described as the only Jews who are still working with Paul. It is an intimate

picture of a man who has fought hard for the Lordship of Jesus, at great cost; but he takes great comfort in the fellowship in work for the Lord with these three men.

Aristarchus was a companion of Paul on his missionary journeys (Acts). He seems to have been a Macedonian. He seems to have been sharing Paul's imprisonment – either by choice or because he was arrested at the same time.

Mark is different, again. Just like Onesimus was the odd one out in the first pair, so too Mark here. Mark, from what we know, grew up with a Christian mother (Acts 12:12) and even accompanied Paul on his earlier humanitarian missions (Acts 12:25). Peter himself regarded Mark as a protégé, even a son (1 Peter 5:13). But, this is the same Mark who's conduct split Paul from Barnabas in Acts 15. Paul, at that time, had severe doubts about Mark's character. And, yet, here, twelve or so years later, Paul and Mark are reconciled (a fact which is affirmed in Paul's last known letter, 2 Timothy 4:11). In fact, this man Mark is responsible for one of the four accounts of Jesus' life that we still have, Mark's Gospel.

The last name – Jesus, or Justus – we know nothing about.

The second three names here – Epaphras, Luke and Demas – are non-Jews.

We have already met Epaphras. He is the man who brought the Gospel to Colossae, his home town ('who is one of you'). Moreover, by the way Paul describes his labour in prayer for this region, he might have been the bearer of the good news to two other towns in the area – Ephesus and Hierapolis. But Epaphras

is no one-hit wonder. He continues to labour – struggle with great intensity – for the benefit of these churches that he has helped establish. His desire is for their maturity and perseverance in their walk with Jesus as Lord. Paul's strong recommendation of Epaphras is somewhat strange, given his positive role in these towns. Perhaps the strength of this recommendation is a sign of how strong the presence of the false teachers really was, even enough to cast a shadow over the original bearer of the Gospel.

Luke is the same Luke who wrote both Luke's Gospel and Acts – the largest contributor to the New Testament. It is here that we are told that he is a doctor (why, we don't know).

Demas is the last name. Like the previous two sets of names we have seen, this set has one that stands at odds. By the time we reach Paul's last letter, 2 Timothy, we find that Demas has deserted Paul (2 Timothy 4:10). And, yet, here, he remains at the centre of Paul's support group in Rome.

Before we move onto the last two sections of this close, it is worth noting that many of these names – in fact, all of them except Justus – are mentioned at the end of Philemon. When we pause and ponder Paul's situation, and the group of people around him, we cannot help but be struck by the amazing 'bible-study' group that existed in Paul's imprisonment. Imagine Onesimus, a runaway slave converted, spending time with a group that included Mark, Luke and Paul – the contributors to the vast majority of the New Testament!

The second last section of the letter focusses on three final brief commands Paul has for the Colossian church – **look at verses 15-17... READ.**

The first command is one of greeting. This church in Colossae is not separate from Laodicea and the Christians who meet there in Nympha's house. Both are house churches, and both are Christians, and both share the same Lord. Paul is in fellowship with them, and he wants the mob in Laodicea to know that.

The second command gives an interesting insight into Paul's letter-writing and the passing on of the commands and ministry he brings. The churches in Colossae and Laodicea have both received letters from Paul, for the purpose of their encouragement. These letters are to be exchanged and read. There is already an awareness by Paul here, and his readers, that his letters are for wider consumption and must be preserved.

The final command is to Archippus. He, from Philemon, seems to be an elder or leader in the Colossian church. He is to be reminded that he has been given a job by God, and he must fulfil it faithfully.

The final section is Paul's closing comment – **look at verse 18... READ.**

This letter has been by Paul. His imprisonment weighs on him – they are commanded to remember his plight. His desire for them is that they know the grace of God.

3. The real community of the Lord Jesus...

After that survey, what do we make of this close?

Let me make three observations:

(i) Real

- Real people...
- Real relationships... the interconnected nature of these relationships
- Real history...

(ii) Community

- The nature of the language...
- The diversity of the community... across social barriers, ethnic barriers, and encompassing towns and regions...
- Deep theology does not preclude real and warm social relationships – in fact, the two are inseparable: deep theology leads to deep relationships in practice...

(iii) The lordship of Jesus

- The only plausible reason for this is the Lordship of Jesus: this makes such a real community reality!
- The forgiveness of sins and peace with God, the change of address, the Lord of the universe – here are the ingredients that make this snapshot so warm.

Such a snapshot raises the question we must ask as we close such a book: is such a real community of the Lordship of Jesus what we exhibit, enjoy and live here?

Place: NAC

Date: 4/10/2020

Passage: Colossians 4:7-18