

Colossians 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 29 August 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Colossians chapter 4 Colossians chapter 4 Colossians chapter 5

Luke the beloved physician greets you As does Demas Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea And to Nympha and the church in her house And when this letter has been read among you Have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans And see that you also read the letter from Laodicea And say to Archippus See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord I Paul write this greeting with my own hand Remember my chains Grace be with you Paul continues his instructions concerning proper household order At the beginning of chapter 4 Before concluding his epistle with requests and greetings A well-ordered household is a matter that is addressed on several occasions in the New Testament The church itself is a household And its members have their own households Especially in this stage of the church's history Much of its life would have occurred within the realm of households With wealthier members hosting a congregation within their house And supporting its ministers and ministries as patrons Nympha in this very chapter Is an example of a woman who hosts a church within her house

When we think of the household we may think of a domestic realm of retreat From the world of work, study and public life Where we recharge ourselves and enjoy the company of our immediate family It's a realm primarily of recreation However in the world within which Paul is writing The household was a very great deal more than that Our own society is more of a historical outlier in this respect The household was far more integral to society A centre of labour, business and government The household was its own economy and productive entity Within which its members needed to depend upon good order And collaborative labour in order to survive and thrive It wasn't the case that the man typically went out to work While the woman stayed at home as the housewife Households weren't narrowly focused on the young nuclear family But were more extended and intergenerational in their character Much that occurred in many households Would be more analogous to the operations of a medium-sized company today At points, God's government is understood after the analogy of the management of a household

God is a father And his fatherhood in the wider cosmos Is analogous to the place of the father within his earthly household All of this is important to bear in mind when we are reading these household codes Which have a fair amount in common with some other household codes in the ancient world Aristotle or Xenophon's teaching on the household And concerning men and women within it Have many points of similarity with the New Testaments And we should beware of overstating the differences Even though there most definitely are some differences In many respects, Paul is nearer to that world than he is to ours When we read about wives submitting to their husbands, for instance We should keep the form of the household in mind Within the ancient household, the free man bore a weighty set of responsibilities Of provision, protection and judgment In overseeing the labour and relations of his household The submission of his wife is not primarily about giving him the deciding vote in matters of dispute As some understand it today But in honouring, upholding and counselling him

As she works alongside him in the labour of forming a well-ordered and just household That impacts the wider society The ideal is that, as she supports him His realm of influence and weight in the wider society will increase And as his wise and supportive second-in-command She will enjoy a growing field for her own labours And level of honour within her community A wife who is constantly undercutting the authority of her husband in his household Or bringing dishonour to him in their community Is not a good wife On the other hand, and this is perhaps where the distinctive emphases Of the Christian teaching are most pronounced A man who does not exercise his authority within his household In a way governed by love Building up and encouraging those within it Is failing in his calling The formation of the household is a collaborative effort And the primary locus are both the man and the woman's labour It is a rather different situation from the modern situation Where men and women typically both leave their homes And sell the best part of their labour and its fruits to unrelated persons

[5 : 37] In order to serve the business enterprises of third parties Rather than labouring in their own households Before returning home to consume some of the money that they have earned At the end of the day and over the weekend While it may be strange of us to think of it in such a manner Certain aspects of our situation are more analogous to that of high-status slaves And there are analogies to be drawn between the modern business owner And the master of slaves Both of whom might exert considerable power over those who work under them Paul does not condemn the owning of slaves While a slave-owning society is none ideal Much as a society that imprisons people It is not presented as necessarily sinful within the Old or New Testaments In both Testaments there are a number of righteous slave owners In neither Testament is there any straightforward condemnation of slavery The institution of slavery in the ancient world more generally And in classical antiquity more particularly Was brutal and oppressive in its general character Although the conditions of slave could vary markedly

And many would have enjoyed materially better conditions Than those of poor free persons Manumission would not have been a step up in the world for many slaves For all of its common abuses It was also more morally complex than the chattel slavery characteristic Of the American antebellum South Which was a form of slavery generally ordered around race and man-stealing That form of slavery which is very clearly condemned categorically within scripture Tends to serve as our paradigm for thinking about slavery more generally It should not do so When as here in verse 1 Paul addresses slave owners His concern is not to abolish the institution But to leaven it by love Slave owners need to treat their servants with fairness and with justice In Ephesians chapter 6 verse 9 Masters are charged to stop threatening their servants Masters must recognize that they too have a master in heaven By this reminder Paul is leavening the institution of slavery by the golden rule So whatever you wish that others would do to you

Do also to them For this is the law and the prophets And by Christ's principle of judgment For with the judgment you pronounce You will be judged And with the measure you use It will be measured to you Masters You have a master in heaven Treat your servants accordingly Servants are instructed to act towards their earthly masters As those working heartily for the Lord Promised a great inheritance as sons The truth of Christian freedom and of sonship must guide them For masters it is the principle of Christian service that is most pronounced They must act towards their servants As those who are themselves bond servants of Christ Accountable to him And answerable for how they treat other persons made in God's image For as Paul reminds the Ephesians There is no partiality with God The status of the slave owner Does not exalt him over others in God's sight Or give him some greater dignity Or allow him to treat others with impunity Paul charges the Colossians to continue steadfastly in prayer

Watchfulness and thanksgiving are the order of the day Watchfulness to the signs of God's work And the needs of the times And thankfulness for the manifold blessings of God Prayer is a constant work of the church and for Christians A sustained communication with God in our labours and lives Paul is especially concerned for the success and the progress of the gospel mission He requests their prayer for an open door for the word The word here is almost personified As if it were someone seeking to gain access to certain closed realms The word must be spread and avenues must be opened for it However intercession is an essential part of how such avenues will be opened How hearts will be made receptive How opportunities will be presented How possibilities will arise This is all for the sake of declaring the mystery of Christ Of which Paul spoke earlier in the epistle Paul is in prison on account of this But as he argues in 2 Timothy 2 verse 9 The word of God is not bound In Philippians for instance

Paul speaks of ways in which his imprisonment Actually opened unexpected doors for the gospel The doors that God will open for his word May not be the ones that we expect Paul is a herald of the mystery And it is his task to reveal it To make it clear He asked the Colossians to pray also for this That he might fulfil his calling in this crucial respect The Colossians are to be mindful and wise In the ways that they act in the sight of their society The quality of their lives will be foundational For the success of their witness This requires goodness and moral courage But it also requires wisdom and creativity As there will be pitfalls and traps And difficult decisions to be made Faithfulness often requires wisdom The ability to perceive the best courses of action To take the right stands And to perceive subtle errors The Colossians must be especially considerate Of how they use their time And how they use their speech The verb translated Making the best use of here Is the same as that which is used

[10 : 43] In Ephesians chapter 5 verse 16 In both places I think that the sense of the verb That some translations capture With the translation Redeeming Is present Although it is clearer in Ephesians chapter 5 Where we are told That they are supposed to do this As the days are evil In times dominated by wickedness Christians must not simply maximise The Christian activities within their day planners But they must resist the ways of thinking of And employing time that surround them And must establish different patterns And habits and practices They must relate their time To the coming day of the Lord With watchfulness They must punctuate their time With rest and thanksgiving They must more fully root themselves In God's works in the past And look with renewed hope To further horizons in the future They must in ages of decadence Sacrifice for that future They must in ages of revolution Honour their fathers and mothers In such ways They will redeem the time in evil days Their speech must likewise Exhibit wisdom and grace

It must have the savour of salt Being lively with truth In a world of insipid error Christians must bring words That have salience and power Words that stand out This requires us to learn How to communicate Words of truth With eloquence Passion And integrity In societies where words are light The words of Christians Must be weighty Knowing how to answer each person Is a challenge And we need to grow in wisdom In this area The words that we speak Must vary according to the persons And context that we address The wise person must speak Considered and measured words In season Not speaking rashly or carelessly The conclusion of the epistle Contains elements familiar From others of Paul's epistles Travel plans Greetings from various persons Final instructions Personal notes And a benediction James Dunn Following Roy Yates Remarks upon the great social mix Of the people represented In this chapter Large householders Nympha A doctor Luke

People with sufficient financial freedom Or support To travel in the work of the gospel Tychicus Mark And Epaphras And slaves Onesimus There are also various descriptions Such as Fellow worker Minister Brother Fellow servant And fellow prisoner Tychicus is bearing the epistle And he will also bring news Of Paul to the Colossians Paul commends him to them With the intent That he will not only communicate How Paul and the others are doing But that he will be able To minister to them Tychicus is accompanied By Onesimus This is likely the occasion Of the sending of the epistle To Philemon And all save the names Of Philemon And Appiah In the epistle to Philemon Are also mentioned here Onesimus is one of them He's a Colossian But now he is one of them In a deeper way As a Christian Tychicus Who is privy To more of the details Can explain anything That needs further explanation About Onesimus' situation And of what transpired Paul sends greetings From six of his fellow workers Three Jews

Aristarchus Mark The cousin of Barnabas And Jesus Called Justice And three Gentiles Epaphras Luke And Demas Aristarchus Is described as Paul's fellow prisoner Most likely literally Mark The cousin of Barnabas Was formerly a cause Of division Between Paul and Barnabas In Acts chapter 15 Verses 37 to 40 Now Barnabas Wanted to take with them John called Mark But Paul thought best Not to take with them One who had withdrawn From them In Pamphylia And had not gone with them To the work And there arose A sharp disagreement So that they separated From each other Barnabas took Mark With him And sailed away To Cyprus But Paul chose Silas And departed Having been commended By the brothers To the grace of the Lord Mark's mother Owned a large house In the city of Jerusalem And this is the first time That we hear of his Relationship with Barnabas Although it makes a lot More sense of the details Of their connection elsewhere Now it seems Paul has been reconciled To Mark And recognises his value It isn't clear

Whether Mark Is the author Of the second epistle But the belief That he was Has been very widely held Throughout church history Epaphras is the one Who has worked Among the Colossians And in the surrounding region Of Hierapolis And Laodicea Paul might not yet Have met the Colossians But Epaphras has told him All about them And is in constant prayer For them Paul also has Luke And Demas with him If the Mark mentioned here Is the author Of the second gospel Then we have reference To two gospel writers Being in the same place As Paul The author of the vast majority Of the epistles Of the New Testament Almost 60% Of the New Testament Was written by these three men We also learn That Luke was a physician Sadly in 2 Timothy Chapter 4 verse 10 We learn the tragic news That Demas later forsook Paul In love with this present world Paul wants the Colossians To pass on these greetings To the Christians In Laodicea too And to Nympha And the church meeting In her house There is quite a lot of debate Over whether Nympha Was a woman

[15 : 46] Or whether the person Paul is speaking of Is Nymphas A man As the manuscript tradition Has both forms within it Not much depends Upon this point however Possibly Paul has yet To visit Laodicea Which is why he can Single out Nympha And the church at her house Without fear Of privileging her Over others in the congregation Laodicea is of course One of the seven churches Addressed in the book of Revelation They are instructed To pass on the epistle To the Laodiceans From whom it will Presumably circulate More widely They will also To read the letter That the Laodiceans Had received Presumably from Paul Which a number of scholars Believe is the epistle To the Ephesians These epistles Would be read publicly To the congregations Of the churches And then they will be Circulated further Presumably becoming Gathered in small volumes Quite early on They expressed Paul's apostolic authority And they also Knit the young church More closely together By encouraging Lots of movement Between congregations With these circulating letters At this time then It is likely That the Colossians Would have received

books Of the Old Testament