

“Forgiveness”

*Colossians 2:9–10; Colossians 2:11–12;
Colossians 2:13–14 (NRSV)*

Through the cross and resurrection, God chooses to offer us forgiveness that we might be made right not only with God, but in our community.



If you look at the Scripture passages for this week, you will see that all three form a single passage within which the images of community, cross, and new creation are interwoven. We begin with the “you” in verse 8, which we ought to read as “y’all,” for Paul is speaking to the community. It is we, as a body, as the body of Christ, that have “come to fullness in him [Christ]” (v. 10). If, when reading Paul, you are ever unsure whether a second person pronoun is singular (you) or plural (y’all), assume it is plural and you will almost certainly be right. Paul speaks to the community of believers throughout his letters. After all, he is their pastor.

Verse 12, takes us to the cross, where we find that we have not only been buried with Christ but also raised with him, which takes us barreling into the new creation and our proclamation that the kingdom of God was inaugurated in and by Jesus . . . and nothing can ever be the same. Jesus has forgiven our sins, nailing to the cross the list of charges against us. We have been made alive with Jesus. What powerful images. As Paul writes in 2 Cor. 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ -- New Creation!! -- the old has gone and the new has come.” Nothing has been the same since that Friday in Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago.

Fullness?

Survey after survey reveals that Americans, Christian and non-Christian alike are becoming increasingly ignorant of the most basic teachings of the Christian faith. We’ve talked for years about the growth of a competing “christianity” – similar in name and form to the real thing, but still a fraud—I call it “churchianity.” Further, there has been an unending stream of competing gospels fed to us, each telling its own story of how we can be rescued, what we must do to save the planet or save ourselves, build a world of peace and harmony, and so on.

Since humans tend to believe that the answer lies within themselves, Paul faced much the same problem in his day. People put their trust in many complicated schemes by which they might get right with the gods. They indulged in much deep thinking about the whole thing. So, Paul wrote the Christians in Colossae and urged them to “see to it that nobody enslaves you with philosophy and foolish deception, which conform to human traditions and the way the world thinks and acts rather than Christ” (Col. 2:8). Paul had worked mightily against a competing gospel in Galatia—embrace the Law of Moses (circumcision, dietary laws...) if you want to be a true follower of Jesus, the opponents said—Paul didn’t even try to be nice to the pushers of that fraud. Similarly, in Colossae there are some who wanted to add-on this and that to the simple gospel of Christ. Paul would have none of it.

Earlier in Colossians 1:19, Paul had written, “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” and now in 2:9 he reiterates his point with, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” And then without even pausing, Paul goes right on to say, “you have been filled by him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.” N.T. Wright illuminates these simple but world-altering verses for us:

What he means, simply, is that Jesus was and is not simply a fully human being (though he is); not simply a man remarkably ‘full of God’ (though he’s that as well). He was and is the bodily form taken by God himself, God in all his fullness. He isn’t a demigod, half divine and half human. He doesn’t have a

human body and a divine spirit, or mind. He can only be properly understood as the human being who *embodies*, or ‘incarnates’, the fullness of divinity.

This meant, of course, that all the pagan deities and divinities were at once upstaged. The pagan world sometimes spoke of demigods, or heroes who became divine around the time of their death. Jesus wasn’t like that. He was the real thing. But it also meant that Paul was cutting the ground away from any potential attack from the Jewish side. Jews, including Paul himself, believed that God was one. Many, perhaps Paul himself in his pre-Christian days, would have said that therefore Jesus couldn’t be divine; that the best that could be said of his followers, particularly the ex-pagan ones, was that they should now go on to discover the true God, the creator, the sovereign Lord of all. Not so, says Paul: if you want to find the true God, you need look no further than Jesus himself. Verse 9 is perhaps the sharpest and clearest statement in all his writings of his belief that Jesus quite literally embodies the one true God, God in all his fullness.

If you possess Jesus, therefore, you are already ‘fulfilled’ in him, and no rule or authority can go, as it were, over his head and impose itself on you. He is the head of them all. The church in our own day still needs to recapture that vision of the supremacy of King Jesus over all other authority.¹

Paul the Pastor

Paul’s vocation, given him by God, was to crisscross the Mediterranean founding Christian colonies across the Roman empire. He was founding churches and helping them grow. It may have been 2,000 years ago in a world far different from our own, but still, many of the problems and opportunities Paul had to deal with are the ones we deal with. Paul was helping new Christians and more mature Christians to grow in their discipleship and to grasp the enormity of the three-word statement: Jesus is Lord. He was helping them find their way to unity in the body of Christ. He was teaching them the full meaning and depth of the Christian proclamation so that they might withstand a hostile world and false teachers of the gospel. In the deepest sense, Paul was helping people to make their way into the people of God and, once there, to make their way toward God and one another . . . toward a genuine with-God life.

Paul’s letters are the oldest writings we have about Jesus and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, people, particularly in television specials, will try to pit Paul against Jesus, as if Paul messed up the simple teachings of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this metaphor will help. Imagine Jesus’ life and teachings, his death and resurrection, to be a symphony composed by our Lord. You can think of Paul as that symphony’s first great conductor. The music is Jesus’, but Paul is the one who teaches the orchestra (yes, that is you and me) to play as one beautiful and skilled ensemble.

Fullness and forgiveness

If you start with this claim, that Jesus embodies fully the Creator of all that is, then the rest of Paul’s claims begin to fall into place. How could we need anyone other than Jesus? To say that there is a way to go to God that doesn’t include Jesus is illogical. To say that Jesus is not enough is to say that God is not enough! Jesus is sufficient in all things, for all things.

But Paul doesn’t stop even there. He wants us to grasp that in a very real way, we have already died with Jesus and been resurrected with him (v. 12). Already, we are new creations. Already, we have been born anew. Already, forgiveness is ours. All this because Jesus obliterated all our debts, our wrongs, our trespasses by nailing them to a cross. What powerful and direct words and phrases. Is Jesus enough? Is his grace sufficient

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (pp. 167–168). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

for all things? The “yes” that is our answer, is the answer the world longs for but doesn’t know it or won’t hear it.

Of course, the cross looms over all this. New creation came at a price, such a terrible price. Sin and death were not defeated by sword or army, but by one man’s willingness to be faithful to God, even to death . . . death on a cross. Andrew Lincoln asks us to consider whether we are really ready to live by the proclamation Paul makes:

The challenge issued to the readers of Colossians is one that remains for Christians: Is this proclamation about Christ’s death a metaphor by which we are prepared to live? Do we believe that this answer to the power of evil is really sufficient? The gospel proclaims that Christ has conquered evil; yet, evil still threatens and flourishes. . . . For all readers of Colossians, a major test of authentic adherence to the gospel and to the confession of Christ as Lord is whether they are convinced enough of the sufficiency of God’s action in the crucified Jesus to gamble their lives on the paradoxical power of the way of the cross rather than making compromises with other powers.²

The question is, are we truly ready to embrace and live in the truth that Christ is indeed sufficient for the forgiveness of our sins?

Daily Bible Readings

(More from Colossians)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| Monday | Colossians 1:1-14 | Paul gives thanks for the Colossians |
| Tuesday | Colossians 1:15-23 | The supremacy of Jesus Christ |
| Wednesday | Colossians 2:6-19 | The whole passage on the fullness of life in Christ |
| Thursday | Colossians 3:1-17 | Our new life in Chris |
| Friday | Colossians 3:18-4:6 | A household code for the believers in ancient Colossae – look for the mutuality in this code. What do you think would have surprised the first-century Greco-Roman readers? |
| Saturday | Colossians 4:7-18 | Final greetings and benedictions |

² Lincoln, A. T. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Colossians. L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 11, p. 628). Nashville: Abingdon Press.