

# **Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,**

## **Session 22 – Philippians, Colossians**

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Alright, let's jump right in. We're going to take a look at how the Apostle Paul, while stuck in a prison cell, managed to tackle two totally different crises in two early churches. And his solution? Well, it wasn't some new set of rules.

It was something way more powerful. A couple of songs. You know, it's so easy to forget that the letters in the New Testament weren't written to be chapters in a holy book.

They were, well, they were mail. Actual letters sent to real people who were dealing with some really messy human problems. And today, we get to open two of them.

So let's paint a picture here. The Apostle Paul is under house arrest. Most likely in Rome.

Now, he's not in some dark, grim dungeon or anything. He's got a little bit of freedom, but he's still a prisoner of the Roman Empire. But that doesn't stop him.

Not at all. He is still deeply connected to these little churches he's planted all over, and he's constantly writing to them, trying to guide them through all their growing pains. We're going to zero in on two of these so-called prison letters.

One went to the church in Philippi and another to the church in Colossae. Now, each of these communities was up against a really unique, really serious threat. And what's so fascinating is Paul's strategy.

In both cases, he uses a beautiful, poetic hymn about Jesus to solve their very different problems. Okay, first up, Philippi. This wasn't just any old town.

It was a full-blown Roman colony, a place where veterans from the Roman army would go to retire. So try to imagine a city with this really strong military culture, just full of pride and obsessed with status. And right in the middle of all that, Paul had started a church.

So Paul's writing to them for a few reasons. He wants to reassure them that his imprisonment isn't a setback, and he wants to thank them for sending him some money. But as you read the letter, one core problem just jumps off the page.

This church was really struggling with fighting with disunity. And for Paul, this was a massive deal. I mean, few things got him more fired up than a church that was in danger of splitting apart.

The community in Philippi was literally being torn apart by selfish ambition, by pride, by arguments. People were just looking out for their own interests instead of caring about others, and it was threatening the health of the whole church. So what does Paul do? He gives them a direct command.

This is the simple instruction. Stop being selfish. Be humble.

Put other people first. I mean, it's clear. It's simple.

But Paul knows that just telling them what to do isn't enough. He needs to show them. He needs to give them the ultimate model to follow.

Alright, now let's grab our second piece of mail. This one's addressed to Colossi, a pretty small town in what we now call Turkey. And what's really interesting here is that Paul had never actually been there.

The church was started by somebody else, but a problem had popped up that was so serious, Paul felt like he had to step in and write to them. So, unlike the internal fighting at Philippi, the threat in Colossae was coming from the outside. A deceptive philosophy, as Paul calls it, was creeping into the church.

It was this really tempting but really dangerous teaching that was starting to lead people astray. So, what was it exactly? Well, we can actually piece it together from the clues Paul drops in his letter. It seems like it involved a bunch of strict, Jewish-style rules.

Things about Sabbaths, festivals, what you could and couldn't eat. But then, there was this mystical side to it too, with talk about worshipping angels and having special visions, all mixed with these really harsh practices focused on punishing the body. So, here's the bottom line.

Paul was up against this really unique blend of mystical Judaism. This teaching didn't just stick to the Law of Moses. It offered secret knowledge and deeper spiritual experiences.

It was a whole philosophy that was basically telling the Colossians, "Hey, what you have in Christ is good, but it's not enough. You need this stuff too. Okay, so we've got two very different problems, right? In Philippi, you've got this internal crisis of pride and disunity.

And in Colossae, you have this external threat. This false teaching says Christ isn't enough. And in both cases, Paul's solution is exactly the same.

He recites a poem. An early Christian hymn about who Jesus is and what he did. And for Philippi, this hymn is the perfect medicine.

It tells this beautiful U-shaped story. It starts way up high with Christ existing in the form of God. Then it just plunges down as he humbles himself, becomes a servant, and is obedient all the way to death on a cross.

But that's just the bottom of the U. The story then swings right back up to his exaltation by God. The connection is just so powerful. To a church drowning in selfish ambition, Paul holds up the ultimate example of self-sacrificing humility as the real path to glory.

Now, for the Colossians, the ones being tempted to believe Christ wasn't enough, Paul uses a different hymn. This one isn't focused on humility. No, this one is all about supremacy.

Its entire purpose is to show in the most powerful way possible that Christ is absolutely supreme and completely sufficient. They don't need to add a single thing to him. Now, there's a key phrase in this hymn that can be a little confusing, but it's absolutely crucial to get.

It says Christ is the firstborn of all creation. Now, that doesn't mean he was the first thing created. In this context, firstborn isn't about time.

It's a term of status and sovereignty. It's language pulled from the Old Testament Psalms about the king. It means he's the rightful ruler, the heir over everything.

See, he's not part of creation. He's the Lord of creation. Big difference.

So, let's put it all together. You can really see the genius of Paul's strategy here. For the proud, bickering Philippians, a hymn about Christ's humility becomes the perfect model for unity.

For the tempted Colossians, a hymn about Christ's supremacy proves he's all they'll ever need. These hymns aren't interchangeable. Each one is like a precision tool, perfectly designed for the specific crisis that church was facing.

So, what does all this mean for us? I mean, why does Paul's ancient strategy even matter today? Well, that brings us to our final takeaway. Here's the most important point. For Paul, theology was never just some intellectual exercise.

What you believe about Jesus- his humility, his supremacy- was meant to be an intensely practical tool. It's supposed to directly shape how you live, how you treat other people, and how you respond to confusing ideas. Your deepest beliefs are meant to solve your most immediate problems.

And that kind of leaves us with a final thought to chew on. We all face our own versions of disunity and deceptive ideas today, don't we? Paul's approach suggests that maybe the most profound answer isn't some new rule or a better program, but just a clearer, more powerful vision of who Christ is. So, the question for us is: how might that ancient wisdom provide the very practical solutions we need for our own modern challenges?