

GOD WITH US Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 24 – Colossians The Supremacy of Christ Colossians 1, 2

Introduction

Colossae was perhaps the least significant of any of the cities to which Paul wrote. *‘The people of Colossae were mainly Greeks and Phrygians, with an unusually large Jewish population’* (Colossians, by Irving L. Jensen, Intro). He did not plant this church. In fact, he had never even visited it. Epaphras, one of his co-workers, had planted this church (1:7,8). Yet, one of Paul’s most important letters was addressed to this small, out-of-the-way place. Why? Because Epaphras came to Paul with the disturbing news that teachers in Colossae were presenting a false view of Christianity. In place of a faith built on the **Supremacy of Christ**, which Paul elaborates on primarily in the first 2 chapters of the letter, they were promoting a religion that made Him less than the centerpiece of salvation (ALL the fulness of Deity dwelt in Christ’s humanity, 2:9). Jesus was being presented as ‘a piece’ of the religious puzzle, but not the main and ONLY piece. Jesus was just a high-ranking angel, a mediator of some sort, a bestower of secret knowledge, or a prophet. *“It was a doctrine of God and of salvation that cast a cloud over the glory of Jesus Christ”* (C.F.D. Moule). Paul combated these heresies by reinforcing that Christ was God, the Creator, the One and only Redeemer, and the **only way of salvation**. A.T. Robertson rightly described Colossians as *“Paul’s full-length portrait of Christ.”* Colossians is very relevant in our world today, because there is a tendency to minimize the Person and Work of Jesus Christ while stressing the primacy of religious duty. As we will learn from this letter, there is no true Christianity where Jesus Christ is not supreme.

Greetings and Introductory Comments: 1:1-12

After giving his customary greeting, Paul encourages the Colossian church by speaking of their sincere faith in Christ, their love for one another, and their enduring hope in their future reward. This trilogy of faith, hope and love was a favorite with Paul:

“We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit” (1:3-8).

The gospel (good news) had been gladly received by these people, and the evidence of their sincerity was the fruit that was springing forth from their lives since the day of their salvation. Epaphras had now come from Colossae to report on the condition of the church. He tells Paul that the Colossian believers have a sincere love for him (1:8). In turn, Paul shows how much he loves them by telling them what he has been praying for them.

“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light” (1:9-12).

We can learn what was important to Paul by looking at his prayer:

- that they might be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding
- that they might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord
- that they might please God in all aspects of their lives
- that they might bear fruit in every good work
- that they might increase in the knowledge of God
- that they might be strengthened with the power of the Spirit
- that they might be granted steadfastness and patient endurance
- that they might be thankful people

Paul’s letters regularly include his prayers for people. This shows us how important prayer was to Paul’s personal life and ministry. These prayers also show us what kinds of thing Paul prayed for.

Paul modelled for the believers (and for us) how much he prayed for them. He deeply cared about them, as we should care for those who are growing in their faith (including ourselves!). If you are wondering what you should pray for, try taking Paul's list and making it your own. The "apostolic prayers" (like this one) are given to us to guide us in our own prayers for our own spiritual growth and for others. Perhaps you can write out this list and make it your guide for a while, until you become accustomed to praying in these ways. Notice that there is nothing in the list about the material, physical needs of people (which is often the primary focus of our prayers). Rather, Paul focuses on the spiritual health of people – that we would know Christ, and might walk in a manner worthy of our calling. Ch. 4:3,4 shows Paul asking for prayer for his ministry, and in other letters he does ask prayer for personal needs, but his emphasis is always 1st about people's need to know the Person of Jesus Christ.

The Supremacy of Christ: 1:13-20

Paul now launches into his main subject, as necessitated by the urgent problem of false teaching in Colossae. He hones in on the supremacy of Christ. In these verses, he says 10 things about Jesus that are critical to understand.

1. He is the image of the invisible God . . . (1:15a)

The word "image" here means "copy," or "reproduction." Paul is saying that when you look at Jesus Christ you are seeing an exact representation of God. Jesus Christ is the pure reflection of God. In Hebrews 1 we find similar words:

"He (Jesus) is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus Himself spoke similar words:

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and you have not come to know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "show us the Father?" (John 14:8,9)

The false teachers at Colossae had demoted Jesus. Paul is elevating Jesus, saying essentially: When you look at Jesus, you are looking at GOD!

2. *The firstborn of all creation . . . (1:15b)*

“Firstborn” is a metaphor (figure of speech) meaning “highest in rank.” In ancient culture, the firstborn had special rights and privileges. The firstborn was the father’s heir and representative. Usually, the management of the father’s household fell to the firstborn son. The title “firstborn” was used as a figure of speech to describe the privileged position belonging to certain persons. For example, in the Old Testament, God says of king David, “*I also shall make him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth*” (Psalm 89:27). King David was unique among kings; he was “highest in rank” in God’s sight; he was “firstborn.” In another passage, the title “firstborn” is used of the nation Israel as a whole. *Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Israel is My son, My first-born’”* (Exodus 4:22). Israel was privileged and pre-eminent among the nations in God’s sight.

Thus, Paul is saying that Jesus holds a very special rank *over* all creation. He is not just some part of the created order, as the false teachers were suggesting. He is the *manager* of all creation. He is the Father’s *representative* over all creation. He is *pre-eminent* over all creation. The next verse amplifies on this title, “first-born of all creation.”

3. *“For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things have been created through Him” (1:16).*

This was a real challenge to the Colossian error. The false teachers had made Jesus a part of the created order. Paul says, No – Jesus is THE CREATOR! The apostle John used very similar words to describe Jesus as the creator-God.

“All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:3).

Paul reminds the Colossians of the central truth of Christianity: Your Redeemer is none other than your Creator. Don’t let anyone rob you of this reality!

4. *All things have been created for Him . . . (1:16b)*

Not only have all things been created BY Christ Jesus; but all things exist FOR Christ Jesus. He is *heir* of all creation. Note: “**Christ**” is used 30 times in Paul’s defense in this letter. “Christ” was a Greek

title meaning “Anointed One,” similar in meaning the Jewish TITLE “Messiah.” While the false teachers were saying that Jesus (the human), was part of the created order, Paul was saying that the entire creation was made *for Jesus ‘The Christ’, God’s Son!* The book of Hebrews says the same thing:

“In these last days God has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:2).

This is very similar to the idea of “firstborn,” in that the *ownership of all things, by Christ* is being stressed. The Father has given Him everything.

5. And He is before all things . . . (1:17a)

Both in time and in rank, Jesus Christ is “before” all things. It is likely here that Paul is emphasizing the temporal aspect, the pre-existence of Christ. Jesus Himself pointed to His eternal pre-existence by using the divine name, Yahweh (I AM) for Himself, causing the Jewish religious leaders to attempt stoning Him for blasphemy:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it and was glad. The Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM.” Therefore, they picked up stones to throw at Him” (John 8:56-59).

6. In Him all things hold together . . . (1:17b)

Jesus Christ is creator, heir AND sustainer of the universe. He is the “cosmic glue” that holds everything together. Without Him, the universe would collapse into a ball of fire and evaporate. The book of Hebrews speaks similarly:

“He upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3).

This is a stunning thought: He holds together the very ground upon which people take their stand against Him, by His powerful WORD.

His WORD, “*I AM HE*”, spoken in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night Judas betrayed Him, caused the soldiers who came to arrest Him with swords to fall backwards... “*they drew back and fell to the ground*” (John 18:6). They were powerfully impacted by HIS WORD, but also HIS WORDS - “*I AM HE*” - the same words that God spoke to Moses, “*I AM*” (Exodus 3:14), and as already noted, the same words Jesus proclaimed to end an argument with the Jews,

“before Abraham was born, I AM” (John 8:58). While Jesus, God’s Son was on earth in human form, we only get a glimpse of the manifestation of these Divine powerful attributes that HE chose to relinquish (Philippians 2:5-11) -His Divine powers- to walk as we humans walk, so He could be our true Savior and mediator.

Step outside and take a look at the world. Think on this idea: JESUS is the One who is holding everything together, at this very moment. Our very next breath is given to us by Him. The fact that our existence here on Earth is determined and sustained by forces that are minutely and intricately balanced, is given to us by Him. The fact that we live in a bubble of air called the atmosphere is given to us by Him. The reality that the distance between Earth and the Sun is such that we do not freeze over or burn up is given to us by Him. Some will argue that all of this is one unexplainable, yet fascinating accident. The Bible argues that all of this is a gift of God, created and sustained by the Son of God, and His powerful word. Let us give thanks to Jesus Christ, the Creator and Sustainer of everything, as we take our next breath and go on with our day. Jesus Christ is the Creator, Sustainer, and Heir of it all!

7. *“He is also head of the body, the church” (1:18a).*

Trying to minimize the importance of Jesus is like trying to minimize the importance of the “head” to a “body.” Impossible! The body can survive without many other parts; remove an arm, a foot, a kidney, an eye . . . and the body will survive. But it cannot survive without the head. In practical terms, this means that Jesus Christ should be acknowledged as the true leader, guide and decision-maker of every true Christian church. If He is truly the head, then the body ought to do what HE wants, not what anyone else wants. In a true Christian church, the entire body bows humbly before Christ, the head, and takes its cues from Him.

8. *“And He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything” (1:18b).*

We saw how Paul used the title “firstborn” above as a title of honor, of rank, and of pre-eminence. Now he uses that title again in the phrase: *“Firstborn from the dead.”* This means that by virtue of His own victory over death, His own resurrection, *He is completely in charge of the domain of life after death.* He rules the resurrection. It means that of all those who will be resurrected to eternal life, He is

the leader. He is the pioneer of victory over death. Jesus Himself spoke of His authority over the resurrection:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself” (John 5:25,26).

The Father has given the Son charge over the resurrection. On resurrection day, it will be the Son of God, Jesus, that calls the dead back to life. It is He who will preside over the judgment of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25). Jesus is the firstborn over the realm of resurrection life.

9. “For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him” (1:19).

To understand what “*all the fullness*” means, we have to compare 1:19 with Col.2:9 - *For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form*. If there is any doubt about the Deity of Christ (that He is GOD), these verses should erase all doubt. Little wonder, then, that throughout church history the Deity of Christ has been a central feature of mainline, orthodox Christianity.

10. “. . . and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach (free from accusation)” (1:20-22).

Why is the supremacy and deity of Christ so important? Because it is through Him that reconciliation with God has been made available to everyone. Through the blood of His cross . . . and through the brokenness of His fleshly body . . . He is able to bring lost sinners back into a relationship with God, presenting them as “holy and blameless and beyond reproach” before the Father. It is here in these last lines that we see the essential connection between the Person of Christ and the Work of Christ.

What does the above passage (1:13-20) do for your view of Jesus? Does it confirm your view of Him? Does it correct your view of Him? Does it cause you to wonder anew over the glory of Christ, or is He just 'a man' as many were wrestling with in Paul's day, and still today? Does it invoke worship, thanksgiving and praise to Him? I know of no other passage in the Bible that so strongly and clearly highlights the supremacy and glory of the 2nd Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ- "GOD THE SON". Take some time to ponder this passage this week. Do not hurry past it. Perhaps you will even be moved to memorize it. This is THE defining passage on the Person of Christ. Let it define your view of Him, once and for all.

Paul rejoices in the Ministry given to him: 1:23-29

This section resembles closely Ephesians 3, where Paul expressed how privileged he felt to be a minister of the gospel to the Gentile world. Here, writing similar words to the Colossians, he ends with a note about his *ultimate goal* in spreading the good news:

"We proclaim Him, admonishing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom, so that we may present every person complete in Christ. For this purpose, I also labor, striving according to His power which works mightily within me" (1:28,29).

Paul was not just striving to help people accept Jesus and become children of God; he was striving to help people reach maturity in Christ. This was the very motivation for this letter: The Colossians were being hindered in their spiritual growth due to the false teachers. Thus, this letter was intended to help them get back on track with their spiritual growth process. Paul was, in this letter, "proclaiming Christ, admonishing every person" to exalt Christ as Lord and to continue walking in fellowship with Him.

Maturing in Christ: 2:1-7

Above all, Paul wanted believers to grow in the true knowledge of Christ Himself. "All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in the Person of Christ" (2:3). Paul's great struggle – in prayer and in discipleship – was for people to grow in unity toward spiritual maturity.

"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have in your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged,

having been knit together in love, and that they would attain to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will deceive you with persuasive arguments. For even though I am absent in body, I am nevertheless with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your orderly manner and the stability of your faith in Christ" (2:1-5).

Some of the false teachings in that day centered on the idea of "secret, higher knowledge" for the initiated. For example, Gnosticism (based on the Greek word Gnosis – knowledge) stressed salvation through knowledge of secret ideas revealed by spiritual intermediaries, along with strict adherence to rules and customs growing out of these ideas (much like a modern cult). But Paul wanted these believers to understand that all the true wisdom and knowledge are wrapped up in Christ. The more they grew to know Jesus Christ and His teachings, the more they would be filled with the true knowledge of God that leads us to life. Thus, he admonished them to continue walking by faith in Christ, not trusting other sources of wisdom and knowledge.

"Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude" (2:6,7).

A true view of Christ is the antidote to deception: 2:8-15

Paul begins this section with a warning against falling captive to these deceptive teachings. But he quickly transitions to again talk about the supremacy of Jesus and the completeness of His redemptive work.

"See to it that there is no one who takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception in accordance with human tradition, in accordance with the elementary principles of the world, rather than in accordance with Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over every ruler and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision performed without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised

Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your wrongdoings and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our wrongdoings, having canceled the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (2:8-15).

We learn many things here about the Person and Work of Christ. There are parallels here with Ephesians 2; but also some unique emphases in light of the Colossian situation.

- All the fullness of Deity dwells in Him in bodily form.
- Believers are made “complete” in Him. We need nothing more.
- Our hearts have been “circumcised” and made new.
- We were buried and raised with Christ.
- We were spiritually dead before we knew Christ.
- God has made us alive together with Christ.
- We are completely forgiven because of the death of Christ.
- Our certificate of debt has been cancelled; nailed to the cross.
- Christ triumphed over hostile spiritual forces when He died and rose again.

The “certificate of debt” was a plaque that contained the charges against someone. This plaque was actually nailed above Jesus’ head on the cross, containing the charge against Him – He claimed to be the King of the Jews. Yet, when God looked down at that plaque, He saw our sins written there. When Christ died and said, *“It is finished,”* He was signifying that the certificate of debt against us had been *paid in full*.

Warnings against asceticism and angel worship: 2:16-23

Along with the idea of “secret knowledge,” these false versions of Christianity advocated self-denial (asceticism). The material world was viewed as evil, thus, to become truly “spiritual” one must avoid interaction with material substances. Additionally, they encouraged the worship of intermediary beings (demiurges, or emanations from God) such as angels. The reference to “Sabbath day” here has led many scholars to believe that the false teachers in Colossae were mixing aspect of Gnosticism, Judaism and Asceticism, to form a hybrid version of Christianity that placed less focus on the Person and Work of Christ, and more focus on people’s need to earn their

way into God's favor. To Paul, this was "defrauding" believers of their true prize: the grace of God given to us in the Person and Work of Christ.

"Therefore, no one is to act as your judge in regard to food and drink, or in respect to a festival or a new moon, or a Sabbath day – things which are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Take care that no one keeps defrauding you of your prize by delighting in humility and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding firmly to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of man? These are matters which do have the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and humility and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (2:16-23).

We see the Colossian error played out in so many ways today, wherever Jesus is minimized and religious rituals are prioritized as the way to find God. We also see rampant devotion to 'spiritual beings' and/or intermediaries in many aspects of our culture. People commune with their 'inner voice.' They find their 'spiritual guide.' Many consult astrologers, fortune-tellers or teachers of mysticism. Still others devote themselves to intricate religious systems requiring all kinds of human effort in order to please the deity. The worship of angels and other spirit-beings is common. Detroit actually has one of the few temples in America devoted to the worship of Satan! Thus, the Church must proclaim the supremacy of Christ, the completeness of His Person and Work. This has always been, and will always be, the true message of the Church: We are COMPLETE in Christ from God's position. And in our practical daily lives, we have the power of His Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. How/where have you seen the Colossian heresy being repeated today? Can you give specific examples from your own experience?
2. From 1:13-20, what did you learn about the supremacy of Christ that you did not previously know or understand?
3. There is a great deal of emphasis in Colossians on pursuing spiritual maturity. Review 1:9-12; 1:28,29; 2:1-7. Discuss the obstacles today to our pursuit of spiritual maturity.
4. Discuss also the key aspects toward the pursuit of maturity. What is necessary?