

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 237

Colossians 4

October 13, 2018

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Episode Summary

This episode of the podcast concludes the series on Colossians. While the last chapter of Colossians contains mostly personal references to traveling companions and greetings from Paul, there are several items of interest. Does the chapter refer to a house church led by a woman (Nympha)? Is the “letter to the Laodiceans” a lost letter of Paul—and if so, is that a problem for inspiration? The end of the letter makes it clear that Paul used an amanuensis (i.e., he dictated the letter). Does that mean Paul wasn’t well educated?

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, episode 237, Colossians 4. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how are you?

MH: Pretty good, pretty good.

TS: I hear your family has increased by one.

MH: That’s correct. We had a good couple of weeks. We have a new black pug, which we’d been looking for a year. So we finally got one. And he is a 2 ½ pound terror. [laughter]

TS: And how is Mori taking it?

MH: Mori has been a little clingy—a little dejected—but he’s coming around. Yeah, he’s pouting. He has competition for attention now.

TS: What’s the new pug’s name?

MH: Norman. I wanted Loki. We have this supervillain/crazy-villain kind of thing—that’s how we view our pugs—like these wild-eyed supervillains. So Mori is

Moriarty from Sherlock Holmes, and I wanted Loki from the Avengers. But they wanted Norman for Psycho. They like the Psycho association.

TS: That's crazy. That's a good one. The Norman I'm used to right now is... My wife and I are watching *Cheers* on Netflix. So when I hear "Norman," I think of "Norm!" when he comes into the bar. It's funny how watching *Cheers* back then...

MH: There's quite a difference between that Norm and this Norman.

TS: Yes. So that's the Norman that springs to mind right now for me. But nonetheless, I'll bet he's... Do the pugs sleep in the bed with you?

MH: We let Mori do that, and then I'll get up and take him out in the morning, but Norman we have in the room in his little crate because we have to take him out at 3:00 in the morning. We'll have a couple of weeks of that before he doesn't need that anymore. But he just goes on command. It's great. So the initial owners must have worked with him a little bit, because he is no trouble had all. And like Norman Bates, he is attached to Mommy. [laughter] He has a Mommy thing going on.

TS: Uh oh.

MH: Drenna's liking that, so...

TS: So as you get the kids out, you're basically bringing more kids into the home.

MH: Yeah. There's a comment in there about how much more obedient these are than the other ones. [laughter]

TS: Alright, Mike. Well, this is the last week of Colossians, so I wanted to remind everybody that we're going to be doing a Colossians Q&A in probably two or three weeks. We're going to do a couple of regular Q&As before that to give us time to collect the questions. If you have a question specifically about the book of Colossians, send me an email at TreyStricklin@gmail.com. We'll collect those. We obviously can't answer everybody's email questions, but send me your questions anyway. We'll go through them and we'll put together an episode of specific questions about Colossians. With that, I'm excited that this has been a good series. I'm glad that people voted on this. I was wanting to go back to the New Testament. Maybe we'll go back to the Old Testament next. I've enjoyed the book of Colossians very much. We appreciate you taking the time to do it.

MH: Yeah, we're almost at the point now where we need to vote again. That's coming around the corner. Colossians, I think, was worth the time that we spent on it. Today, it's Colossians 4. You read through the last chapter of Colossians and it seems like there's really not much there beyond Paul saying, "Hey, so-and-so's still with me. They haven't left. Boy, they're a good worker. I appreciate

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them” and saying hi to other people in Colossae. But there’s actually a few things in the last chapter that are kind of interesting that we’re going to spend most of our time parking on. They’re toward the end of the chapter. There are a few things I want to hit on as we work our way there. We’ll just read through the fourth chapter here. When we hit something, as is our typical pattern, I’ll say something, but we’re really angling for most of this episode on some of the things at the end. There’s a little more to think about in some of these than you might suspect. So last time when we were talking about the relationships—the pairings (husband and wife, fathers and children, masters and servants)—we included the first verse of Colossians 4 in that, because it should be included. The first verse said,

Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

It echoes the thought that preceded it in chapter 3. So we’re not going to backtrack and do any more with that. So we’ll begin this episode in verse 2 and continue all the way through the end of the chapter. The first few verses in Colossians 4 read as follows in the ESV:

² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³ 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 I am in prison— ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Now right here we run into the concept of the mystery. We had touched on this earlier in the book of Colossians, but I want to draw attention back to it because here we have Paul in jail for declaring the mystery of Christ. So for anyone who doesn’t remember the earlier reference to wisdom in the book of Colossians (because it was pretty early), I want to hit a few things again. We’re not going to backtrack through all that information. You can go back... The episode where we covered Colossians 1:26-27 is going to have a few more things than I’ll allude to here. Why don’t I just read that—the earlier reference in Colossians to the concept of the mystery? Colossians 1:24-27:

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Now, earlier I had quoted a little segment from DPL (*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*) that noted,

Mystērion appears twenty-one times in Paul's letters out of a total of twenty-seven NT occurrences. [MH: So overwhelmingly, this is a Pauline phrase.] Usually it points not to some future event hidden in God's plan, but to his decisive action in Christ here and now...

And even more specifically,

Christ's role in the salvation of humanity and reconciling ("resetting") all things to the original creation order. The Gentiles [MH: Here's the key (core) element in the mystery] are a specific element of this for a couple reasons: (1) their disinheritance as part of the family of God by God himself (Babel); (2) all of this [MH: This whole plan, not only broadly of the salvation of humanity, but even more oddly (or pointedly)—this is why Paul refers to it as the mystery] it all depended on messiah -- who was a child of Abraham and David (Jewish).

...through whom all of the disinherited nations would once again be brought back into the family of God—the Deuteronomy 32 worldview in play—that God had disinherited the nations (Deuteronomy 32:8-9). For those who are familiar with my content, this is a very familiar theme. It's a very familiar, very important point of biblical theology. This whole idea of disinheriting the nations as a punishment at Babel is the third rebellion stanza of the Old Testament that essentially frames the entirety of the rest of the Bible. The first one being the Fall; the second one being Genesis 6:1-4; the third one being what happens at Babel. Of course, Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is a big player there. Psalm 82 gives us information on how to parse what happens at Babel.

So that's a big deal. And Paul is looking back at all that, and, of course, knows his Old Testament really well, and says, "This is what I was called to do. This is a mystery. This is the *mystērion*—Christ in *you*, Gentiles; not just Christ for the Jews (that would just be obvious). But Christ in you—the work of Christ being the catalyst, the linchpin, for the Gentile nations being brought back into the family of God, or at least, people who live among those nations who are Gentiles.

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Paul alludes to this in other places. In 1 Corinthians 2, he talks about the hidden wisdom of God, "We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God which God decreed before the ages for our glory," and "Had the rulers of this world understood this, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." Why is that an important thought? Because "rulers of this world" in Pauline theology and in his terminology are these geographical rulers. This is why Paul uses the vocabulary of geographical dominion (principalities, powers, rulers, authorities, thrones, dominions—all this kind of terminology). And what Paul is saying is, "Had *those* rebels, had those fallen powers of darkness known what all of this meant—what

the arrival of the Jewish messiah really meant—that it was going to be the key to nullifying their authority and bringing the Gentiles back into the family of God, they would never have crucified Jesus. I talk at length about this in *Unseen Realm*, so I'm going to leave that point for there. *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* adds this thought:

The mystery which focuses on salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ is not new, for God had decreed it “before the ages” (1 Cor 2:7). It has been kept hidden from “the rulers of this world” (1 Cor 2:8): only ignorance of the mystery can explain their crucifixion of “the Lord of glory.” But now the mystery of God’s salvific plan, which includes the divine inheritance [MH: The *full* divine inheritance, which means Gentile inclusion—*all* of the nations, not just one], is being revealed through his Spirit [post-Pentecost].

This is why, as we talked before (a couple of episodes ago, I believe it was)... We took the time to talk about when Paul talks about resurrection, somehow in his head the other light that goes on is the defeat—the nullification, the delegitimization—of the rulers and the authorities—the powers of darkness. Why? Because those are the ones over the nations. Paul is saying, “This is my mission: to go tell them that they don’t have to worship the gods that they worship.” Yes, the Most High created a certain situation that went haywire because of the rebellion of those beings. God didn’t choose them when they were evil and wicked, but they became corrupt. So there’s this tendency among the Gentiles... We’ve talked about this before, as well. Plato writes about this. Lots of pagan, classical, Greco-Roman texts allude to this idea of the parceling out of the nations and their locales to distinct gods. This is the same worldview in the pagan world as we see in the Bible. Of course, in the Bible the one who sets this up is the Most High—Yahweh of Israel. And it’s a judgment. It’s a thing to *alienate* the nations. But then God, right after that, goes to Abraham and creates a covenant with him that *includes* the nations—includes a pathway back. And the mystery is how the pathway back would work, what would finally achieve this. And that’s the mission of Christ. It’s the cross event. So we spent a lot of time in Colossians talking about that and linking it to these thoughts in here where Paul refers to the mystery of Christ. Ephesians 3:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. [MH: They get to see it play out in real time.] ⁶ This

mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

So I just wanted to reiterate those thoughts. You can get more detail in the earlier episodes of Colossians—we've hit this a couple of times. The one episode in particular with the link between the resurrection and the ascension... That triggers the sending of the Spirit, which at Pentecost goes out and penetrates all the nations through the Jews initially who are at Pentecost. They hear the message of Jesus, believe it, and they go back home and start to plant the seed that will produce a remnant among the Gentiles to be brought back into the family of God. Our series on the book of Acts—you can go back and listen to that.

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Begin at Acts 2, and all the way to Acts 10 you get glimpses of how this works, to the Jew first and then transitioning to the Gentiles—how this whole plan is coherent in light of what happens, what's described historically in the book of Acts. If we go to verse 5 here in Colossians 4, Paul tells his readers:

⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders...

He's just talked about, "Hey, this is the mystery." They know by now what he means by that: the Gentiles are being brought in. This is part of what is being opposed by the mystic Jewish element that Paul has been opposed by and that he's alluded to throughout this letter for what they teach and how they want to tear him down and teach contrary to what Paul was saying. Right after commenting on—reiterating—his mission (the mystery) he says:

⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.

Now this comment concerns a lot more than good principles of time management. And unfortunately, that's typically how you're going to hear it preached. "Make the best use of the time," and somebody will go off and talk about how to make schedules and how to not waste time. "Don't spend too much time watching TV..." That's really not the point. There might be some application in there to what I'm going to say, but that's really not the point. He links this thought to outsiders—those who would be both outside the community in terms of people who *need* to be redeemed (need the message that Paul has) and also those who would be out there opposing it. You link those two thoughts, and what Paul's really getting at here is a sense of urgency for the mission, for completing the fullness of the Gentiles, which is a phrase he uses elsewhere in other letters about this notion that we've seen the gospel go to all the places (read the book of Acts or listen to the series) that are connected in some way with Jewish inheritance (covenant inheritance). And now, "I was on the Damascus road. The Lord picked me out. I was the worst of all men, the worst of sinners. He chose me to go to the Gentiles to complete the plan"—to make sure that the gospel penetrates all the places that they were aware of, in terms of their Old Testament history and their knowledge of the world. All those places the gospel has to go to

so that the fullness of the Gentiles can be brought in. And why is that important? Because then those who are now hardened against the messiah (which would be a lot of the Jewish community), then that's going to soften them up. That's part of God's plan to include the Gentiles, and the hearts of his fellow Israelites—his fellow countrymen—will be opened to transition (come back) to the Lord.

Romans 11:25:

I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

So when we get to that point, “all Israel will be saved.” We've talked about what that phrase might mean. But at the very least, Paul linked this idea with the return of the Lord and the ushering in of the final age—the re-consummation of the kingdom. So this was a big deal. So when Paul talks about, “walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time,” it's both, “be on guard for an alternative gospel,” but also, “be on the lookout for opportunity to minister to Gentiles.” You're the Colossians. This is where you live. So I want to quote a little bit from Moo's commentary on the letter to the Colossians. He writes this:

The word for “time” here, *kairos*, can sometimes have the sense of a particular time, or opportune moment (as opposed to *chronos*, which usually refers to time in a general way). It is not clear whether the word has that particular nuance here or not, but it does not make much difference to the meaning. More significant is the wider salvation-historical significance of the concept “time” here. Paul views the time in which believers find themselves as caught in the tension of the “already ... not yet.”

We talked about that earlier in the podcast, especially as it relates to the kingdom and the mission and believers becoming what they are ultimately going to be.

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Believers live after the initial coming of Messiah and the inauguration of the redemptive kingdom. But they also live in expectation of a second coming of Messiah to complete the work of redemption. Paul has alluded to this tension in 3:1–4, and his call for believers to “watch” in v. 2, as we have seen, may also allude to this eschatological sense of time. Therefore the need to “buy time” is especially imperative because of Paul's sense of the “shortness of the time” (1 Cor. 7:29). He does not mean by this that the Lord will return within a specified short period of time, but that the return of the Lord is always impending, rendering it entirely uncertain how much time we will yet be given [to complete this mission]. An important aspect of wise living is to use the (short) time God has given us to best effect. In Colossians, because of the focus on “outsiders,” this will refer specifically to making the most of the “open doors” (cf. v. 3) that God gives us to evangelize.

So he connects the reference to “make the best use of the time” specifically to the mission—to the whole “fullness of the Gentiles” idea. So I thought that was important because you hear this preached and it becomes something about keeping a schedule, keeping a Day Planner, or something like that. That’s really not what’s in view here. It’s a much bigger concept. In verse 6, we read,

6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Now this is kind of an odd phrase (“seasoned with salt”) because in our day when we talk about someone who has a salty mouth or salty speech, we’re actually talking about somebody who swears a lot or is really crude. That’s actually not what Paul is shooting for here. Salt had a different meaning in the biblical world. It actually had a number of meanings. What he’s angling for here is something positive: so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. So I want to read a little bit from LBD (the *Lexham Bible Dictionary*) on salt. It has a really nice entry on salt. If you don’t have LBD, you should. You can get it for free online. This is one of the free resources that Faithlife (my employer) gives out. You just have to give them your email address and you can get the *Faithlife Study Bible* and *Lexham Bible Dictionary*. This has a really good entry on salt, so I’m going to read a few parts of it.

Salt as a Symbol of Life

In the biblical world, salt was associated with life due to its uses as a preservative, a purifying agent, and a seasoning. Many of the symbols attached to salt reflect its practical uses. For example, because salt can delay the rotting or decaying process when rubbed into meat, it is a symbol of incorruptibility. Salt was also a symbol of provision, and eating someone’s “bread and salt” left the eater obligated to the giver (Ezra 4:14). Other practical uses of salt attested in the ancient world include:

- purifying agent—ancient peoples rubbed babies with salt at birth (Ezek 16:4), and the prophet Elisha used salt to purify a polluted spring (2 Kgs 2:19–22);
- seasoning for food (Job 6:6–7; compare Isa 30:24)—tasteless salt was worthless and thrown out (Matt 5:13; Luke 14:34).

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? (Matthew 5:13)

Answer: it ain’t going to happen. It’s no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. Salt was also, on the other hand, a symbol for death. There was a flip side to this coin. LBD writes:

Salt as a Symbol for Death

Despite salt's practical uses, too much salt can lead to death. For example, land that has too high of a salt content, such as salt flats, marshes, or pits, is typically incapable of producing good crops and thus unproductive and uninhabitable. Victorious armies in ancient times would sometimes use salt to render land infertile (Judg 9:45; Zeph 2:9; compare Deut 29:23).

Here's another aspect of salt:

Salt and the Covenant

Scripture refers to God's covenant as a "covenant of salt," reflecting salt's unique place in the covenant...

The phrase "covenant of salt" is usually understood to refer to the perpetual obligation of the covenant, perhaps due to the concept of loyalty [MH: owed] to the provider of salt (Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:5; Kurlansky, *Salt*, 7). The salt of the covenant is necessary for life (compare Tractate Sopherim 15:8, Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, 1:235; 2:23)...

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You get the picture. Salt was viewed as so valuable that when someone gave it to you in a meal or gave it to you for your use, there was an implied debt (obligation) owed to that person because they were good to you. So there was this implied loyalty obligation—something that bound you to reciprocate in some way. So the LBD writer is saying that's probably what's behind this phrase, 'covenant of salt,' that's used occasionally in the Bible in reference to the covenants that are made.

The salt of the covenant is necessary for life (compare Tractate Sopherim 15:8, Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, 1:235; 2:23)...

One more category of meaning:

Salt and Discipleship

Several New Testament passages connect salt with discipleship, including:

- Jesus calls His disciples to be the "salt of the earth," perhaps referring to salt's preserving or flavoring properties (Matt 5:13; Mark 9:49–50; Luke 14:34–35).
- Jesus calls His disciples to have salt within themselves and to live at peace, perhaps referring to God's word and the effect it was to have on their lives (Mark 9:50; compare Heb 4:12, Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, 2:23).
- Paul admonishes the Colossians to season their speech with salt (Col 4:6).

In light of those other contexts about discipleship and loyalty and enduring quality and whatnot, this isn't a negative thing. Paul's not telling the Colossians to behave negatively toward other people.

⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt...

So this has to be interpreted in line with being like Jesus—in line with discipleship, in line with being wise in the way that you answer people and the way you treat people. So it's part of discipleship there.

Now, Paul moves from there into verse 7. Here's where we get the whole section on Paul mentioning traveling companions and greeting other people in Colossae. I'm going to read through a good part of the passage here, beginning in verse 7. Paul writes:

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), ¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. 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.

A few comments drawn from Moo:

Tychicus [MH: we've run into this name before in passing] was apparently the person chiefly responsible for delivering the letter. Since he plays the same role in Ephesians (6:21) and is accompanied by Onesimus (v. 9) ...

We mentioned Onesimus in the previous episode about servant/master relationships. So Onesimus (that particular slave) is accompanying Tychicus. So Tychicus plays the same role, and he's accompanied by Onesimus.

... and since Ephesus and Colossae are no more than 120 miles apart, we can reasonably surmise that he [Tychicus] is carrying the letters to the Ephesians, to the Colossians, and to Philemon at the same time. [MH: That makes sense if Onesimus is with him, because he's obviously going to be the subject of the letter to Philemon.] Tychicus makes his first appearance in the New Testament as a

Christian from the Province of Asia who accompanied Paul on his trip to Jerusalem to deliver the “collection” (Acts 20:4)...

The money Paul has been collecting for the poor community back in Jerusalem. That’s referenced in Acts 20:4. So Tychicus is kind of an important figure—a very trusted figure—in Paul’s life.

Accompanying Tychicus on his mission to Colossae is Onesimus. He is, of course, the slave about whom the letter to Philemon is written. From that letter, we can conclude that Onesimus encountered Paul in his place of imprisonment, that he was converted through Paul’s ministry (v. 10) [of Philemon], and that Paul became deeply attached to him (vv. 12, 15).

I think that’s fair. Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus are referenced here.

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Aristarchus, like Tychicus (see v. 7), figures in the later stages of Paul’s ministry, being mentioned first as a “traveling companion” of Paul’s from Macedonia during the apostle’s Ephesian ministry [MH: there’s another connection to Ephesus] (Acts 19:29; c. A.D. 52–55). According to Acts 20:4, he hails from Thessalonica. He accompanied Paul on at least the early stage of his voyage to Rome (Acts 27:2) and may have gone all the way to Rome with Paul [MH: we just don’t know]. This might be particularly likely if, as we think, Paul is writing this letter [Colossians] from Rome shortly after his arrival there...

Mark [MH: he’s more familiar], the *cousin* of Barnabas...

One note about the term: ἀνεψιός (*anepsios*) means “cousin,” not “nephew.” The King James has “sister’s son.” It’s not nephew, it’s cousin. You can look up the word in a good lexicon for that.

Mark, the *cousin* of Barnabas, is the same Mark who had a checkered career in Paul’s early missionary labors.

Now that’s significant, because Mark... That’s a nice way of putting it. He wasn’t always a shining success and a help to Paul. But here in Colossians, Paul tells them... He even alludes to, “Well, I’ve already given you instructions about this guy. Welcome him.” Whatever rift there was has been healed. Moo writes,

Mark, whose other name was John, was the son of a woman in whose house the early Jerusalem Christian community met (Acts 12:12). After Barnabas and Saul had delivered the money collected by the church in Antioch to the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27–30), they took “John, called Mark,” with them back to Antioch. He then accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, only to abandon the trip in Pamphylia (Acts 15:38). It was for this reason that Paul

refused to take Mark with him on the second missionary journey, creating a rift between himself and Barnabas (Acts 15:37–39). This split must have taken place around A.D. 49, and we hear nothing more about Mark until twelve years or so later. Paul’s simple conveyance of greetings here and in Philemon 24, along with his commendation of Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11...

Let me just read you that. 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul writes:

“Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”

Paul’s simple conveyance of greetings here and in Philemon 24, along with his commendation of Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11 reveals that they must have become reconciled at some point [MH: there’s this 12-year gap]. Mark apparently had a significant ministry in Rome, since Peter, writing from there, also mentions him (1 Pet. 5:13). And it was probably from Rome that Mark wrote the gospel bearing his name.

What’s the point here? The point is that failure is not the end of the road. In terms of John Mark, this is a good lesson to learn. There are a lot of people out there that think that God has put them on the shelf, whether for some personal failure or (as in Mark’s case), just bailing out of ministry. That’s not the case. There are plenty of scriptural examples like this where God doesn’t look at a person who fails and say, “Well, we’re done with you.” That just isn’t the portrayal for the Lord and also these ministry situations. And Mark is Exhibit A for, “You know what? You can come to your senses. You can deal with what you did. You own your failure and you get back in the game. You have something to contribute to the kingdom of God, so get up and do it. Don’t live in the past.” He’s just a great example for that. Moo has a couple of comments on Jesus, who is called Justus. “Jesus” was a popular name among first-century Jews. The whole “Jesus Tomb” thing... I wrote an article on it about ten years ago (it feels like ancient history) that you can find on the internet. It’s about the discovery of a tomb, and the name “Jesus” is on one of the ossuaries. Jesus was a common name in the first century. So even in the New Testament, Jesus is a common name. And then you get these second names to clarify what individual we’re talking about here. And Moo is pointing this out.

“Jesus” was a popular name among first-century Jews, fading in popularity only in the second century because of growing Jewish/Christian tensions.

That’s interesting and kind of obvious, too. If you’re a Jew, you’re not going to name your boy “Jesus” (Yeshua) in the second century because “that’s the guy from Nazareth and we don’t like his followers and we don’t like this theology.” So it falls out of use later on.

In the multilingual environment of the first century, Jews often took a second Greek or Roman name, often one that sounded like their “original” Hebrew name.

A classic example is Saul/Paul.

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“Justus” is a surname that is borne by three different men in the New Testament: one of the candidates to take the place of Judas among the Twelve, “Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus)” (Acts 1:23); a Gentile “God-fearer” in Corinth, “Titius Justus” (Acts 18:7); and the “Jesus Justus” in this text. We know nothing else about this man, though the name “Justus,” as Lightfoot notes, was common among Judeans and Gentile proselytes.

So we can’t even necessarily get the ethnicity there. But it’s kind of an interesting observation. What Paul says in verse 11 is worth a passing note. When he writes about these four men:

These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God...

In other words, everybody else that’s helping Paul is a Gentile. These are the only four Jewish guys...

... among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

So the irony is, here you have Jews laboring with another Jew to evangelize Gentiles for the sake of the kingdom of God, which is a Jewish (i.e., Old Testament) concept. So the irony of the situation is pretty transparent there. Paul goes on to mention a few other people in the verses that follow. He mentions Epaphras, Luke, and Demas. They were all Gentiles, as far as we know. I’ll just read from verse 12 here.

¹² Epaphras, who is one of you [a Colossian], a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

I’m going to stop there. There’s one more verse in the chapter, but I’m going to stop there. Paul mentions a number of Gentile here. Epaphras, of course, is one of the Colossians. He’s part of the Colossian community. Demas is referred to elsewhere in Philemon verse 24, along with Aristarchus there and Mark and Luke. It’s the same group. In 2 Timothy 4:10, though, it’s not a positive reference. Paul writes (this is going to be after the Colossian correspondence):

...for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me, and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.

Demas gets mentioned here in 2 Timothy, not in a good light at all. Paul, in 2 Timothy 4, also adds, “Only Luke is with me.” So some had gone away from Paul to do ministry (Titus and Crescens). We don’t know much about Crescens, but of course Titus we know more about. But Demas has just bailed. And Paul says, “Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” Then he adds, “I sent Tychicus to Ephesus.” That’s 2 Timothy 4:9-12. So this was apparently an entourage (a group), in this case, of Gentiles who had stuck together and helped Paul. Obviously, they’re mixed in with Jews, as well. For the most part, Paul has success in gaining help from them. They stick with the ministry, but unfortunately, as it turns out, Demas is going to defect. Before I hit the last verse (verse 18), there are a couple of other things that I want to mention. They’re very easy to read over but I think are worth spending a few moments on. Back in verse 15 Paul said:

¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Here we have a character... We alluded to her last time when we were talking about the husbands/wives command of Colossians 3 and how it was really directed at wives and not just women in general, because there are women in the New Testament epistles, in the Gospels, and in the book of Acts that seem to be self-sufficient, self-supporting, heads of their own households. I think most commentators would lump Nympha in with that group. There is a bit of an ambiguity here, and I’m going to bring this up because it’s kind of like... I don’t know how many listeners are aware of this, but years ago... I have a friend (John Hobbins) who is a pastor in Wisconsin. His wife is also a pastor at their church. And I have a number of other friends whose wives are in some sort of pastoral ministry. I have still other friends who just don’t think that that’s right. So years ago I asked John to blog with me on my site about the women in ministry issue, and his task was simple. I said, “John, make me care about this, because I can erect beautiful arguments on both sides of this.” And ultimately, you really argue

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this subject to a stalemate. And surprisingly enough, it really comes down to very arcane things about the text, and that's in part what produces the ambiguity in many aspects of this issue. This is going to be one of them. It's going to be like the issue of Junia in the book of Romans, toward the end, when she is "one of the apostles" or "among the apostles." (It depends how you translate that.) Her name in certain manuscripts... It's also a male name. So there's this debate: is it a man or is it a woman? And (this is going to sound crazy) it actually comes down to the accent on the name. And the problem is that in the oldest Greek New Testament manuscripts, when they used capital letters on seals to write (that's always the writing style in the oldest material), they didn't use accents. So it's just completely ambiguous. Nympha, as we're going to find out here... I'm going to read you a little section from a commentary. Nympha is also like that, too. It's really kind of odd. [laughs] So this is from Moo's commentary. He has a nice little summary of this. He writes:

In the second part of v. 15, Paul requests that his greetings be extended to an individual and the church in that person's house. [Notice how he words this.] The gender of this person is not entirely clear, the confusion arising from two sources: (1) the Greek form, depending on how it is accented, could be the name of either a man, "Nymphas," or a woman, "Nympha"; (2) the manuscripts differ in the possessive pronoun modifying "church," some having *autou* ("his"), others *autēs* ("her"), and still others *autōn* ("their"). The last option, though defended by Lightfoot, can probably be eliminated. It depends on reading "brothers and sisters and Nympha(s)" together, which is unlikely. The other two variants undoubtedly arose because of uncertainty [MH: among the scribal copyists here] about the gender of the name Nympha(s). None of the variants commands a very clear preference in terms of external evidence. But the feminine name, with corresponding pronoun, should probably be preferred, since it would be more natural for early scribes to think of a man as the one in whose house a church met rather than a woman.

In other words, why else single out this one person? If it was a man, that's just expected, but Moo's argument here (or how he's trying to articulate this) is since Paul singles out this one individual having a church that met in the house, he thinks that tilts the scales over to the side of a woman. In other words, she'd be exceptional, so Paul commends her and says hello to her.

The scribes would therefore have been more likely to change an original feminine pronoun into a masculine one [MH: because that was the norm]. The feminine "Nympha," then, is the option preferred by most of the modern translations and commentaries. Nympha, then, was perhaps a wealthy widow who used her home and resources to support the church. Because of the sequence in this verse, we should probably conclude that she lived in Laodicea and that there was, then,

more than one “house church” in Laodicea. Why Paul singles out Nympha and the church that met in her house for special mention is impossible to know.

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So I only bring that up to highlight the fact that you’ve got this one... You’ve got Junia in the book of Romans in the last chapter, in these “meet and greet” sections. It’s just what it is. You have this same textual ambiguity when it comes to this. So no matter what side of this you take, we need to be aware of this. I don’t like proof-texting. So it’s very easy to proof-text in an argument like this, depending what translation you use to defend what view you have. If you know what I just told you, that’s a little dishonest. If you don’t know it, well, now you do. You should know that you can get really, really, really granular when it comes to these kinds of issues. A lot of these things that Christians tend to fight about really hinge on stuff like this. Like how do you really know what kind of accent was on it in the original text? Especially when they didn’t *use* accents with unsealed script. How are you supposed to know? And my advice is, if you’re going to discuss this, this is neutral. The Romans 16 thing is neutral. This reference is neutral. So throw them out and try again. Build your case with some other material, because neither side really has anything here, is the point.

Another thing I want to bring up (we’re stalling a little bit I guess—not really—until we hit verse 18) is the letter from Laodicea. Let me go back and read this. Right after he greets Nympha, in verse 16 he says:

¹⁶ And when this letter [to the Colossians] 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.

So Paul wants the Colossians, when they get his letter... “Hey, read it among yourselves and then either copy it or make sure that the church over there in Laodicea... make sure they get a copy or get to read it, too.” And the assumption is, “The letter I sent them, you need to read that one, too.” You probably already see the issue. We don’t have a letter to the Laodiceans in the New Testament. So is this a missing letter of Paul? And how does that work with inspiration? This is really easy to read over, but it prompts this question in the commentaries. You might think, “There’s nothing really to think about here.” Well, that’s not quite true. Even mundane things like this sometimes generate good questions. Now Dunn in his commentary gets into the discussion this way. He says:

...presumably ([Laodicea and Colossae] were so close that any threat to the church in one would almost certainly be a threat to the other)...

So Paul wants both places to read his letters. But what’s going on with Laodicea? What is that—the Laodicean church? Now:

The mention of a letter to Laodicea provokes a further round of speculation. Possibly...

We shouldn't be reading it "letter *from* Laodicea." Maybe we should be reading it "letter *to* Laodicea." It's either to or from. You could actually translate the Greek either way. So the options are, on one hand, it was a letter that had been...

...possibly written in Laodicea by someone else.

Not Paul, and Paul just knows about it. And maybe written *to* Paul. Maybe that's why it has importance. We don't know. How else would Paul know about it? Or maybe it was written by someone else but was well enough known to be familiar to Paul, and therefore it should have already been known to the Colossians as well. So he's sort of engaging in open speculation. I'm paraphrasing what Dunn is writing here. He says maybe another view is that it was written by Epaphras, and if that was the case (because some commentators go there to try to explain this), wouldn't it have been logically referred to as Epaphras's letter? And here's where Dunn and a lot of other people want to park, and I've already alluded to the issue.

If, however, it is a letter to Laodicea but viewed (epistolary style) from the perspective of the Colossians, as seems more probable, then we may assume that it is envisaged as coming likewise from Paul so that he, as author, could determine to whom it should be read.

And that is the issue. You could very well look at the Greek here and conclude that... Let me read it the way the ESV handles it. You'll see the difference.

¹⁶And 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.

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See, that divorces Paul from it. Paul just knows about this other letter. "I want you to read that one, too. It's a good one. I read it; it's good." If you translate it, though, "see that you also read the letter *to* Laodicea," *that* suggests that Paul is alluding to something *he* wrote to that church. We actually can't conclusively determine which one it is, but I think it's worth talking a little bit about. Let's just assume that it's Pauline (that Paul wrote it). Now, what Dunn says here... I'll just read you what he has, and I'm going to throw my own two cents in here. He writes:

In that case [MH: if this is a missing Pauline] we have two possibilities. One is that the letter has been lost.

One option is, if we think this is a letter Paul wrote, it's gone. It's lost.

That would require us to qualify the reflections of the penultimate paragraph, since it would mean that some of Paul's letters were not valued so highly as to be carefully preserved, unless, that is, the loss was wholly accidental and unavoidable; this seems to have been the case with some of Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church...

Now, let me read to you 1 Corinthians 5:9. This is a comment made in *First Corinthians*. Okay? Not *Second Corinthians*, but *First Corinthians* 5:9. Here's what we read. Paul says:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.

Now, since that appears in 1 Corinthians, it very clearly alludes to the fact that Paul had written them earlier. We don't have that. Dunn mentions that there is an apocryphal *Letter to the Laodiceans*, but it can only be dated to the fourth century or later, and he speculates, that...

...was evidently written to make good the gap and was widely regarded as authentic for a thousand years in western Christianity.

Unfortunately, among some sectors. Possibility number one is that this letter is lost—this letter to the Laodiceans that Paul wrote to the church at Laodicea, and it's gone.

The other possibility is that the letter to or from Laodicea has been preserved under some other name. The most obvious candidate would be Ephesians [MH: geographically and thematically], so close to Colossians in so many respects. Ephesians was perhaps a circular letter, a letter passed "from" church to church rather than addressed to any one church in particular...

It's just that we know it as the letter to the Ephesians. That's how we understand what the destination was and what the context was. Because the beginning of the letter has that, as well, so that's how we read it. But maybe Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians intending that it be passed around in the region of Laodicea. Who knows? It's impossible to really know. So back to the question of what about the earlier letter to the Corinthians? What about this, if this is a Pauline letter? Could it be missing, just like that original first one to the Corinthians that precedes 1 Corinthians? That's gone. We don't have that. Is this a problem?

In class, I used to like to address this this way. Let's say you were a traveling companion with Paul and you get up in the morning and you go to make breakfast. Paul opens the fridge, and says, "Oh, man. We're out of eggs. You know what? You need to go down to the market and get some eggs. I really want an omelet today. So let me make a list and here's what to get in the market." So

he puts eggs there. “Get a side of beef. Get this...” He hands you the grocery list and you go down to the market and get the stuff on the list. Is the grocery list inspired because Paul wrote it? Just the fact that Paul wrote something, does that mean that we have inspiration happening? You already know my view of inspiration not being an event, but a process. So you can guess my answer. No. Just because it came from the hand of Paul doesn’t mean that it was intended... that God intended it, in his Providence... (I take a very Providential view of inspiration. It’s a Providential process, not a paranormal event.) Just because Paul wrote something... Maybe he wrote a laundry list. Maybe he wrote a thank you letter to somebody. There’s nobody running around collecting these things, “This came from the hand of Paul. This is the word of God,” just because it came from Paul’s hand. No. It’s quite possible (I think normal) that Paul would have been writing a number of things that God, in his Providence, never intended to be part of the canon—part of the sacred body of literature that we know today as the New Testament.

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And so it doesn’t bother me... I mean, I don’t *know*. I don’t know which to choose. Is the letter to or from the Laodiceans, is it really Ephesians or not? I don’t know. Neither does anybody else. It’s a reasonable guess, because of the region (Laodicea), and then you have Colossae and Ephesus really close together there. And the letters are a lot alike. So that’s reasonable. But we don’t know. And even if we did know, it doesn’t solve the earlier letter to the Corinthians—the one that preceded 1 Corinthians. But in my view, I don’t really care. Just because Paul wrote it doesn’t mean that we have to presume that God couldn’t handle the situation. “God really intended that to be in the canon and he couldn’t stop the process of it being lost. God failed.” That’s incoherent. It’s as incoherent as the other idea—that everything that comes from the fingertips of Paul has to be considered part of the sacred text. Neither of these things makes sense, but they extend from a spooky view of inspiration. And I’m hoping...

If you’re not familiar with how I look at scripture in this regard, go up to the podcast website (www.NakedBiblePodcast.com). At the top, there’s “Are you new here? Click here.” And one of those videos is how Mike views scripture. That’ll get your feet wet—give you a little introduction. You’ll also find things on YouTube about how inspiration is a process, not a paranormal event. There are lots of things you find *in* the text (and here’s one of them) that just aren’t accounted for by a dictation view, or a view that has the Spirit of God having to whisper everything in the writer’s ear. That doesn’t conform to what you actually find in the text. So that ought to tell you it’s a bad view of inspiration. So I just thought I’d rabbit trail on that a little bit. And now we’ll hit verse 18. Paul finishes his letter this way. He says,

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

Now, what's interesting here is Paul's reference to writing this greeting... Now, is the greeting verse 18, or is the greeting all those greetings that came before (a few lines, a few verses)? Is that Paul's greeting? It could be either. But he says, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you." You say, "What does it matter? What does it matter if Paul just wrote the last verse or a few verses?" There are other references to Paul commenting about, "Look, look, I'm writing this!" There's a very interesting study, and you should be able to find this online. Chris Keith is the author's name, and the article is entitled "In My Own Hand: Grapho-Literacy and the Apostle Paul." The journal is *Biblica*, and they put a lot of their stuff online. 2008, Volume 89, No. 1 (2008). So let me read you his first paragraph of this article because it gets into this subject about whether we can we learn anything about Paul's level of literacy, not only from this verse, but from some of the other verses where he talks about, "Hey, look, I'm doing this with my own hand." Let me just read you the first paragraph, and then I'm going to summarize some of the content here. Keith writes:

That the apostle Paul was a literate individual is well-established and beyond doubt. However, in the ancient world as today, "literacy" was not a homogeneous entity but rather existed in shades and gradations. The present essay is thus concerned not with Paul's literacy per se, but rather the degree of literacy Paul held in Greek, and, more importantly, how he employed and displayed his literate status in a rhetorical fashion. Recent research in the school papyri of Greco-Roman Egypt [MH: these are like schoolchildren lessons and just general reading and writing lessons that have been recovered, archeologically] has yielded new insights into the process by which individuals learned to read and write in the Greco-Roman world, insights that shed new light on five passages where Paul (or someone writing in his name) (2) highlights the fact that he has written in the epistle with his own hand. I will suggest that these passages enhance Paul's arguments in the epistles, and social position in the congregations, by underscoring not only his literacy, but his grapho-literacy [MH: his ability to write—not just read, but write]; and not only his grapho-literacy, but his ability to avoid using it.

1:00:00 That's the beginning section of the article. Now the five passages are:

1 Corinthians 16:21

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

Galatians 6:11

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

Colossians 4:18

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

2 Thessalonians 3:17

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.

Philemon 19

I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

That's a little aside, of course, to Philemon about the whole Onesimus matter.

A couple of observations. I'm not going to go through this article. You should be able to get it if you're interested in it. But I'll give a few general observations that he makes in this article.

1. When Paul alludes to the fact that he's written something in the letter in his own hand, whether it's that verse or a few verses associated with it, that highlights the fact that he used an amanuensis for most of what he wrote. In other words, he dictated his letters. Someone else was the actual writer and Paul verbally dictated the letters. Now, when he wanted to write something in his own hand, he does. He doesn't have to, but he does, and then he points it out. So again, it's just kind of interesting. Maybe there are some in the audience who have never heard that Paul used an amanuensis, but he did, and it was actually very common even for literate people in the ancient world to do it this way.
2. These passages demonstrate that Paul's Greek education was (at the very least) sufficient enough that he could write formulaic greetings and short phrases in his text. Now, a note here on Philemon 19: Some scholars believe that Philemon 19, and also because of the shortness of the letter... When Paul says "I write this with my own hand," it's not at the end of Philemon. All these other ones are at the very end of the letter, but this one's not. And so because of that and because the letter's so short, some scholars take it as proof that Paul wrote the entire letter himself. Some people say, "No, Paul just interrupted the amanuensis here and wrote that verse in, and then let his amanuensis continue as he dictated." We don't know, but there are a number of people who feel that because this doesn't fall at the exact end, that he wrote the whole thing.

You say, “Who cares?” It’s because that was unusual. It was not unusual (and you can read the whole article) for people to be able to read in another language. When I say “not unusual,” I can’t be too generous, because the article actually goes into some studies on this (based upon textual evidence) that probably about 10% (and 10% might be generous) of the people in Paul’s world at the time could read and write. So that sounds really, really, really low. And it was. And it’s not that everybody’s a dunderhead. It’s just that this is an agrarian culture. There’s a lot of servants and slaves in the culture. This is the Roman empire. So there are a lot of professions and a lot of cultural situations where reading and writing was not necessary at all, beyond maybe the ability to write your name or to count a tabulation or something like that for economic purposes. It just wasn’t part of life. It’s hard for us to imagine, but it wasn’t. So studies have put the number at 10%, and even the people who are doing the study say it’s probably a little generous, but we’re just going to go with 10% that could read and write.

So if Paul was capable (and it seems like you can build a good argument from Philemon 19, and there are scholars who have)... I’m not going to go into all of it. But if Paul could do that—if he could write the whole letter himself—that means he was in the upper echelon in terms of education. He could certainly do it in Hebrew and Aramaic. Those would be his native tongues, and of course he’s going to know Hebrew really well as a Pharisee. “Pharisee of the Pharisees.” And Greek... He was quite possibly not only trilingual, but he could write in all three languages, as well, which would have put him really in a very small percentage of people in the ancient world. It would have really elevated his status—people who could both read and write. Apparently, he could do all that. Now, he still uses an amanuensis, but when he does that it doesn’t mean that he’s not capable. And there’s an interesting parallel to this of a well-known person: Josephus. Josephus actually tells us in his own writings (this is specifically in *Against Apion* 1.9.51) that he needed help when composing Greek. Now, from what we know about Josephus, he’s probably really versed in Aramaic because he’s Jewish, but he’s also employed by the Romans so he’s probably really good in Latin, too. But he confesses he needed a little help to learn Greek well enough to write in it, because that’s what Josephus is written in—Greek. So Josephus actually says:

1:05:00

Afterward I got leisure at Rome [MH: he went to Rome]; and when all my materials were prepared for that work, I made use of some persons to assist me in learning the Greek tongue, and by these means I composed the history of those transactions.

So he tells us that as an adult he had to learn how to write in Greek. Didn’t mean he was illiterate at that point. He wasn’t. But he just had to acquire this new skill. And so the article by Keith quotes another study by Hezser. It’s from a book called *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*. And that author says this:

Josephus should probably be seen as an example of those upper-class Jews who had achieved a relatively high level of Greek education, being able to read and discuss Greek literature, although not able to write a faultless and stylistically sophisticated Greek without outside help.

And Hezser's quote is used by Keith to say, "That's probably Paul. Paul's probably in the same group: upper class Jew, high level of Greek education. Not perfect, but he could do it. He could do it when he had to. He still prefers an amanuensis, so the fact that he uses an amanuensis (here's the larger point) is no indication that Paul was some dundering peasant. He was well-versed."

Even take the writing thing off the table, he quotes from Greek literature, and the fact that he does tells you something. But the fact that he could also write tells you something else. He's in the upper elite for his day educationally and intellectually, which I think at some points in what he does write (in terms of his content) is probably good to know—probably significant.

So that's how I wanted to end Colossians. Those last few verses have some interesting things in there—places you can drill down if you're really interested. So it's been a good ride, but this is the end of Colossians for us, and as Trey mentioned at the beginning of the episode, we're waiting for your questions and I'm happy to get them. And we will revisit Colossians in that way in the future.

TS: Alright, Mike. Another one in the books. I really enjoyed that.

MH: Yes, you get an interesting insight.

TS: I wish we could get through all 66 books of the Bible, but unfortunately we just don't live that long. [MH laughs]

MH: That's true.

TS: But I always appreciate it when we've completed a book, and I think our listeners thoroughly enjoyed it, too. I want to remind everybody that we will be voting on the next book probably in a month or two. I think Mike and I discussed that we would hopefully like to kick it off in January. So our next book will probably be in the new year. We've got some Q&A's to get to.

MH: And maybe a topic or two.

TS: Yep. Again, send me your questions via email to TreyStricklin@gmail.com for the Colossians Q&A. And with that, Mike, we really appreciate you taking the time and energy to go through the books. I know they're probably not your favorite. [MH laughs]

MH: It's not Israelite religion or divine council, but you run into it everywhere so it really doesn't matter. [laughs]

TS: Yeah, and people are interested on your take on these matters, so I know our listeners thoroughly appreciate it, as do I. And with that, Mike, I just want to thank you and thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.