

The final instructions

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[0 : 00] This is really to lead us into communion, and of course, before we get to Colossians, the book, the final message on Colossians.

And in 1 Corinthians 2, verses 6 through to 10, it says, Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to pass away.

1 Corinthians 2, verses 6 to 10. Verse 7, But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would have not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Listen, what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. Amen.

[1 : 13] Well, let's listen to another hymn, and then we'll come to the reading of the message this morning. Thank you.

You were the word at the beginning, one with God, the Lord most high.

God has said, What a beautiful name it is What a beautiful name it is The name of Jesus Christ my King What a beautiful name it is Nothing compares to this What a beautiful name it is The name of Jesus You didn't want heaven without us So Jesus you wrote heaven down My sin was great, your love was greater

What you'd separate us now What a wonderful name it is What a wonderful name it is The name of Jesus Christ my King What a wonderful name it is Nothing compares to this What a wonderful name it is The name of Jesus Death could not hold you You failed so before you Your silence levels Our sin and grave The heavens are lowly The praise of your glory For you are raised

To life again You have no right, oh You have no equal Now and forever Now and forever God you reign Yours is the kingdom Yours is the glory Yours is the name Above all names What a powerful name it is What a powerful name it is What a powerful name it is The name of Jesus Christ my King What a powerful name it is Nothing can stay again What a powerful name it is What a powerful name it is The name of Jesus What a powerful name it is

[4 : 58] The name of Jesus What a powerful name it is The name of Jesus Let us pray And then let us come to God's word together Father God To you this morning In light of your church Being in the condition that it is Throughout the world That you would give us both Understanding and wisdom Father God We do not want to be like those of old Who fail to understand But Father God We want to be wise in our walking And Father God

We want to be wise in our witness We would ask Father God That as we pray we would be mindful always of those, whether we say their names or not, who are struggling to walk in the faith at this time.

Father God, that the world has shaped their understanding now to consider life differently. But we recognize, Father God, that even in the most difficult of times and the most confusing of times, that we are to hold to your word.

And we pray that as believers, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we would continue steadfastly in the faith, not shifting from the hope that we have received in Christ Jesus.

And Father God, for all those who cannot be here, we ask that you bless and keep them and that they feel not isolated or on their own as they worship you online with us this morning.

[6 : 56] We recognize, Father God, that there are many limitations that can stop us from coming and assembling together. And so, Father God, we thank you that our bodies work well and are able to bring us here.

And Father God, for those bodies who struggle, we are forever reminded that one day we'll have a new body. For you made us to live with you in a form, and that form is to bring glory to you in all that we do.

So whether we're in this body or the new body to come, we recognize, Father God, that you have given it to us so that we may live with you in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. But if you'd like to turn to the very end of Colossians, the chapter 4. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. finishes off that section, why those men decided to put the beginning of chapter 4 with the word masters when it clearly belonged to the previous section. This is why that the words of scripture are without error, but the titles and numbers aren't. Man has a particular way of just taking what God has and messing it up, like just leave it alone. Although I am thankful for verses because it'd be hard to tell you where the reading was this morning without it, wouldn't it? So chapter 4 verse 2 and this makes up the final instructions and of course the final greetings. Now hear God's word. Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it, with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which

[9 : 09] I am in prison, that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the best use of your time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.

I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts. And with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Aristocras, my fellow prisoner, greets you and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions. If he comes to you, welcome him.

And Jesus, who is called Justice. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God. And they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you always, struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, greets you, as does Demas. Give my greetings to the brothers in Laodicea and 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 Acrypus, 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.

Well, we have come to the very final section of Colossians. And in many ways, the final section makes sense because all the previous sections have been heard. When Paul gets to this stage, there's a reason for not putting this at the beginning. It's not just the fact that these final greetings are just the final greetings that need to be at the end, but rather he is moved throughout the letter consistently building our understanding to the place where we would understand what true biblical spirituality looks like in a fallen world. And too often, it is possible to think that Christianity is just concerned with the Christian life and sin is just concerned with life. And so, you know, some people say, well, the biggest problem in the world is, you know, a person is sinful. Well, that's not even close to the biggest problem, but it is a problem.

But the biggest issue in the world is the wrath of God facing such people. That would be a big problem. And what we are to understand when we understand the gospel is that when God makes all things new, he's not just talking about people, but he's talking about everything becoming new.

[12 : 51] Now, this alters the mindset of every faithful follower, because now they don't live in a pessimistic world where everything is going to hell in a handbasket, and we just want it all to be over so that we can occupy heavens. And you very rarely hear them speak about a new earth. And yet the plan of God is, of course, victorious. It's one where Christ has won the victory. It's one where he has accomplished everything. And now Christians have taken over the world in one sense, though they haven't taken over the world with force, but they have taken over the world with this gospel message.

They're able to turn it upside down. One of the reasons why Christians are no longer able to turn the world upside down is because our version of Christianity is a diluted version of the Christianity that first emerged in the early church. Now, one of the reasons it's diluted is because not only have we moved throughout history, where we are borrowing so much from the world, you know, healthcare, education, a number of different things right across the board, but also because we tend to think that those things don't need saving, that politics doesn't need saving or healthcare doesn't need saving. Healthcare will never save anyone. Politics will never save anyone. Education will never save anyone. But if Christ is going to make all things new, then it has to include all things. And so the way this greeting ends is by a gentle reminder that Christianity is a public affair, not a private one. And so as he moves through with these final instructions, and then he talks about the advance of the gospel, and make sure you read the letter that was sent to the Laodiceans and vice versa, and you're able to speak out into the world, it's a gentle reminder, but a fairly strong one, especially in light of the rest of the book, that Christianity was never to be internalized in the sense that it just, it is just what goes on in my heart. It was never to be restricted to the home only. It was never to be restricted into some kind of privatized corporation where Christians set up ministries for other Christians around the world. You know, it was supposed to make waves in the public arena. And so there's a reason why Paul is in prison as he writes this letter, is purely because the gospel is not a private affair. He doesn't, it's not, it's, it's making advances in the public arena where you can get locked up for saying things like Jesus is Lord and you're not. Because that there is a matter of authority, that's a matter of control, that's a matter of who has ownership and the right to say how things ought to be done. So the final greetings look as if we can almost pass over them as if, okay, they're just, they're just the final goodbyes, not even close to it. The fact that Paul finishes with the fact that remember my chains is just a clear example of the fact that Christianity in the early church was always proclaimed in the public arena. In other words, it made a difference in the world. And this is what this church is to do here. They're to be wary of false imitations of the Christian faith, idolatry, a number of different things. Their Christianity is to be the purest form. So you'll notice that he is very thankful to God and he wants us to continue steadfastly in prayer and to be thankful to God. And the only way to, for us to do this is to communicate that thankfulness through prayer. And the thankfulness is based on observation and the observation is based on being able to tell the difference between what is a genuine work of God and what is not a genuine work of God. We're able to tell, we can spot what true Christianity looks like. And so we give

thanks to God for people like you turning up, worshiping God under restrictions, whatever. The fact that you continue to do it is that you're demonstrating your faith. It's a public affair. You leave your home and you come out to a building. Okay. But in one sense, you're not, it's not restricted to the home.

We're out. Here we are. And we're worshiping God. The doors are open. People can see that something is going on in here. Now, there is a distinction here between Paul and the church in that there are those who are meant to advance the gospel out with. And there are those who are meant to stand where they are and able to give a response to the gospel. So when we talk about the proclamation of the gospel, there are two ways to understand it, which Paul clearly demonstrates here. The first is that he asked the church to pray for him as he advances the gospel, that he goes out and about like missionaries, like ministers are meant to do and what have you. And then he, for the church to always be able to give an answer, which means that they're not to not be involved in evangelism, but their evangelism is shaped in a slightly different way in that they're always to be ready to give an answer. That doesn't mean that they are restricted from going out and proclaiming the gospel, but it means that they have to be ready if someone come and ask them. And of course, that raises the question of why isn't anyone in the world asking Christians today about the faith on a large scale? Why isn't that happening? And of course, I don't want to go into it too much, but because there has been a dilution in true biblical spirituality, which is what Colossians is about.

So here's the sort of summary of the section that we have read. When Paul gives the instructions that he does, he recognizes that from a teaching point of view, everything has been covered, but from a learning point of view, it may not have been.

[19 : 49] So Paul has discharged his duties faithfully in that now these people know, but their response to what they now know means that they can't say at this point, well, I didn't know I was meant to do this, or I didn't know I wasn't meant to do that. No, the moment you know is the Pandora box. Right now, you know, you know, you can't, you can't say to God, well, I didn't see it that way, or I didn't interpret that way. And that's always a classic one, isn't it? To say, well, I don't see it the way the pastor does. Okay, but I can guarantee I'm not always right, but I make every effort I can to stick as faithfully with, and I have, I've said this many times, there's a reason why there's hundreds and hundreds of books on my shelves. And that's because you don't just hear from me. You hear from all the people that I read and I listen to, and I understand, especially the dead ones who can't change their mind. There's nothing worse than reading a sort of a Christian author that wrote a fantastic book 20 years ago, and then he brings out a new one, and you think, he's changed his mind.

It would have been gracious if the Lord took him two years ago, before the book came out. And because there's been great damage done, when I actually presented my material on justification by faith to, it was 90 ministers down in the northwest of England, and it was the controversy over Steve Chalk, you remember, calling God a cosmic child abuser because he's abusing his son on the cross. He's pouring out his wrath on his son. Alan Lamb, who wrote the book with him, later confessed that he didn't even understand the subject that he was co-authoring the book about.

Well, these are people with doctorates in front of their names, and that's a sad case to be in. So we read widely, but the church is always, the church will always only ever move at the speed that someone understands it or is committed to someone else's understanding.

So I trust many things that I don't fully understand, but because these men have been proven faithful throughout the years, I'm going to go, well, I'm going to stick with this until I work it through myself. Because I don't want to be in the position where I don't know what I believe about anything, and can't make my mind up on anything, because that would be a terrible position to come here, because all I could ever say to you is, well, it could be this, it could be that.

What kind of faith is that? So the Christian church have to be in a position where they are able to give an answer. It's got to be seasoned, it's got to be gracious, it's got to be seasoned with salt. But you have to be able to give answers, not just it might be, it's got to be definitive answers. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Well, the Bible's clear on that, but it's also clear on a number of other things. And this is what Paul is praying for. He's praying that he would be clear as he advances the gospel. Pray that doors would be open for me, and pray that as I go out and speak, that I would be clear. That I wouldn't, I wouldn't prance around and dance around the subject, that I would attack it directly. And then for the church, that you would be clear, that you would be able to give an answer. And that, that you wouldn't use the phrase, well, I don't see it that way to cover your sin. Because the way that, the way that people dilute sin is by saying it wasn't sin, it was a mistake. And it's not really sin, because I see it this way. And so there becomes a dilution. Well, that may be one of the reasons why you shouldn't be teaching others. So the final greetings then is, reinforces this idea, when Paul says, make sure that the letter that was sent to the Laodiceans is read by you, and make sure this letter that you have is read by the Laodiceans. Make sure that there's a crossover. Why? Because we are a people of one faith. Different churches, ought not to believe different things, but they do. And there's plenty of reasons how we got there.

[24 : 38] And one of the reasons why we got there is because we're not really sitting under the word of God properly understood. We, we end up with dilutions, we end up with multiple interpretations, because people have decided to take it upon themselves to become their own teachers. Now, I'm not advocating in any way whatsoever for, um, uh, uh, to say that the Reformation wasn't an important move in church history. But what I am saying is that pre the Reformation, you had sort of one church, and after the Reformation today, you have, what, a hundred thousand different denominations? And why does that happen? Well, because Martin Luther knew that the moment you try to reform something and you break away, soon as someone is allowed to see it differently, then that is a domino effect. Now everyone gets to see it differently and everyone's allowed to start something new. The idea of there one being one voice and one voice of authority is lost. So now everyone is kind of fighting for attention.

That didn't exist in the early church. Yes, there were factions. Yes, there were difficulties. But it was sorted out with definitive answers. And so it's really important, uh, that we understand how God sees his church. In other words, if I can put this in a slightly different way, when God looks down on the church at Colossae and he looks down at the church of Laodicea, he just sees his people, the church. And so when, when we, when we transport this idea now, 2,000 years later to where we are, and we have sort of, I don't know, a hundred of thousand different denominations throughout the world, each claiming to be right, you know, because you're not going to set up a church claiming to be wrong, are you? I mean, it's, everyone's claiming to be right.

What does God see? Well, he only, he's, he's only going to see one church. He's only going to see one people of God. And, and so the issue comes down to, well, who, who are those people? And that's what you have in Colossians. There are the faithful people of God demonstrating a true biblical spirituality that are being infiltrated by others who say, no, there's a secret knowledge that you need to know in order to have fulfillment. So there is only one church. There is only one faith. There is only one body as Ephesians puts it. And so we must be clear on belonging to that one body and proclaiming that one body rather than falling into the trap of, well, the church down the road believes that, or the church down the road believes this. No, God's people are, are, are one people.

And the people of God are demonstrated by the, are proclaimed throughout the word of God as believing these things and practicing these things. And everything else needs to be sorted out because it addresses our witness in the world. But we're a long, long way for that. One wonders what the church will look like in a thousand years time. Now I'm all for defining your terms, but I don't like the idea of multiple divisions with every division claiming that they're right, apart from me, which is part of the problem, isn't it? So the call here is to then continue in steadfast prayer. The way to make through what is actually quite a complicated issue, more complicated now than it was in the days of Paul, because there are many more false teachings in the church that you have to make your way through. And you can be guided from many of them depending on what church you're in. And then in other churches, you can be exposed to them. So I think in England now and in America, we have churches that are called open and affirming churches, which is churches where you can go to not only live out your identity as a homosexual.

It doesn't mean that you're practicing it, but you can live out that identity. But what is the problem with that? Well, what if my desire, and I'm going to make this as grotesque as possible, just so that you can understand the difficulty with living out your identity. So if I identify with my desires, what do you do if you find a man who identifies a desire for young children? Is he meant to live out? Or a man who wants to sleep with animals? Is he allowed to live out that identity? And so the issues that you have in the church is that people say, like, I'm not practicing it, but this is who I am. And I'm going to say who I am. Well, why does that apply to you and not to the man who's attracted to young little boys? Because that's grotesque, horrible, and sinful. And so people are pushing things forward in the church and failing to see where the errors actually are. And this is why one John says that those who continue in sin are not born of God. In other words, the moment you know it's a sin, and you've been told by the past, you've been told by the elders, don't do it, it is against... It would be very difficult to claim that you're born of

[30 : 25] God. When the very word of God says, no one who continues in sin, knowing that it's sin, is born of God. And yet we, well, yeah, but he's my brother. He must be saved. And so suddenly that emotional connection. So why must we continue steadfastly in prayer, walking wisely? Well, because we have to advance the gospel. And the gospel will change everything. The gospel is the very means by which God changes the world and changes individuals. The reason we are to continue steadfastly in prayer is because Christianity has become, is not to become privatized, is forever to remain public.

Everything we do is witnessed in public. And also we are to walk wisely towards outsiders. We are, our speech is to be gracious, but it has to be seasoned with salt, or else we can no longer have the effect on the world that we are meant to have. If the church is confused, then we cannot proclaim a clear message to the world. And so this distinction that Paul makes here between him and the church of, please pray for me that doors will be opened, that I would speak clearly. Why? Because it matters. Clarity matters in the world. And also within that, steadfast prayer, that you are to walk wisely, making sure that when someone come and asks you to give an answer, that you're able to give that answer, that you're able to. This isn't about intellect or how articulate you are. It's being able to hold to a confessional truth. This is why

I've always said denominations are important for one simple reason, despite what I've just said about there only being one church. And it's this, it makes no sense for a pastor to stand up in the church and say, I hold to the Bible and everything I teach comes from the Bible.

Well, I'd imagine every pastor does that. So the issue is not that you hold to the Bible. The issue is rather, what do you believe the Bible teaches? And so the reason we have a Baptist Confession of Faith and the Westminster Confession of Faith, and these different confessions that have emerged throughout the years, is because people are saying to the world, we've read the Bible, this is what we believe it teaches, this is what we're committing to. So that confessional Christianity is what Paul is getting at here, that ability to be able to give an answer, your confessional witness of this is what we believe, and this is why we believe it. And so when you come, you know what you're coming to. Why? Because the witness of the church is to be a public demonstration of the work of God within the lives of the people of God, not a private affair where we can keep all of this in house. And we're to do this making the best use of our time, as he says. Now why are we to make the best use of our time? Well, because it's not that God is on a clock, or that we're on a clock, and we have to get done by a certain time. But rather, time is the one thing that nobody can get back.

Once you've used it, you've used it up, and it's gone. And the best way to use your time as Christians is to continue steadfastly in prayer and advance the gospel. Continue steadfastly in prayer for someone else to advance the gospel in an area where you simply cannot get to, and for you to always be ready to give an answer for those who come and speak to you. And one of the ways I think is perhaps a bit of a test on the modern day church, especially under COVID-19, is simply this.

[34 : 31] That I think a church can tell whether or not their Christianity is more private or public on whether or not they have run out of things to do under COVID-19. I think that's probably one of the best tests to determine whether or not your Christianity is private or public. That if we or a church has run out of things to do under the COVID-19 restrictions, it is because either our faith is more private than we think it is, or our faith is limited to the building that we meet in. And suddenly, the idea of it being public and advancing is not falling under the restrictions, but rather the restrictions of just now, the restrictions now come into the private section, and suddenly you begin to realize that I'm limited even further than my own limitations. And I think that though Paul doesn't speak about COVID-19 here at all, of course, what he is getting at is the fact that in the early church, read this letter, make sure you read their letter, is to demonstrate that Christianity is a public affair, not just a private affair. And the moment it becomes private, and the moment you receive restrictions, then suddenly you run out of things to do. The church doesn't know what to do. And I think that is a shame. That doesn't mean that we are to do things differently against the restrictions. But what it does mean is that if we've lost the ability to outsmart the world and wisdom, then are we the people of God or aren't we?

So has the church become a private affair? I think so. And I don't say that gleely or happily. I say it with great sadness. We've lost our public advance. So when Paul says here, you know, be watchful as you pray, it makes you wonder whether or not he's just sort of not stepping on their toes, but just sort of saying, have you become sleepy? I mean, when Paul says, be watchful in prayer, it reminds me at least of Jesus saying to his disciples, can you watch and pray with me? And of course, he comes back and finds them asleep. Is Paul gently saying to this church, come on, let's just wake up just a little bit, shall we? Let's not sleep on the work of God amongst the people of God and amongst the world.

And perhaps that's why he raises this issue of being watchful in prayer, so that our faith would be publicly demonstrated, not just privately seen. So what about the final greetings? Well, the final greetings for me is the most important part, or one of the most important parts, and with this we finish, because it pays attention to the like-mindedness amongst the people who are mentioned. Now, for the gospel to advance anywhere and for churches to be strong, there has to be a like-mindedness and a shared understanding. I have learned one thing after 20 years of ministry that I wish I knew even before I began. I guess I wish I just paid much more attention to Jesus walking and the disciples following. It would have made life a whole lot easier than trying to start things and to drum up interest. One of the things I thought that a minister had to do, probably because I was instructed in this in some way by different people, is you need to give people a vision. You need to stir up their interest. You need to get them motivated and stuff like that. And then I read the scriptural text. Well, none of them, none of these had to do it. I wasn't, I don't find that in scripture.

What you find is that Jesus walks, he teaches, and people follow. There, done. And so over since 2015, for instance, when we started Branch Hub, we had a very simple rule that if we were going to advance Jesus Christ lordship over everything, especially the home and education, then we were not going to promote it. We were simply going to do our thing knowing and hoping that those who were interested would follow. And those who were not interested would never raise it in conversation. And since 2015, that is exactly what has happened. Now, you would imagine that in the church that the gospel would be the one thing that everyone would be interested in, the advancing of the gospel. But it doesn't.

Why? Well, for exactly the same reason. Because there's not a shared interest, there's not a like-mindedness, and there's not a shared understanding. And so the church becomes weak the moment we don't share the same understanding. We are no longer able to fulfill the ministry. And so the church that ought to be strong in proclaiming the gospel, understanding that we share the same faith as the Laodiceans, the Laodiceans as those at Colossae, that we are to advance the gospel through different people. All of these people mentioned are sharing the gospel, doing their thing for the Lord, fulfilling their ministry in the Lord, because they're all moving in the same direction. And there is nothing more beautiful than a church that moves in the same direction. Regardless of the little differences, there is absolutely nothing better. And I guess when you read the final greetings, what does leadership look like? It looks like men doing, in this sense, because although Nympha is mentioned, so she is a woman in her house, it looks like people serving the Lord and others following. That's what it looks like.

[40 : 36] And so what are we going to finish with? Well, I think the exhortation should be this as we come to communion. I have been trying to advance the gospel through knowing Christianity. And like Paul, I would value your prayers that doors would be open for this to happen. And I will pray for you. And my prayer for you is that you would fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord. So you can pray for me, that we can advance the gospel in this way. And I will pray for you, that you will be able to fulfill the ministry that God has given you. Amen.