THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR FAITH

The All-Sufficient Savior
Studies in Colossians and Philemon
by Edward Robinson

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about the author

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Brother Robinson is the author of three previous studies in The Cornerstone of Our Faith series. He studied at Southwestern Christian College, Harding School of Theology, and Mississippi State University. He and his wife, Toni, have three daughters.
how to use this study

Each lesson in this *The Cornerstone of Our Faith* study has four major parts.

Every lesson begins with an introductory section called *The Foundation*. In this section, the author will give background material to help prepare your mind and heart for God’s Word.

The second part of each lesson is called *The Cornerstone*. This section is always the heart of every lesson. The Bible is explored in detail to help us understand the text. Those who are accustomed to hearing African-American preaching can hear this section “preach.” God’s Word is powerfully presented so that all can understand.

The next section of each study is critical for the Word to fulfill its intended purpose. It is called *The Inscription*. Just as people take note of inscriptions on cornerstones or monuments, each lesson is written so as to drive home a point worth remembering and a principle worth following. It offers the encouragement to change attitudes or behaviors to align better with God’s Word. To *know* the Bible is one thing; to *do* it is another.

Every lesson ends with a series of thought-provoking *Discussion Questions* that help you explore God’s Word on a personal and a congregational level. These questions provide opportunities for group discussion and participation. Teachers can tell by the responses whether their students have really come to grips with the lesson.
Sometimes we wonder how the apostle Paul got as much done in his lifetime as he did. He preached, he taught, he made tents, he traveled, he prayed, he made friends, he mentored, and he wrote. We never read of Paul taking a break or a vacation to the mountains or the beach. He was too driven to slow down for rest and relaxation.

Where did he do his best writing? Secluded in a five-star hotel with room service? Not quite. Some of Paul’s most significant writing was done from the jails and prisons around the Roman Empire. This is certainly true of this quarter’s letters to the Colossian church and his friend, Philemon. Paul made the best use of less-than-desirable circumstances and his writings are still encouraging today’s church.
Confined to a prison in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote four epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These series of lessons focus on the letter to the Colossians. Paul did not personally know the members of this congregation at Colossae, for he stated: “I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally” (Colossians 2:1).

Paul evangelized the province of Asia for three years, particularly the city of Ephesus (Acts 20:31). While there, Paul perhaps converted a young man named Epaphras, who most likely planted the Lord’s Church at Colossae (Colossians 1:7-8). Paul learned about the spiritual status of the Colossian congregation from Epaphras who was the apostle’s “fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus” at Rome (Philemon 23).

Scholar William Barclay has pointed out that Paul wrote the letter which contains the “highest reach of his thought to so unimportant a town as Colossae then was” (The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, pgs 100-101). God often does His most important work in the most unimportant people and places. Nathanael asked in John 1:46: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”
In Colossians 1:2, Paul addressed Christians at Colossae as “saints and faithful brethren in Christ” (NASB and KJV). The New International Version reads, “God’s holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Colossians 1:2 contains three potent principles. First, unlike our Catholic neighbors who insist that Christians become “saints” after death, the apostle Paul makes it clear that believers in Jesus Christ are saints here and now. The Greek word for saint is *hagios*, which means “holy” or “set apart.” God’s people are holy and set apart for His service. This is made possible by God’s Holy Spirit. Paul expressed, “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Peter similarly explained that Christians “have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood” (1 Peter 1:2). Commentator Peter T. O’Brien has written, “Christians are ‘saints’ because of the new relationship they have brought into by God through Jesus Christ” (*Colossians, Philemon*, pg 3).

Second, Paul refers to Christians at Colossae as “faithful brothers and sisters” (NIV). The Greek word for “faithful” is *pistos*, which means dependable, reliable, and trustworthy. The same word is applied to God throughout the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul affirms, “God is faithful,” meaning that God is dependable, reliable, and trustworthy. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, he declared: “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” First Thessalonians
5:24 states, “The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.” What is true of the heavenly Father should also be true of His children.

Third, the phrase, “the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae,” reveals that the Colossian Christians lived in “two spheres.” “A Christian always moves in two spheres. He lives in a certain place in this world; but he is also in Christ. He lives in two dimensions” (Barclay, pg 104).

But how can Christians live in two places at the same time? They reside physically on earth, but spiritually in Christ. We are “in Christ” because Christ lives in us. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” In short, the Christian is in the world, but not of the world.

Barclay has added, “In this world he [the Christian] may move from place to place; but wherever he is, he is in Christ. That is why outward circumstances make little difference to the Christian; his peace and his joy are not dependent on them. That is why he will do any job with all his heart. It may be menial, unpleasant, painful; it may be far less distinguished than he might expect to have; its rewards may be small and its praise non-existent; nevertheless the Christian will do it diligently, uncomplainingly and cheerfully, for he is in Christ and does all things as to the Lord. We are all in our Colossae, but we are all living in Christ, and it is Christ who sets the tone of our living” (Colossians, Philemon, pgs 104-105).

In the epistle to the Colossians, Paul specifically mentioned three “faithful brothers.” They were Epaphras, Tychicus, and Onesimus. First, Paul referred to Epaphras as “a faithful minister of Christ on
our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit” (Colossians 1:7-8). Epaphras was most likely the evangelist who planted the Church of Christ at Colossae, and the apostle praised him as a prayer warrior and a hard worker for the Lord. “I vouch for him,” Paul wrote, “that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis” (Colossians 4:13).

Second, Paul singled out Tychicus as a “dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” (Colossians 4:7). Tychicus, a trustworthy companion of Paul, traveled among various congregations as the Lord’s representative. Tychicus accompanied Paul to Macedonia (Acts 20:4). Tychicus went to the church at Ephesus as Paul’s representative (Ephesians 6:21). Paul sent him to Crete to relieve the evangelist Titus (Titus 3:12). In 2 Timothy 4:12, Paul wrote, “I sent Tychicus to Ephesus.”

Third, Paul highlighted Onesimus as “our faithful and dear brother” (Colossians 4:9). Onesimus was a member of the Colossian congregation; he was a runaway slave who Paul converted in prison (Philemon 10). All three men—Epaphras, Tychicus, and Onesimus—had one thing in common: They were faithful, that is, dependable, reliable, and trustworthy.

One of the dire needs in most congregations is for more faithful brothers and sisters. We have brothers who periodically attend worship, but are they faithful? We have sisters who occasionally show up for church events, but they are not faithful sisters.

Unfaithful church members can demoralize a congregation. Solomon said that relying on unfaithful people is like a pain in the mouth and a pain in the foot. “Like a broken tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in a time of trouble” (Proverbs 25:19). The Message renders the verse: “Trusting a double-crosser when you’re in trouble is like biting down on an abscessed tooth.” Paul knew how it felt to
depend on unfaithful brothers, for he lamented: “Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica” (2 Timothy 4:10). Many church members are not faithful to God and His Church because they have been choked by “life’s worries, riches and pleasures” (Luke 8:14), and they have fallen in love with the “fleeting pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:25). No wonder the apostle John warned his readers: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

But God requires us to be faithful. He wants us to be faithful worshipers. He desires us to be faithful fathers, faithful mothers, faithful husbands, and faithful wives. When we are at work, He wants us to be faithful employees and faithful employers. In the service of the Church, God desires for us to be faithful preachers, faithful teachers, faithful song leaders, faithful Sunday school teachers, faithful child-care attendants, and the like. In the final roundup of human affairs, we want to hear the Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matthew 25:21, 23).

Discussion Questions
1. What is a saint according to the Word of God?
2. What does the word faithful mean?
3. Approximately how many “faithful” brothers are in your local congregation?
4. Approximately how many “faithful” sisters are in your local congregation?
5. Why are some church members unfaithful to God and His church?
6. Who did Paul single out as faithful in the Colossian congregation?
7. Who was Onesimus?
8. What can you do to encourage members in your local congregation to be “faithful”?
9. What does God require of His children today?
10. Discuss the statement: “God often does His most important work in the most unimportant people and places.”
11. Who was Tychicus?
12. Who was Epaphras?
13. Name some areas in which Christians need to be more faithful in your local congregation.