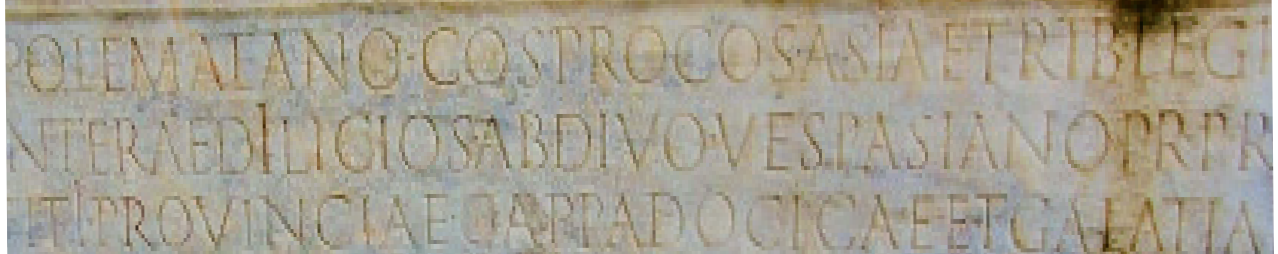




FOUNDATIONS

Lessons in Discipleship
from the New Testament Church



Study Guide



CENTER FOR
HOLY LANDS STUDIES

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Colossae The Light of the Lycus Valley

Bible Text: Colossians 3:22-25; Philemon

Have you considered how life has a way of placing values on individuals and projecting that supposed value into our thoughts and the thoughts of others? For example, if I were to ask you, “Who is the more important person, Bill Gates or the nineteen-year-old who handed your coffee to you at Starbucks?” What would your immediate response be?

Naturally, we are drawn to someone like Bill Gates. He is famously wealthy. He owns a worldwide corporation that employs many people and is known for his philanthropy. The Starbucks barista has not knowingly accomplished anything near that level of success in the eyes of the world. What if I told you that as a follower of Christ, both of these individuals should appear as equals to you.

Although the world would convince us that one individual is more valuable than another, the Bible says otherwise.

While discipling those in the regions of Asia Minor, the apostle Paul struggled with an audience who had become accustomed to understanding value based on the ways of the world. It was a society built on wealth, enslavement, chauvinism, and cultural supremacy. In Paul’s writings to the church of Colossae, a particular set of events gave Paul the perfect opportunity to teach the church members how to see the value of the individual in the way that God intended, rather than how the world projected.

Although it would have been easy for Paul to adhere to his day’s cultural norms, he understood that if the church was going to grow and remain strong, the value of humanity needed to be realigned. This lesson was taught using one of the most powerful and influential churches in Asia Minor. Their influence allowed God’s truth to permeate through the generations.



WATCH THE LIGHT OF THE LYCUS VALLEY VIDEO

Through the examples of Onesimus, Philemon, and the Colossian church, Paul effectively instilled a foundational truth. This truth separates the worldly view from the biblical teaching that each of us holds undeniable, intrinsic value in the eyes of God. Therefore, humanity should hold the same inherent value in the eyes of each person.

From the opening pages of Scripture, Genesis 1:26 states that human beings were made in God's image and likeness. No matter what we look like physically, no matter what we accomplish or neglect to achieve in this life, we represent the image of God. We bear an unmatched intrinsic value over any other part of creation. Further, no individual is created more or less in His image. We have equal value in the eyes of God.



Our Father gave what was of utmost importance to Him, His Son, Christ Jesus, for all humanity serves as proof of this reality. Therefore, if we are the Church, built on the teachings and life of Christ, it becomes a requirement to place great value on each person because they bear God's image. This fact does not appear to have been second nature to the church of Colossae. They were a mixed crowd of Jewish and Gentile believers. Some in the church should have known better. The Jewish believers knew the Scriptures and the value they placed on humanity.

For the Gentiles, and like some in the Church today, it was the first time they had heard these truths about the value of humanity in God's kingdom. These new believers had spent years of their life being told, "If you were born in this family, you have this status and value." They were just learning that as Colossians 3:11 states,

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

The revelation of the value of humanity to the Colossian church is essential! Paul is almost taking a page out of the early pages of the Bible. He chose to teach the truth to this church through the example of someone

who was not strong and grand in the eyes of the general population. Instead, just as God used David, Gideon, and Ehud, Paul used the example of the most unexpected individual to teach God's truths a slave.

In the days of the first century, the perceived low value of a slave was driven into the minds of the population by the pagan Roman Empire. Slaves were not even considered people, simply property. They could be sold, traded, mistreated, abused, killed, seized to cover debts of a master, subjected to prostitution, and even used in gladiatorial fights. Roman law had minimum protection for a slave. They existed at the will of their masters, those individuals the world considered worth more than they.

Also, Paul's example grew more profound, as we cannot escape the fact that according to Roman law, Onesimus was a criminal. Though we do not know Onesimus's dealings, Paul's words in Philemon 18 allow us to see that Onesimus had cost his master a great deal of money that he clearly could not repay. As a slave, there were no options that Onesimus would have had to make the wrong right, resulting in his flight from his master or, stealing himself.

Under Roman law, Onesimus had no right to ask his master Philemon for forgiveness, as such an act was unheard of. Yet, only one verse earlier, Paul made the boldest of all of his requests in his short letter to Philemon and the Colossian church, "*welcome him as you would welcome me*" (Philemon 17). Paul was an apostle of Christ and a leader of the church body. He was commissioned by the resurrected Christ and a spiritual father to the church of Colossae. And he was telling them that Onesimus, a slave and criminal, was to be treated no differently than if it were Paul himself standing before them.

Perhaps the first thought in the minds of the Colossian church members was, *why. Why is Paul lowering himself to the level of a slave.* However, Paul never lowered himself to the level of Onesimus. Instead, Paul placed Onesimus and all others like him in the elevated position of a human being created in God's image.

Much like Onesimus, Paul knew that he had no right to forgiveness in his previous life before he knew Christ. Colossians 2:13 reminds each of us that, "*You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away,*" and with Ephesians 2:12, echoing this saying, "*You lived in this world without God and without hope.*"

We, too, must realize that we were once in the same fallen state as Paul. Our sin brought about what would have been impending eternal doom. However, Colossians 2:13 continues with a reminder that,

God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.

Paul served as Onesimus's advocate just as Christ had already been Paul's advocate on the cross. Just as a slave in the first century, we too were at one point slaves to sin, with no hope of breaking out of the downward spiral. Paul wrote in Romans 6:20 - 23,

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the obligation to do right. And what was the result? You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom. But now, you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul's example embodied the same reality as when Christ looked upon humanity in our fallen, sinful state. We were those that the enemy would deem as worthless and criminal but were brought to a place of forgiveness because we have value to God.

Our faith foundations are built on God creating humanity in His image. Our foundations are built on loving God and loving all who are created in His image, without exception. This is just one discipleship lesson we can learn from Paul's example of Onesimus and the church in Colossae, and God's care for humanity.



