

Getting the Most Out of *Colossians & Philemon*

“More! More!” urged our son John when I laid down the spoon after feeding him.

“Again! Again!” pleaded our daughter Sara as I turned the last page in the book I was reading to her.

Their cries for more pudding or stories are echoed in our culture’s search for more—more power, more money, more knowledge, more gadgets, more furniture, more clothes—more everything!

Books on self-improvement and success flood the market. Gurus gain eager followers by offering enlightenment, power and secret wisdom. Millions read horoscopes every day.

Not only in our society but also in the church, we cry for “more.” If only we had more wisdom, more maturity, more power, more faith. To fill these needs we attend seminars, go to concerts, hear celebrity speakers and read their latest books.

Colossians was written to Christians with similar longings. They didn’t know Who and what they already had. False teachers urged them to add rules, ascetic practices and new philosophies to their Christian faith. Then they would have fullness of life. Paul writes to satisfy their desire for more by showing that they already had fullness in Christ.

Paul never traveled to Colossae, a city in the Lycus River valley about a hundred miles east of Ephesus and twelve miles from Laodicea. But somehow he met Epaphras, the man who had taken the gospel to Colossae, and Philemon, the host for the local house church.



6 ————— *Colossians & Philemon*

While in prison in Rome, Paul learned from Epaphras about the Colossian church and the pressures threatening their peace and stability. These “faithful brothers” had not turned away from faith in Christ. Paul’s warm, friendly letter affirms their positive qualities and the changes in their lives. But he warns them against being deceived by “fine-sounding arguments” (2:4) or being captured by “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and on the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (2:8).

The temptation to add ascetic practices, regulations or “superior knowledge” threatened their dependence on Christ alone for the fullness of life they wanted. The early Gnostics boasted about a spiritual “fullness” not previously experienced. They promised to complete and perfect the simple and elementary faith introduced by Paul and Epaphras. They emphasized a deeper knowledge of God, reserved for a special few, and an experience of greater power.

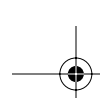
Colossians is Paul’s strongest declaration of the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ, his full authority over all powers and the fullness of life he gives. Paul spells out the implications of this fullness of life again and again in the letter.

Like the Colossians, we are bombarded by longings for something more. But Paul thunders in Colossians, You already have fullness in Christ. Enjoy it! “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ” (2:9-10).

The little book of Philemon is the only surviving letter of Paul to an individual friend and convert about a private matter. In it we learn that Onesimus, one of Philemon’s slaves, had stolen from his master and run away to Rome. In that great city he met Paul and became a Christian. Under Roman law Philemon had the right to brand a returned slave and even kill him.

Paul applies what he wrote in Colossians: “Here there is no Greek or Jew. . . slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (3:11). Philemon and Onesimus are given the chance to participate in a revolutionary new process for reconciliation.





Getting the Most Out of Colossians & Philemon — 7

The purpose of this guide is to help you discover the scope, reality and implications of the fullness of life you have in Christ. The first study gives you an overview of the tone and contents of the letter. The next eight studies help you explore and apply the main ideas of each section. Study ten examines Paul's letter to Philemon, which gives principles for mending broken relationships.

May Colossians and Philemon enlarge your appreciation of Jesus Christ and the fullness of life he has already given you. May you live out that fullness in joyful gratitude to him.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

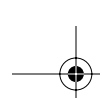
2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author's meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. If you are studying a book, it will be helpful to read through the entire book prior to the first study. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.





8 ————— *Colossians & Philemon*

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under “Now or Later,” or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

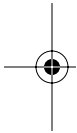
2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

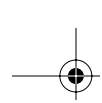
3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for





Getting the Most Out of Colossians & Philemon — 9

others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

