



BEFORE ALL THINGS

Studies in Colossians

Ron Pickell

Leader's Guide

Before All Things – Leader’s Guide

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Welcome to Before All Things

“The center and the circumference of the Christian life is none other than the person of Christ,” wrote Leonard Sweet. “All other things, including those related to Him, are eclipsed by the sight of His peerless worth. God put an image in our galaxy to demonstrate what Christ is to us. We call it the sun. Without it, no life can exist on planet Earth. We are dependent upon the sun for everything. And just as the sun is the center of our solar system, Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of God’s universe, and even our lives.” (Sweet, Leonard. *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*. Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.)

So many voices. So many questions! Who is right? Does God exist? Which God should we follow? Does anyone have the answer? Paul was excited about what he had come to know and experience about Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had changed his life completely. He went from the greatest skeptic and persecutor of the Christian faith to ardent apostle.

We cannot help be moved by his passion in the first few verses of his letter – “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people – the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace.” (Col. 1:3-6). So, what was it about Jesus that so changed Paul’s mind and heart from hating and attempting to wipe out belief in Jesus to dying for the faith he once tried to destroy?

No literary work of Paul in the New Testament lays out the crux of his *raison d’être* for the supremacy of Christ better than the letter to the Colossians. Here Paul responds to questions others are having about Jesus by getting right to the point. He believes in Christianity because he believed completely in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Each of Paul’s letters have a different scope and cover various issues. His letter to the Romans sets out his clearest and most well-developed argument for the gospel. Galatians is a kind of polemic cliff notes version of Romans. I and II Corinthians deal with a host of practical issues plaguing the church and Ephesians is his clearest ecclesiology and theology of the church, but Colossians, I would suggest, may be his best apologetic work on Jesus among other god’s, beliefs and ideologies. Here Paul differentiates Jesus and His message from other competing ideas and philosophies emphasizing the full and absolute deity of Christ. Colossians helps us understand what is so unique about Jesus and why it so necessary for us to get it right. With so many competing beliefs and ideas on today’s college campus it is the perfect study for students curious about why they should follow Jesus.

As Ravi Zacharias put it so well in *Jesus Among Other Gods*,

“At the heart of every major religion is a leading exponent. As the exposition is studied, something very significant emerges. There comes a bifurcation, or a distinction, between the person and the teaching. Mohammed, to the Koran. Buddha, to the Noble Path. Krishna, to his philosophizing. Zoroaster, to his ethics.

Whatever we may make of their claims, one reality is inescapable. They are teachers who point to their teaching or show some particular way. In all of these, there emerges an instruction, a way of living. It is not Zoroaster to whom you turn. It is Zoroaster to whom you listen. It is not Buddha who delivers you; it is his Noble Truths that instruct you. It is not Mohammed who transforms you; it is the beauty of the Koran that woos you.

By contrast, Jesus did not only teach or expound His message. He was identical with His message. 'In Him,' say the Scriptures, 'dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily.' He did not just proclaim the truth. He said, 'I am the truth.' He did not just show a way. He said, 'I am the Way.' He did not just open up vistas. He said, 'I am the door.' 'I am the Good Shepherd.' 'I am the resurrection and the life.' 'I am the I AM.'"

Zacharias, Ravi. *Jesus Among Other Gods* (pp. 89-90). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

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Breaking Down *Journey*

Journey was created for larger weekly on or off campus meetings in a teaching format and small group discussion. The beginning story or illustration introduces the topic of study.



- **Journey Together** helps ease participants into the topic through ice-breaker related questions.



- **Road Map** is the main passage for discussion followed by questions that help draw out the topic. If you are leading *Journey*, feel free to depart from these as needed and come up with your own questions, while staying on track with the main direction of the study laid out in the leader's guide.



- **My Story** has been prepared as a continuation of the larger group meetings for smaller groups that meet during the week to check in with one another and reflect on how God is using *Journey* in their daily life. We recommend these groups be flexible in terms of location and meeting time. Also, the amount of questions are limited in the My Story section, allowing for more personal interactions and life application.



- **Back Story** is a helpful guide for those leading out in the *Journey* Series and is only included in the leader's book.

Getting the most out of *Journey*

What You're Going to Need for Beyond All Things:

- Good soil—an open and receptive heart
- Willingness to work the soil—determination and diligence
- Hunger and thirst—a desire for God

Dynamic group discussion will bring out points from others that studying alone might miss. However, the most important discipline in what we take from our time in this letter will come from a careful reading of the text. To help us mine the golden truths in this letter here are five suggested practices to get the most from our study and discussion.

The Five S's of Hearing and Discerning God's Voice

- **Seek:** Pray for God to open up the passage for you. Is there a promise for you to claim, a sin to confess, a word for you to follow, an insight to share?
- **Soak:** Read the passage each day and write down any observations, thoughts, questions, connections, or anything God speaks to you about the passage.
- **Seal:** Seal God's word deep within your heart by taking some time to meditate on the most important truth to you this week. Ask God to open the deeper recesses of your heart to teach you what you need most for your life this week.
- **Script:** Journal or write – it can be just a few lines – noting the ways that God spoke to you from the passage, your meditation, or our group time together. This will help you keep better track of God's voice and the way He is speaking through Scripture.
- **Share:** Share with someone what you are learning from your time with God. As you share what you are learning, it will help drive God's word home even more and you will notice how God will use what He has revealed to you to bless others.

Learning to practice these five disciplines will move us beyond a surface reading of the text to God's discernable voice in our life. We want more than Bible facts. We want God to move and act in our life as we read about Him in scripture. This requires a deeper listening to God's voice and soaking in His word. The great thing is that Jesus promised more for those who desired more. See Mark 4:24:

"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more."

We don't want to lose anything of what God has for us. We want to soak it up together – first in our own personal time with the passage for the day, then in group time (Journey Together), again during the teaching time (Back Story) as we all consider the broader lessons together, and finally in our smaller cell groups during the week (My Journey) as we wrestle with God's call in our lives. In the end, my prayer is that we will see our way clearly through the fog of competing and /confusing messages of truth on campus to the Truth of God in Christ for He is...

"Before all things and in him all things hold together." – Colossians 1:17

Journey Covenant

I want to grow in my understanding of Jesus and the life he has for me. I want to participate in Journey to enhance my own relationship with God this year. I will commit to doing the weekly assignments and life group meetings.

Signature _____

My best times of availability are

Morning: _____

Evening: _____

Email address _____

Cell Phone _____

Christ For the World: *Transformed*

The revolutions of 1989 formed part of a wave of freedom in the late 1980s and early 1990s that resulted in the end of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. The period is often referred to as the fall of communism. Nations that had been under communist rule and dictatorship were falling one by one – first Poland then Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and finally, Romania. Just a little over ten years later, the Arab world would also experience a wave of freedom in what would be referred to as the Arab Spring. People were demonstrating in the streets as communist dictatorships fell one by one and much of the change was affected and led by college students. The world seemed to be undergoing a fundamental shift toward freedom as students and ordinary people took to the streets demanding change.

This is the kind of excitement that the Apostle Paul opens with in his letter to the house church in Colossae. As far as we can tell, Paul never visited the city of Colossae, but he had heard about them from his ministry partner Epaphras, who first shared the message of Christ with them. He is excited that the Gospel has come to them and is bearing fruit among them just as it was doing all over the world. The message of Christ was bringing about change and a freedom from within. It is the mustard seed growing into a large tree – the leaven mixing into the dough and permeating the entire batch. It was a message of hope to a world under the oppression of Satan – the world’s worst dictator. What a great beginning to a powerful treatise announcing the victory and supremacy of Christ!



1. What big changes have you experienced in your lifetime?
 2. What good news have you ever shared with perfect strangers?
-



Colossians 1:1-14

1. Paul has never met these people, yet he cares enough about them to write them a letter of appreciation and instruction. What drove Paul to care this much for them? When have you cared enough about perfect strangers on your campus to share the gospel with them?
2. Paul mentions that the Gospel is growing and bearing fruit all over the world. Where do you see the Gospel growing and bearing fruit on your campus, and how is it being spread?
3. Prayer plays a significant role right at the start of Paul’s letter to the Colossians. He is writing to them because he is praying for them. What role does prayer still play in the success of our ministries? What role is prayer playing in your campus ministry?
4. How does Paul’s prayer in verses 9-11 compare with what he thanks God for in verses 12-14?
5. The gospel is growing and bearing fruit all over the world. How is the fruit of faith, hope, and love growing in your life?
6. What do you appreciate most about being rescued from the dominion of darkness, and brought into the kingdom of Christ?
7. How can this group pray for you today?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?
2. How is God using you to share good news on campus?
3. How are you praying for the gospel to be spread on your campus?



Back Story

Have you ever written a letter to someone you did not even know? How about a whole group of people? I certainly haven't, but this is what we have in Paul's letter to the Colossians. The background on Colossians helps explain it to a point. Paul was most likely under house arrest in Rome (60 AD), had time on his hands, and was doing what he could to advance the cause of Christ from jail—similar to many advancing the cause of Christ from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Epaphras, one of Paul's fellow ministry partners, planted the church in Colossae, and Paul wanted to encourage and strengthen them in their new-found faith. There was no Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok here. Instead, Paul wrote them a letter with his own hand. This was surprising since his poor eyesight often caused him to defer to an amanuensis (Romans 16:22).

Paul was already becoming quite the celebrity, having traveled all across modern Turkey and Greece sharing the good news about Jesus and the kingdom of God. Imagine how wonderful it must have been for the small house church to have received a letter from Paul addressed to them! Actually, it was probably pretty amazing to get a letter from anyone in those days, not to mention someone as well-known as the Apostle Paul. But even more important, it's what he writes to them that is so incredible.

Colossae was a small marketing town about 9 miles southeast of the larger neighboring city of Laodicea. It sat on the base of Mt. Cadmus, the highest point in Turkey's western Aegean region. Epaphras was a convert of Paul during his three-year stay in Ephesus. When some questions and theological disagreements arose in the church, Epaphras decided to pay a visit to his mentor, Dr. Paul, and put the questions to him. This is the real reason for Paul's letter. He wrote to encourage their young faith, untangle some theological questions, and support his faithful young disciple—Epaphras.

Noticeably, the words "pray," "prayer," or "praying" come up three times in this brief introduction. Paul wants the Colossians to know that even though they are separated by approximately 1,300 miles they are in direct contact through the divine social media of prayer. In fact, Paul had not stopped praying for them ever since he heard of their faith in Jesus.

Another important element of Paul praying for them was his emphasis on thankfulness. His prayer is bathed in thankfulness to God for their faith and love for all the saints. Their faith in the good news of Christ is part of a much larger community that also believes in Jesus and springs from the hope stored up for them in heaven just as Jesus is now reigning in heaven on their behalf.

Paul went on and on about being filled with wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. He prayed that they might live a life worthy of Jesus and bear fruit for the gospel in every way. He prayed that they may grow and be strengthened with power. Paul appears to have been in a kind of divine ecstasy as he prayed for them. It is a prayer dripping with all the love and grace Paul himself experienced in his own new life in Jesus. He wanted all this for them, but it would only be true for them as they grasped the greatness of Christ and put their complete faith in Jesus.

It takes an encounter with God like Paul had to pray a prayer like this for others! Paul saw the advancement of the gospel for the larger world as he saw this small-town house church of Colossae embracing the message of Jesus and his heart was full for them. This is our invitation to continue Paul's mission in seeing this good news spread throughout the world when we take up the mission of Christ on campus. We are joining ourselves to this great and noble enterprise of advancing the kingdom of God.

Finally, he wound down his introduction to them by including them and himself together in the amazing accomplishment of Christ for each of them:

"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." -Colossians 1:13, 14

Christ Above All: *Transcendence!*

On January 12, 2007 a famous violinist played for 45 minutes in a subway station in Washington, D.C. He played eight selections from Bach, some of the most intricate pieces ever written, on a violin worth \$3.5 million. His name was Joshua Bell, one of the most famous concert violinists in the world. Three days before, he played to a soldout audience in a Boston theatre at \$100 a seat. But in the subway only six people stopped to hear him play. When the music stopped, no one noticed. No one applauded and no one cared.

Paul does his best to help us understand who Jesus really was in verses 15-29 of Colossians. Like Joshua Bell playing his violin in the subway, outside heaven Jesus looked like another humble teacher, but nothing like God in human flesh. He is gentle, compassionate, and selfless. Jesus is approachable, inclusive, and inviting, but we must not forget who He really is. In these verses Paul captures a true glimpse of His greatness. He is *"before all things and in him all things hold together"* (Col. 1:17). Let's see what we can learn about the One who is *"the image of the invisible God and who God dwelt in fully"* (Col. 1:15).



1. Have you ever been in the presence of someone well-known that you mistook for just another average stranger? How did you feel when you learned their true identity?
2. Have you ever been mistaken for someone else? How did it make you feel?



Colossians 1:15-29

1. What are your impressions of Jesus after reading Paul's description here?
2. Paul says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Who else was made in God's image and why is this so important?
3. List some of the many other things Paul mentions here about Jesus. Which things stand out to you? Which ones surprise you or impress you?
4. How important is it that "all the fullness of the Godhead" was dwelling in Jesus? Why do the Colossians need to know this? Why is this important for others to know on your campus?
5. Paul reminds us that the good news is that before Christ came, we were alienated from God, but now we have been brought into His favor through Christ's death and resurrection. Why is this good news for the whole world? Why is this good news to you? How can you share this news on campus?
6. Paul talks about the "glorious mystery of Christ in you." How is this a mystery and what is so glorious about it?
7. Paul says that Jesus is "before all things." How is Jesus before everything else in your life? What things need to take a back seat right now if your life is going to match up with how Paul describes Jesus here? How can you help others recognize the supremacy of Christ?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?
2. How does Jesus mean even more to you after this week's lesson?
3. How can you help your friends understand more about the greatness of Christ?



Back Story

Who was Jesus? The answer to this question ranges from our example on how to live a moral and righteous life to perhaps the greatest life teacher of all time. But was He more than that? Nicodemus, a proud Pharisee, wondered the same thing. In his own private meeting with Jesus in John 3, Nicodemus referred to Jesus as a “rabbi sent from God,” but lurking behind what Nicodemus must have considered a great compliment was the question – was He more than that? Was Jesus more than a divinely sent teacher from God? Was He in fact the long-awaited Jewish Messiah? Was He God in human flesh?

Other Scripture references boldly confess Jesus’ divinity such as John 1:1-4, Hebrews 1:1-3, and many more anecdotal references such as the raising of Lazarus (John 11), His own resurrection from the dead, and Jesus’ self-references to divinity in Luke 22:70, John 4:26, and John 10:30, just to mention a few. But nowhere in the Old or New Testament is the absolute supremacy of Jesus and His clear oneness with God so powerfully stated as in Paul’s eloquent appraisal of Jesus in Colossians 1.

The key and most repeated word in verses 15-29 is “all.” *All* things were created by and for Jesus. He is before *all* things. In Him *all* things hold together. *All* the fullness of God was dwelling in Him. He reconciled *all* things to Himself. We proclaim Him with *all* wisdom. In other words, Jesus is *all* – full stop. Knowing the name of your guardian angel will not get you in closer with God. Keeping certain Jewish festivals will not add to the perfect work of Christ. No angel can bring God down closer to us and no work of humans can bring us closer to God. Jesus is God and has come to us, becoming one of us, taking humanity in our fallen state and lifting us up to God.

All of God is in Jesus and all of God in Him is for all of us. Jesus is 100% God and 100% human. It is His full deity that brings God to us. It is His full humanity that brings us to God. Early followers of Jesus struggled with the deity and absolute supremacy of Christ as evidenced here in Colossians.

Some doubted the divinity of Christ. **Adoptionism** held that Jesus was not really God but merely a man to whom special graces had been given and who achieved a kind of divine status at baptism. Christ as a man was only the “adopted” son of God, not truly God in human flesh.

Docetism (from Greek *dokein*, “to seem”), one of the earliest Christian heresies, affirmed that Christ did not have a real or natural body during His life on earth, but only an apparent or phantom one. Jesus was pure spirit. His physical body was only an illusion. The apostle John warned against this in I John 4:2.

Without the deity of Christ, God has not made His way to us. Without the humanity of Jesus, we have no way to God. Jesus is the great mediator between God and people. If He is not all God, then we still need something more – an added measure, a good luck charm, the name of a high angel, or a good work on our part to appease God just in case Jesus isn’t enough. If He isn’t fully human, then He cannot represent us as the second Adam and the curse of sin has not been buried, bringing sin to an end in Himself. Jesus brings God to us and us to God! We have no other access to God! This is why early followers of Jesus were called people of “the way.” In Jesus they had found the way to God (Acts 9:1, 2).

It’s important that we understand this as there are so many different beliefs and philosophies on campus today. The campus is a smorgasbord of worldviews, each promising the answer. Jesus and belief in Him often get tossed right into the mix. Pseudo Christian messages, like legalism or limiting Christ to just a great teacher among many, can sometimes be the most confusing. Here, Paul sets the record straight. Jesus is not just a superhuman, great teacher, or mythical Greek god offering a hope that we must add to – Jesus plus whatever. Colossians 1:15-29 contains perhaps the clearest words in all the New Testament concerning the true divinity and humanity of Jesus. Jesus is the real deal. He is the one mediator between God and people. He is the one we need. *“He is before all things and in him all things hold together!”*

Dangers of Delimiting Christ: *Entranced*

When I was fresh out of college as a new youth pastor, my wife Carolyn and I were very green and highly influenced by church members older than us. One day while hosting our youth group for lunch one of the parents invited herself along. All was going fine. Carolyn served an amazing meal, but when we relocated to our living room we were shocked to discover that this intrusive mom had taken it upon herself to completely rearrange our entire living room according to her decorative taste while we were busy getting the meal together. Apparently, she thought her arrangement and style superior to ours, so she did us a “favor.” We were speechless. Not wanting to create a scene, we waited until they all left and promptly put everything back the way we had arranged it in the beginning.

Our interior decorating was not sufficient. It needed a superior touch. The misguided religious teachers in Colossians 2 were doing a similar redecorating of the gospel by adding and subtracting various philosophies and religious practices to the already perfect work of Christ, and Paul would have none of it. After all, how can anyone improve on what is already complete, unqualified, and perfect? Let’s see!



1. Have you ever tasted something so good that you could not imagine being able to improve on it? What was it and what made it so perfect?
2. How have you seen others adding to the gospel?



Colossians 2

1. What mysteries of God have been unveiled for you through Jesus? What treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God have you discovered in Him?
2. How are you living and being rooted and built up in Christ?
3. In verse 8 Paul warns against being taken captive to:
 - Hollow/deceptive philosophy
 - Human traditions
 - Basic principles of this world

What do you think he means by each of these and what influence have they had in your life?

4. Paul says we have all come to fullness in Christ. How have you experienced the fullness that Paul talks about here?
5. What was the written code that Christ nailed to the cross and what does it have to do with circumcision?
6. How can religious practices like festivals, Sabbath keeping, and dietary laws degrade into false humility? How are these things only a shadow of the real object—the fullness of God in Christ? How can practices like these become linked to “the elemental spirits of the universe”?
7. Are philosophical ideas, religious practices, and the presence of angels bad in themselves? How can anyone of these delimit Christ? What helps you keep Christ supreme in your life?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?
2. What things in your life are delimiting Christ? How is Jesus becoming more and more to you in your study of Paul's letter to the Colossians?
3. What can you do to help others understand more about the supremacy of Christ?



Back Story

Syncretism might be the best word to describe the situation in Colossae. Webster describes syncretism as "the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought." The church was coming under the influence of certain false teachers who were combining various teachings from different religions to come up with something new in the faith they called "The Way." It was a mixture of Greek philosophy, cultic practices, Christian belief, and Jewish speculations blended together to offer a "richer" or "fuller" spiritual experience. Jesus was one of several deities in their approach to God. Rigorous ascetic disciplines were used to experience trance-like visions. In contrast, Paul presents Jesus as the true Lord of the universe highlighting love, thankfulness, and forgiveness as the marks of true spirituality.

As already mentioned, Paul had most likely never visited the house church of Colossae since it was planted by Epaphras, one of Paul's own disciples. When Epaphras delivered their questions to Paul, he was intent on providing a firm foundation for their faith by clarifying what was true and absolute about Jesus. Was the new life in Jesus just another metaphysical experience—a rapturous release from the body? What kinds of angels or entities could help in the transformation initiated by Jesus? What practices must we perform or cease to enhance a new life in Jesus?

In *Gospel Fluency*, Jeff Vanderstelt reminds us that Jesus is the human we were all meant to be.

"We all needed a new human to give birth to a new humanity—a perfect man who is also the true image of God, fully displaying what God is like by living a fully submitted and obedient life before God. Jesus is that man. 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Col. 1:15)."

Vanderstelt, Jeff. *Gospel Fluency* (pp. 68-69). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

This means we are not starting with us. Our new life is not built on our old life. We are all beginning a completely new existence in and through Christ Jesus. He is the beginning of a new human family. Life in Adam was a train wreck. Jesus is not just a reboot of our old system. He represents a new human species—one that perfectly reflects the image of God. Jesus is not a patch on our old human garment. He's a brand new set of clothes. John writes about this in John 1:12, 13:

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

We don't need to be circumcised, because our old life in the "flesh" was already cut off through our baptismal death in solidarity with Christ. There is no need to judge one another concerning the performance of religious practices since we are all in the same boat—under Adam's curse and destined to a lifeless eternity outside of Christ.

When we understand who Jesus is and how He brought new life into our hopeless existence, we stop trying to build up our old life by ascetic practices or the worship of perceived spiritual elites. All these things are understood for what they really are—feeble attempts to regenerate a lifeless corpse. "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Colossians 2:23).

"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13, 14).

Jesus is more than enough. In fact, He's all we need!

Living in Christ: *Transfixed!*

Iron Man is one of Marvel Comics' fictional superheroes. Actually, he doesn't really have any superpowers unless we consider his super intelligence. (According to the story, Tony Stark is a genius who enrolled at MIT at the age of 15 and finished with degrees in mechanical engineering and physics.) Stark uses his knowledge to build an iron suit—a kind of machine-powered exoskeleton that allows him to fly and transform into a virtual human weapon while protecting him from pretty much every force imaginable. But until Stark slips into his body of protective armor, aside from being a genius, he isn't much different than the rest of us.

What would it be like to slip into a new body and take on a whole new persona? This is how Paul presents our new life *in Christ Jesus*. In solidarity with Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension through baptism, our identity and position have changed. Paul's two favorite expressions describing our new life in Christ are "*in Christ*" and "*Christ in us*." We have been born again into a super life in Christ Jesus. How different things could be if we could shed our old skin and assume a brand new identity—the identity of Christ Jesus who beat death on our account. Not even Iron Man could imagine that!



1. What is your birth order and how has it impacted your life?
2. If you could be anybody else, who would you be and why?



Colossians 3:1-11

1. Where does Paul say Christ is now and what does His position have to do with us?
2. According to verse 1 our greatest challenge concerning our new life in Christ is focus. How do you keep your heart and mind set on Christ above? What distractions do you face on campus from this heavenly focus?
3. What are some of the earthly character traits from our nature listed here? Which of these do you find yourself struggling with most?
4. If we are to consider ourselves dead to our old manner of life and alive in Christ, why do we need to put these things to death if we are already dead to sin? If our life is now hidden with God in Christ above, why do we still find ourselves in tension with the character traits and habits of life on earth?
5. How do you put on the "new self being renewed in knowledge of the image of our creator"? What steps are you intentionally taking for ongoing renewal?
6. What is it about our new identity in Christ that provides the key to victory over our earthly nature, especially amid the distracting and sometimes opposite influence of a college campus?
7. How can this group pray for you?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?
2. What are you learning about living with God in Christ with your heart and mind set on things above, and seated with Christ?

3. How can you help others experience a new position and identity in Christ?



Back Story

Colossians 3:1-11 is about **position** and **identity**. Baptism is a kind of watery grave and personal solidarity in Jesus' death and resurrection. When Jesus died, we died with Him. When Jesus rose from the dead, we rose with Him. When He ascended to His throne, we were seated with Him. Our death, resurrection, and ascension is linked to Him through baptism as we voluntarily become immersed in Jesus. He is our new identity. We live vicariously in Him. "When Christ **who is our life** appears, we also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:3).

We also have a new position. Before Christ, we were condemned under the law. "*But in Christ we have peace with God and have gained access to God's grace in which we now stand*" (Rom. 5:2, 3).

We are no longer cowering under God's wrath, hiding in fear and shame. We have been brought into the open spaces of God's favor, standing in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ—standing instead of stooping! We are in Christ, so where He is, we are. Through Christ, our old life has been buried that we might live anew in Him. Jesus is breathing His pure, divine life in us through His Spirit. "*Since Christ is in me my body is dead because of sin, but my spirit is alive because of righteousness and the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in me. He who raised Christ from the dead is giving life to my mortal body by His Spirit living in me*" (Romans 8:11).

Many years ago, a good friend helped me understand something that is very important for new believers. He reminded me that when we feel tempted, focus is everything. When temptation knocks on our heart's door to sin or doubt our salvation, victory will result not by focusing on sin or our performance. Victory will come from remembering our identity and position in Christ. We must fix our gaze on our sin bearer, not on the strength to fight temptation, for outside of Christ we are, "*Dead in our transgressions and sins, in which we used to live when we followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*" (Ephesians 2:1-7).

Our identity is now in Christ. We were dead in our sins, but we now live in a new triumphant position seated and reigning with Christ. The paradox or key to fitting into our new life is maintaining our focus. Growing up into Christ and becoming like the One we have fixed our gaze upon is a lifelong process. Like Tony Stark, we have been given an Iron Man suit. It's time to get out of our dirty clothes, dress in the clean and fresh clothing Christ has provided, and get comfortable in that clothing. The important thing is who we are. We are not that old person who did not believe or have any hope. No matter what influences or temptations are around us, our victory over our old nature will come from knowing who we are in Christ Jesus and gaining a new focus. This world is no longer our home. We belong to God and our home is with Him.

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:1).

Now we realize why the supremacy of Christ is so important. If Jesus is weak, our victory will be weak. If He is not really God, we are still without God's help. If He was not really human, He cannot become sin for us and bring our old life in Adam to an end. It is because Jesus is who He is that we can now become who we are meant to be—children of God and reigning with Him!

Christ in Us!

Transfusion

Return to Me is a romcom film from 2000 about a woman receiving a heart transplant from the deceased wife of the man she eventually falls in love with. Bob (David Duchovny) and Elizabeth Rueland (Joley Richardson) live and work in Chicago. Bob is an architect and Elizabeth is a zoologist. Elizabeth is killed in a car accident, and her heart is transplanted to Grace Briggs (Minnie Driver), who has suffered from heart disease since the age of 14 and is nearing death. Blood pulsates through Grace's veins from the healthy, vigorous transplanted heart of Elizabeth. Her borrowed heart feeds every area and organ of her body. You could say that Elizabeth is alive in Grace so much so that when she meets Bob and they begin a relationship, both he and Bob's dog seem to sense a familiarity in Grace that somehow reminds them of Elizabeth.

Transfusion is the goal of our new life in Christ as well. We were in the death spiral of sin. We needed a heart transplant. Jesus took our old diseased and broken hearts to Himself. This is what took His life. Scripture makes clear that He died of a broken heart—our broken hearts. In His resurrection, Jesus' life-giving heart has been transplanted in us. His life is now pulsating through our veins. We live because He lives! What's it like to have God's heart beating in our chest? Let's find out!



1. Have you ever given or received a blood transfusion? What was that like?
2. What would you choose as part of a completely new wardrobe?



Colossians 3:12-4:1

1. Christ in us is like donning a new set of clothes. What aspect of your old nature wears like a comfortable old shirt and is hard to part with?
2. What are some of the items Paul lists in our new set of clothes? Which ones grab your attention? Which ones are you eager to try on? Which ones will you be comfortable wearing when you're out with others?
3. After a closer look, our new clothes appear more like a uniform. Our life in Christ is a life in community. How would our witness on campus be received if our community was dressed in these articles of clothing?
4. Letting Christ rule in our community reminds me of filling out our new clothes. The wardrobe we have been given by Christ is way too big for us. It will take time for our community to grow into these garments. What measures will need to be taken for Christ to rule in your community?
5. Christ's life pulsating through the veins of our community impacts our romantic relationships, familial relationships, and student to student/employer to employee relationships. Why is submission the key to healthy relationships in each of these areas? What do you find most difficult about submitting to others?
6. What do you need to pray for as a community for Christ in you, the hope of glory?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?
2. What are you learning about the life of God in you and your community?
3. How can you help others become transfused with the life of Christ?



Back Story

Living in Christ and Christ living in us are two different things. The first implies being justified before God. The second is about sanctification. Justification is the work that Christ has done by Himself and for us. Sanctification is the indwelling of Christ where we are fitting into His life more and more each and every day.

Because we are living in the new trajectory of Christ's life, we belong to Him now. We are part of God's family. We are in Christ Jesus and we have a new destiny – a future in heaven with Him. In this new identity and position with God in Christ, we are no longer God's enemies. Christ has called us His friends. In this new relationship we have been given a new wardrobe – the righteousness of Christ. Each garment is woven in the loom of Christ's sacrificial love and humility.

Christ in us bring up words like **take off, put on, let,** and **submit**. *Take off* our old filthy garments layered together with the tattered remnants of this world, like the fig leaves pieced together from the human fall in the garden. *Put on* the beautiful new clothes of Christ's righteous life. *Let* this new life in Christ fill us as we begin to live in our new wardrobe of forgiving love and unity. *Let* God work in what He has worked out. *Submit* to our new wardrobe as we learn to submit to one another in place of competition and rivalry.

You might be wondering about the mixed metaphors of transfusion and wardrobe. The wardrobe is what others see on the outside. It's often the thing that matters most to us. We can hide a lot under a new set of clothes. Most people dress their best for church. But each article of clothing that Paul mentions here leads back to the transfusion of Christ in us. Our new wardrobe reflects what Christ has done, is doing, and will continue to do in us as we stay focused on Him.

"Therefore, my dear friends continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12, 13).

Of course, where it gets sticky is in our closest relationships. Most quarrels and conflict arise from the close relationships between family members, friends, colleagues, and classmates. It is no wonder that Paul applies Christ in us to our dearest and most challenging relationships.

We are called to live in our relationships at church, at school, on the job, and at home as citizens of a new kingdom where Christ is supreme and His manner of life in us leads us to treat others the way we have been treated by Him. Christ is the new standard – something we will never fully achieve on earth, but are always living toward in our high and holy calling in Christ Jesus!

We are now in Christ Jesus, but praise God. Christ is now alive in us giving new power, new love, and new life. It is a different way to live. Our broken and diseased hearts have been replaced with the heart of heaven. This is God's most precious gift to us on earth – the pearl of great price, the hidden treasure. We must be ready to sell all to have what Christ has given though we could not buy it with all the gold on earth.

This is the *"mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people (us). To them (us) God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles (world/campus) the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you (all of us), the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:26, 27). Amen!*

Christ in Community!

Transaction

College was a great experience for me. I made some of the best friends I ever had in college. Even now I could name the people I learned to love, pray with, hike and camp with, study scripture with, and oh yes, sit with through classes. Christian community is one of the things I appreciated most about college.

The last chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians reminds me of the kind of community of friends I developed in college and have continued to enjoy in my relationships with college students over the years. He opens by praying for the people of Colossae and moves on to name the people God placed in his life to share in friendship and ministry. What Paul describes here in these few verses as he mentions each one by name is the kind of community Jesus had in mind when He commanded us to love one another as He loves us. Let's see what we can learn from the kind of deep relationships Paul mentions here and about the supremacy of Christ experienced and shared in the fellowship of Jesus.



1. What new friends have you made in college? What do you appreciate most about each one?
2. Give an example of something important you learned about Jesus from others.



Colossians 4:2-18

1. Paul spends nearly one fourth of his letter greeting people in Colossae and mentioning his fellow partners in the Gospel. Who are these people and what do they mean to Paul?
2. Prayer is the link between Paul, his partners, and the Colossians. What are they praying for and why is it so important for their relationship and ministry?
3. What is Paul's advice for speaking about Jesus to outsiders in verses 5 and 6? What do you think he means by letting our conversation be seasoned with salt?
4. Onesimus is one of the people delivering Paul's letter to the Colossians. Onesimus is the main character in Paul's personal letter to Philemon, also a citizen of Colossae and member of the church. Who is Onesimus to Paul and what is his relationship to Philemon? What can we learn about reconciliation and interceding for others here? (Read the short read of Philemon.)
5. What are you learning about the supremacy of Christ in your own ACF chapter modeled here by Paul's Christian community?
6. Why not complete your small group time praying for some of what Paul prayed for here?
 - For others sharing the gospel on your campus and for other ACF leaders.
 - Divine appointments with others making the most of every opportunity.
 - Clarity in sharing the message of Jesus.
 - Wisdom and tact in our speech with unbelievers.
 - Grace and thoughtful answers to legitimate questions about belief in Christ.



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about wrestling in prayer for one another as modeled by Epaphras for the Colossians?
 3. How can you help your ACF chapter look more like Paul's Christian community and partners in the gospel?
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Back Story

Jesus is the one who raised our level of awareness of love for one another. The great test of relationship and commitment to Yahweh was the command that undergirded all others: the Shema. *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5).

The second great command was always there, *"Love your neighbor as yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18), but it was buried in the commands relating to one another. Jesus brought it into sharp focus and placed it right alongside the great commandment:

"One of the teachers of the law came and ...asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'

'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these'" (Mark 12:28-31).

It could be said that because of the emphasis Jesus placed on loving our neighbor—incloding it as the second great command, demonstrating it in His own fellowship with the disciples, and teaching about it in stories like the Good Samaritan—that loving one another is the foundational teaching of Jesus. In fact, Jesus said how we treat those in need is the basis for the final judgment. He said that when we care for others, we are caring for Him (Matthew 25:31-46).

John, the disciple who referred to himself as *the disciple that Jesus loved*, said that if we say we love God while hating our neighbor we are a liar (I John 4:20). This means if our goal is loving God the way Jesus did, the first step may be learning to love and appreciate the people that Jesus loved and for whom He gave His life. We cannot love God without learning to love one another. John even referred to this as the new command from Jesus. He said it wasn't actually new, but it was new in Jesus since we learned it and experienced it first in Him (I John 2:7-11).

But it was Jesus who said that the best way for others to learn about Him was through loving one another. Paul picks up on this and reminds us that even the way we approach others about Jesus and His message is a witness to Jesus' kindness and grace. He said we need to *"Let our conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone"* (Col. 4:6).

In Paul's time, salt was used primarily as a preservative, keeping meat from spoiling. It was valuable enough to be used as a form of currency. Salt also changes the flavor of whatever it is added to. Paul's metaphor of salt has more than one meaning. Our words are to preserve the message of Christ, helping it effectively reach as many people as possible. What we say should add value to the conversation; our words need to uplift or help. Finally, the truth of our words from our renewed lives need to be clear in the flavor of how we speak and act.

It's powerful when we meet and talk with someone who is thoughtful and kind in both word and deed, speaking words filled with grace. Still, it is exponentially more powerful when we experience an entire community of people who have been transformed by the message of Jesus. Here we see and recognize the powerful transaction of Christ in others. Christian community is the undeniable witness of the supremacy of Christ. When He is first in our lives and first in our community, His life is put on display for all to see. In Christian community Jesus is literally *before all things!*

Christ on Campus!

Translation

We were conducting a CRAVE Campus Outreach, inviting students to write about their cravings on a large black 8' x 8' wall. Students were stopping by and writing on the wall while seminary students in their field school of the campus evangelism program engaged them in conversation about human urges and cravings. There was a point to this. Students were being invited to evening messages and discussion on how our cravings lead to the craving we all have to love and be loved.

Interesting conversations can take place with students on campus. Some lead to deeper questions and an interest in spiritual things. One of our conversations seemed to be heading in that direction with an older gentleman who wasn't even a student. However, the more he talked about Jesus and the kingdom of God, the kingdom he referred to seemed very different from the kingdom Jesus talked about. He was using the right words, but had a completely different perspective of Jesus' mission and message. Our message seemed lost in translation.

I have a similar impression of the issues and questions Paul addresses here in the letter to the Colossians. The Colossians are using the same words in discussion about Christ and His message, but the meaning is very different from Paul's. They too seemed to be missing the translation of Christ. This is why Paul painstakingly goes point by point to emphasize the absolute supremacy of Jesus. Looking back over the entire letter to the Colossians will help us appreciate even more how Jesus is *before all things*!



1. What's one new thing you have learned about yourself, others, your studies, or life in general this week?
2. When have you found it difficult to explain an important truth or concept to someone who speaks a different language than yours?



Colossians 1-4 (main focus on 1:15-20)

1. What are some of the most important things you are going to take away from the letter to the Colossians? What have you learned about the mystery of Christ that Paul mentions here again and again?
2. What was your comprehension of Jesus and His message before this series? How has your understanding grown or changed?
3. What do Paul's words "*He is before all things and in Him all things hold together*" mean to you now?
4. If someone were to ask you who Jesus is or why He is so pivotal to our understanding of God and our relationship to Him, how would you answer them from the letter to the Colossians?
5. How will you translate Paul's message to the Colossians for yourself, your ACF chapter, and your campus?
6. How will the letter to the Colossians help you to be "*wise in the way you act before outsiders*"?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?
2. What is one thing you have been able to share with others from the letter to the Colossians?
3. How are you helping your ACF chapter put Jesus first and before all things including time, finances, relationships, family, and school programs?



Back Story

Bob Dylan wrote and sang “Gotta Serve Somebody” in 1979, but it’s still true today:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you’re gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody*

For Paul, the only One to serve—the only One that makes sense to serve—is Jesus Christ! One thing we pick up from this short letter to the people of Colossae is Paul’s big, big vision of Jesus. He was concerned that false teachers had come in after Epaphras shared the message of Jesus with them and were marginalizing Jesus, among other beliefs and practices. Jesus was fast becoming part of the answer, but not *the* answer. The people of Colossae were hearing mixed messages of Christ plus angelic messengers, Christ plus obeying Jewish laws and ordinances, and Christ plus a certain mysterious and spiritual inside knowledge popular in Paul’s day known as Gnosticism. Jesus wasn’t enough. Jesus wasn’t all.

Paul needed them to realize that in Jesus they had all they needed. There was nothing the Colossians could add to their life in God by knowing the right angel, obeying more and more spiritual practices, or by a secret hidden knowledge greater than what had been revealed about God through Christ. Jesus was the wisdom of God, the righteousness of God, and the fullness of God.

“So what is Christianity?” writes Leonard Sweet. “It is Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Christianity is not an ideology or a philosophy. Neither is it a new type of morality, social ethic, or worldview. Christianity is the ‘good news’ that beauty, truth, and goodness are found in a person. And true humanity and community are founded on and experienced by connection to that person. Conversion is more than a change of direction; it’s a change of connection.”

Sweet, Leonard. *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*. Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

But people have a hard time seeing this today through the stained-glass windows of the church, the confusion of the many other gods on campus, and the hypocritical lives of Jesus followers. How will people learn to translate the Jesus we have come to know through Paul’s message to the Colossians? We are the translation. We are the ones to bring the message home. As translators, we must know the original language (message) as well as the language of the people we hope to share Him with, and this is the problem. The message of Jesus is too often lost in translation.

We either know a lot about Jesus as experienced at church or we know a lot about the world of the campus, but seldom are we familiar enough with the person of Jesus presented here in Colossians while still being relevant and in contact with people around us who need to hear our story. This then is our challenge—to make the Jesus of Paul known to our friends on campus. This will demand an intentional observation and modeling of the person of Christ. He will need to become all to us. When we put Jesus before everything else, Jesus will mean more to our friends. They will see Jesus in us! The way to reveal Jesus to others is for Him to be real and first in our lives. This is our call to make Christ supreme on campus by putting Him *before all things*—beginning with us!

