



## Grace Be With You Colossians 4:7-18

### Greetings . . . in 1st Century Social Distancing

In our current state of social distancing, we can identify a little more with the greetings the Apostle Paul gives near the end of his letter to the Colossians. Paul is “quarantined,” so to speak, in a couple ways: he’s in a prison cell, and he’s at a “social distance” from the Colossians.

Unlike our quarantines and social distancing, however, Paul’s technology doesn’t allow him to have virtual facetime meetings with the Colossian church. In fact, they have never seen each other face to face. They don’t even know what the others look like. So Paul uses what technology and resources he has available to him—a pen, a piece of parchment, a friend who is willing to write down Paul’s words, and two other friends who are willing to take that letter to the Colossian church. And near the end of this letter, we read the greetings that Paul sends to and from the various individuals.

### Historical Ho-hum or Relevant Truth?

But why are these greetings in the Bible? Could this section have fallen right off the parchment without any loss to Paul’s central message throughout the letter? Of course the answer is that this section is not wasted; rather, it is indispensable to the point Paul was making, and the point God wants us to learn.

Notice the similarity between the way Paul opens his letter (“Grace to you and peace from God our Father” (1:2) and the way he closes it (“Grace be with you,” 4:18). Everything in between has been an exposition of the grace of God, including the way God’s grace is at work in the individuals he names. In its overall effect, this passage teaches the Colossians, “As the grace of God has been with Tychicus, Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, etc. so make the grace of God be with you.”

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We must see this closing section, therefore, not as mere historical data, but as a message to us in 2020. By allowing us to peer into the lives of these individuals, it shows us that God’s grace was at work in them, just as it is at work in us. It teaches us that *when God’s grace is with us, it works in us and through us.*

1. **God’s grace works *through* us.**
  - a. **For the encouragement of others**
    - *Tychicus*: Faithful encourager (4:7-8)
    - *Aristarchus, John Mark, Justus*: loyal comforters (4:10-11)
  - b. **For the growth of others**
    - *Epaphras*: Prayer warrior (4:12-13)
2. **God’s grace works *in* us.**
  - . **For our salvation**
    - *Onesimus*: From slavery to freedom (4:9, Philemon 16)
  - a. **For our restoration**
    - *John Mark*: From failure to usefulness (4:10; see Acts 13:13; 15:36-40; 2 Timothy 4:11)

Suppose we looked at these individuals merely as positive and negative examples to follow or avoid. “Be like Epaphras.” “Don’t be like John Mark.”

It is true, of course, that these examples can inspire and warn us. But unless we see them in light of the purpose—to highlight the grace of God—we will inevitably fall into *despair* or *pride*.

We could look at Epaphras’ selfless labors and think, “I could never be that good”—a response of *despair*. Or we could look at John Mark’s sudden desertion and think, “I would never be that bad”—a response of *pride*. But the proper emphasis is not on human effort, but on God’s grace—with the result that *we* are not the heroes, but that Jesus is—the only one who can give us grace. This means that only because of Jesus can God’s grace work through and in us.

### **Questions for Discussion and Application**

1. From these greetings, what do we learn about the relationships among Paul and his companions? about Paul’s heart for people? How does this connect with what we have learned about Christian community earlier in this letter (Colossians 3:12-17)?
2. How might the example of Paul’s efforts to “connect with” fellow Christians (while separated from them) inform our relationships during this COVID-19 crisis?
3. Identify Epaphras’s primary concern for the Colossians (4:12-13). How does that compare with what we tend to be concerned about?
4. Read Acts 13:13; 15:36-40; Colossians 4:10; and 2 Timothy 4:11. From these passages summarize what little we know about John Mark. Assuming that the Colossians knew about some of these events, why is Paul’s instruction to “welcome him” so important?
5. Paul consistently identifies saving grace as being from God alone, and available only through the person and work of Jesus Christ (see, for example, Romans 3:23-34; 5:15-17; as well as the way he opens his letters). Why is it important to see God’s grace (not human effort) as the focus of this passage and Jesus (not these individuals) as the hero of this passage (Colossians 4:7-18)?