

Final Greetings Full of Meaning | *Colossians 4:7-18 (NIV)*

Faith Evangelical Free Church | 8.7.22

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7 Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. 9 He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

10 My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) 11 Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. 13 I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. 14 Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

16 After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

17 Tell Archippus: “See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.”

18 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

This morning I am going to share with you one of my deepest, most closely guarded secrets, something I have kept hidden from others since I was around 8 or 9 years old.

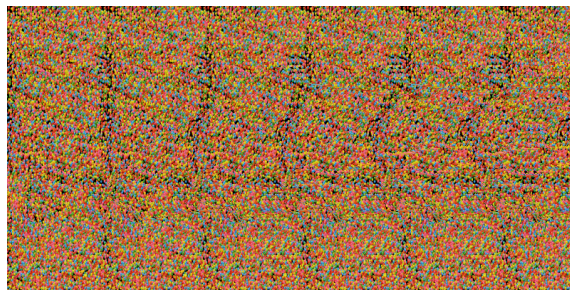
No matter how hard I try...

No matter how long a look...or stare...or squint...

No matter how intensely I force myself to go cross-eyed...

I have never been able to see the underlying image of an *autostereogram*.

The more common name of this visual thorn in my side is the “Magic Eye” puzzle. They are the posters with all the mushed up colors and squiggly lines that, supposedly, conceal a hidden 3D image for those who can unfocus their vision and see the truth behind the nonsense. Supposedly, this one is a shark (*note in this manuscript I have shrunk it down, which may render it impossible to see the image):



If you can see it, congrats. I've tried to see it. I've wanted to see it. I've absolutely lied about being able to see these image before (there was a lot of pressure in 3rd grade to be able to see that stupid boat). But all I ever end up doing is staring at the page and thinking "what am I supposed to get out of all of this?"

For a lot of folks, that's what trying to find applicable truth from Colossians 4:7-18 feels like. As Paul brings his letter to a close he switches from instructions for the whole church (and all believers) to a few personal messages he wants passed along to some specific people. These last few verses remind us that the Letter of Colossians is not only Scripture, but a historical document as well. It was written to help real people advance their faith and better understand how to live obedient lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Which is all well and good, but it does leave us wondering...is there anything here that can benefit us? Is there underlying truth we should seek in this final passage, or are we just left squinting at the words, hoping to see something of value in the jumble of names and greetings?

Often when we study Scripture we want to dig in deep and unpack big, theological concepts that lead us to better ways of living our lives in joyful obedience to God. But every now and then it is just as helpful to take a step back and look at a passage in its broader context. And when we zoom out from vv7-18 and look at the passage as a whole, I think what we find is a snapshot of some of the inner-workings and relationships of the early Church. Paul and all the people he addresses share a camaraderie and a mutual desire to see one another built up in their faith. Paul and his fellow believers were all committed to **fellowship, encouragement, and truth**. And I believe every Christian community – from 2000 years ago up to today, all over the world, in every culture and country and place – are all enriched and strengthened by the pursuit of these same distinctives.

As Christians...

- We should be people of deep fellowship.
- We should be committed to genuine encouragement.
- We should strive to share the truth that matters most.

We'll begin by taking a look at what it means, as Christians, *we to be people of deep fellowship*.

The final 12 verses of Colossians are jam-packed with the language of community, connection, and relationship.

- Tychicus and Onesimus are said to be "dear brothers" and "faithful", with Tychicus also holding the distinction of being a "minister" and "fellow servant in the Lord" (likely meaning he held some official ministry role alongside Paul).
- Aristarchus was a "fellow prisoner" with Paul. He, Mark, and Jesus (called Justus) are all described as "co workers for the kingdom of God"
- Epaphras, who was likely the founder of the Colossian church, has Paul's full confidence and words of glowing praise.
- Luke and Demas are "dear friends"
- The believers in Laodicea are "brothers and sisters", as is Nympha, who apparently offered up her home to host and shelter a local church.
- And if we think back over the whole letter, Paul has used the language of family, love, and warmth for the people he is sending to the Colossians, and for the Colossians themselves. (Recall that in Colossians 1,

Paul began his letter with the glowing words, *“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 feeling I get when I read this passage is similar to the one I get when I look at old group photos of friends or family. I can look across the picture, pick each person out, and describe who they are, what they are like, and why they mean so much to me. I can recall the things about our lives that bring and bind us together. I can celebrate the love and affection I have for the people who matter to me. That’s the kind of fellowship and attitude Paul has with all these people, and it’s the kind that we should want to characterize our own relationships with other Christians, too.

And yet we’d be missing a rather important point if we stopped here and simply said “we should make friends, got it, what’s next?” Because there are two rather interesting things about this fellowship of Christians Paul is addressing here at the end of his letter.

- First, they come from *very* different backgrounds.
 - Only three of them are identified as Jews (Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus), with the rest either being Greek or another cultural origin.
 - One of them, Onesimus, we know was a slave.
 - There is a very wide range of education and socioeconomic background in this group (Onesimus the slave to Luke the doctor, and everything in between).
 - And if we assume that “Mark” is the same Mark that Paul and Barnabas got in a fight over (see Acts 15), then there are probably even some tense relationships and conflict in this little group.
- The second thing we should make note of is that Paul shows a great deal of care, affection, and love for the Colossian church...which he did not start, had never visited, and would never visit.
 - Which means the full weight of his fellowship with this church does not rest on his personal relationship or direct connections with people there.

Which leads us to the question...what is it that has united such a diverse group of people, and compels Paul to care so deeply about a church full of people he has never met? If we, as Christians, are to be people of deep fellowship, what is the foundation of that fellowship? What brings us together and challenges us to affection, compassion, community, and love for one another?

It is, of course...Jesus Christ. Our common faith in Christ is what our deep fellowship is all about. Paul has been hammering on this since the very beginning of his letter, and here at the end, this same truth can be found underneath all these relationships. We are not brought together or bound to one another because of our country, culture, education, status, power, ethnicity, gender, worship styles, building architecture, or any other thing we all too often give too great a position of influence in our lives.

We are brought together and bound to one another because we believe Jesus is alive, and that he is our Savior and our King, and that in him and him alone is the salvation we all so desperately need.

Our fellowship has to be based in our common faith in Christ, because everything else in this world risks failing us. This does not mean that your ties of friendship, family, or even common interests are meaningless. Those are good and beautiful connections that should be cherished and enriched through continued investment. But when it

comes to what ultimately binds us all together as a church, as the people of God, nothing can take the place of Jesus.

How might we grow in our fellowship with one another? What steps can you take to get better connected to this church?

- One of the best ways to build relationships here at Faith is to join a small group. These groups hang out, study Scripture, share life together, support each other, learn with each other...small groups can be an immense and special blessing when people buy in and begin sharing life together.
- You could also serve on one of our ministries – there are opportunities with the Worship Team, Tech Team, Welcome Team, NextGen, and with caring for and supporting our missionaries.
- You know that greeting time we have before each service? We choose to do that very intentionally. We want to give everyone the chance to be welcome, to meet someone new, and to remember the name of that new person. Do you remember the name of the person you said “hello” to earlier? If y’all need a redo, don’t worry, you can say “hello” again when the service ends and spend a few more moments sharing fellowship with each other.
- Here’s a unique one...keeping in mind that we have fellowship with all Christians, no matter where they are...spend a few minutes this week learning about how to pray for believers around the world. Pray that the church would be strong in Ukraine. Pray that believers would be bold in India. Last week Pastor Logan encouraged you to pray for our missionaries...please do so, and remember that what unites them to you is not a common interest in living in far away places...it is the Love of Jesus and how much it needs to be shared with all the world.

And if you aren’t a believer yet...please know, that’s okay, we’re very glad you are here. Our community is for you as well. We hope the people you meet here give you a sense of belonging. We hope you leave here today with a desire to return. You may not know much about Jesus yet...but that’s no problem. We’d love nothing more than to help you to get to know Him better, even as you get to know us better, too.

As Christians, we should be people of deep fellowship because of our common faith in Jesus Christ.

The second thing that we can take away from this passage is that as Christians, we should be committed to genuine encouragement.

I love how the NIV renders v8. Paul says he sent Tychicus to the Christians in Colossae – **FOR THE EXPRESS PURPOSE** – of sharing an update on his (Paul’s) circumstances and that Tychicus “*may encourage your hearts*”.

Pull back for a moment and see what is happening here from a 10,000ft view. Paul – one the most significant leaders in the early Christian church – is sending Tychicus, who might well be his “right hand man”, to a group of believers he has never met because he heard they were having a hard time and he wanted to encourage their hearts. He wanted them to be built up, to be loved, to be drawn close to God and close to the community God has created in the fellowship of all believers.

That’s how much encouragement meant to Paul. He went to tremendous lengths to be sure his brothers and sisters in Christ were strengthened, comforted, and built up in their belief in Christ.

Paul goes on to say Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus have proved a great comfort to him, revealing a little bit of vulnerability and laying out the truth that everyone – from the newest believer to great Christian leaders – needs to be blessed by the gift of encouragement.

Furthermore, Paul says Epaphras (again, likely the founder of the church in Colossae) was “*always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured*”. So here we see an example of prayer being used as a way to comfort, support, and encourage fellow believers, even when we can be there to do so in person.

And Paul also encourages Archippus (even if in a more commanding tone) to “*See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord*”. We make the effort to lift one another up and help each other keep after the calling God has set before us.

Paul isn't just being polite or giving lip service so that he comes across as nice. He addresses people by name, passes along information that directly influences that situation, praises some for what they have done, and encourages others to keep pressing forward. His encouragement is genuine because he has clearly taken the time to listen, to understand what is happening in these people's lives, and cares about their well-being moving forward.

In our culture, a great deal of our communication is centered on self-interest. We talk about ourselves, we look for opportunities to put our best on display, and we all too often listen to others in a way that readies us to add our opinion or perspective as quickly (and sometimes, loudly) as possible. On top of all that, the content of conversations is becoming more and more cynical, judgmental, and occasionally downright cruel.

Think back over the conversations you had this week and ask yourself these questions

- Did you spend more time being encouraging or discouraging to the people you were speaking to?
- Did you speak to people in the hope of building up their faith, or leading them to consider Jesus...or did you want them to mostly think about you and how clever, smart, or informed you must be?
- Were you honorable in the ways you talked about others...or did you use your words to put people down, to diminish or belittle others...especially people who weren't there to defend themselves? (aka, how often are you talking about people in a demeaning way behind their backs?)
- Do you think you were ever like Tychicus, encouraging the hearts of those around? Or Epaphras, wrestling in prayer for the people you are about? Or like Paul, urging others to complete the ministries and the tasks set before them by the Lord?
 - Or did your words bear a greater resemblance to the world rather than to Scripture, sharpened to an edge to cut down and wound and make yourself feel better by making others feel worse?

As Christians, we should be committed to genuine encouragement. We should be people who stand apart from the world around us with love and strength and comfort coming swiftly to our lips, flowing naturally from our hearts. Yes, there are times to be critical, times to call people to repentance and change. But consider this: on any given day I can almost guarantee every person you encounter will have heard something that made them feel discouraged – about themselves, about the world, about life. You could be the person, motivated by the love of Jesus, that makes sure that downtrodden person hears at least one voice of compassion, of kindness, of encouragement.

Finally, as Christians we should strive to share the truth that matters most.

Truth is a slippery thing in our day and age. And perhaps that has always been the case. After all, the Apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians because false teachers had come to the Christian community and said the Gospel of Jesus Christ wasn't correct, that it wasn't enough. Throughout the summer we've seen how Paul's letter seeks to set these Christians back on a path of right belief, good theology, and proper conduct within the relationships of their communities.

But Paul also makes it clear that what he had written was not only for the believers in Colossae. He asks them to share what he has written with their Christian brothers and sisters in the neighboring city of Laodicea, and to expect that there will be more information passed along to them from Laodicea as well (perhaps indicating that he had sent another letter to the churches there).

This little comment in v16, to share what they have received and receive what has been shared, is a subtle yet important reminder that as precious as all we have learned in this letter is to our lives, and as personally powerful the Gospel of Jesus is to every individual believer...it is not a treasure we should keep to ourselves. We are coming up short in our faith and our obedience if we don't tell others about what we have found in the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Paul's words here remind me of another letter he wrote where implored his readers to take up the cause the cause of sharing the truth that matters most:

11 As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame."...13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Romans 10

You and I are the ones who bring this good news to the world. To our friends and family. To our neighbors and our coworkers. To people who are hurting and scared and crushed beneath the weight of sin. To all these people we humbly, joyfully, without judgment and compelled by love, share this this that matters most:

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which"... we all, as followers of Jesus, have become servants.

Colossians 1 (v23 adapted)

Who can you share this gospel with this week? I'm not asking a rhetorical question. I'm challenging you to think of a name, to choose a person, to be bold and vulnerable and true to you calling as a follower of Jesus. To be a light in this world. Share the gospel with someone this week. Even if it's just a small bit, a little story, a quick

testimony of how God has been good to you or could be good to the person you are talking to. Find someone to share the truth that matters most: that God loves them, that Jesus died for them, and that he was raised and now lives so that they might live with him, forever, too.

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