

SIX LESSONS ON COLOSSIANS

Lesson Seven

(1:1-20)

Salutation (1:1-2)

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

V. 1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus By The Will Of God – Unlike the close partnership Paul knew with the Philippians, Paul was known to the people of Colossae only by reputation. Paul was careful to identify himself, then, with the most important fact about himself—he was the Lord’s apostle. The word “apostle” means “one sent forth.” Paul was writing this epistle as the special emissary of Christ, and every indication of this epistle is that the people of Colossae acknowledged Paul as such. (For other historical background on Paul, see comments on Phil. 1:1.)

And Timothy Our Brother – Timothy was with Paul in Rome at the writing of this epistle. Like Philippians, this was written during the time of Paul’s imprisonment (Col. 4:10, 18). There is no indication whether the Colossian Christians knew Timothy personally.

V. 2 To The Saints And Faithful Brethren In Christ – Saints are simply “holy people” who are “set apart” for God’s own ownership and use. The word “faithful” would describe those who are loyal to Christ and believe the Gospel. Paul did not usually use the word “faithful” in addressing his readers. He may have done so here in recognition of the fact that not all people in Colossae were “faithful”—some were guilty of a dangerous new heresy. So it is to the “faithful” among them that this epistle is addressed.

At Colossae – Colossae (pronounced “kah LOSS ee”) was a city of Phrygia in southwest Asia Minor. The main road from Ephesus across Asia Minor to the Euphrates River passed through it. Travel along this road had brought Greek philosophy from the west and mystery religions from the east. In addition, there was a sizeable settlement of Jews who had come from Babylon—not orthodox Jerusalem—in the second century B.C. These diverse elements help to explain the rise of the “Colossian heresy.”

Paul had evangelized this area indirectly (Acts 19:10) during his stay in Ephesus. Paul taught men such as

Epaphras who then carried the gospel back to their own cities (1:7).

The epistle to the Colossians is closely tied to both Ephesians and Philemon. It is tied to Ephesians by having the same person deliver it (Tychicus) and by having a remarkable similarity of contents. Of the 155 verses in Ephesians, 73 are said to have direct parallels in Colossians. It is tied to Philemon because Onesimus accompanied both epistles, Archippus received messages in both, and the same associates (Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke) sent greetings in both. It seems likely that all three epistles were written closely together and delivered at the same time.

Grace To You And Peace From God Our Father – See the comments on this standard Pauline greeting at Phil. 1:2.

Prayer For The Colossians (1:3-14)

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

9 And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with you, 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

V. 3 We Always Thank God, The Father Of Our Lord Jesus Christ, When We Pray For You – No one has the right to go around straightening out people for whom he does not pray. Paul had earned the right to correct their heresy—not just by virtue of his apostleship, but by virtue of his genuine concern and thankfulness for these brethren.

V. 4 Because We Have Heard Of Your Faith In Christ Jesus – Paul has heard of the progress of the gospel

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among the Colossians from Epaphras, who was now in Rome with him (4:12; Philemon 23). Their “faith” in Christ was not only belief, but also “trust” in him and “loyalty” to him. All this is included in the Greek word for faith.

Epaphras was apparently also Paul’s source of information about the heresy. Paul had heard both good and bad, but he preferred to begin with emphasis on the good.

And Of The Love Which You Have For All The Saints – This word for “love” (*agape*) was used exclusively for the Christian kind of love. It was more than feeling; it was commitment. It never counted the cost, it never calculated the profit. It was the identifying mark of Jesus' disciples (John 13:35).

V. 5 Because Of The Hope Laid Up For You In Heaven – It is the hope of every Christian to join the Lord and dwell with him in heaven’s glory. (See 1:27; 3:4 and Eph. 1:18.)

Of This You Have Heard Before In The Word Of The Truth, The Gospel – This was no new message. There is only one gospel (Gal. 1:6-9), they had heard it; and it is true. Anything different being taught by the teachers of this new heresy (2:8-23) was not true.

V. 6 As Indeed In The Whole World It Is Bearing Fruit And Growing – Paul wanted them to know that the Colossian heresy was a local and inferior doctrine. Those false teachers did not have an exclusive franchise in merchandising truth—the truth was already spreading worldwide! (See 1:23.)

So Among Yourselves, From The Day You Heard And Understood The Grace Of God In Truth – The gospel, as received by them, was the truth. It did not need to be supplemented by the philosophical speculations of the false teachers. Any attempt to improve the gospel would only negate God’s grace.

V. 7 As You Learned It From Epaphras Our Beloved Fellow Servant – Epaphras was originally from Colossae (4:12). When he accepted Christ, he became Paul’s co-worker, soon returning to Colossae with the gospel. Now he was a fellow prisoner (Philemon 23) with Paul in Rome. When Paul called him a fellow “servant” here, he used the word meaning “slave.” (See comments on Phil. 1:1.)

He Is A Faithful Minister Of Christ On Our Behalf – The word “minister” has nothing to do with the modern concept of a minister as a clergyman. It meant simple “one who serves.”

V. 8 And Has Made Known To Us Your Love In The Spirit – Thus Paul had first-hand information from Epaphras about their love (v. 4).

V. 9 We Have Not Ceased To Pray For You – Obviously Paul did not spend every waking moment in prayer just for these people. Rather, he made them a regular and permanent part of his prayer list.

Filled With The Knowledge Of His Will In All Spiritual Wisdom And Understanding – It is not just knowledge of God, but the knowledge of God’s will that the Christian should seek. This knowledge takes two forms: wisdom, the practical application; and understanding, the clear insight into each situation. Both operate under the description “spiritual.”

V. 10 To Lead A Life Worthy Of The Lord, Fully Pleasing To Him – Right knowledge must lead to right behavior. Knowledge is never an end in itself. The purpose of gaining knowledge—and the purpose for which Paul prayed—was that the Colossians might live (“walk”) their lives in such a way as to please God.

The worthy kind of life is identified by a string of participles which follow: bearing fruit, growing in knowledge, being strengthened, and giving thanks.

Bearing Fruit In Every Good Work – To “bear fruit” is to be productive, to accomplish the intended aim. Notice that good works are not the basis of our right standing with God; but the fruit which results from it.

Increasing In The Knowledge Of God – In the first century, there were the beginnings of what emerged in the second century as Gnosticism, the major heresy of the early church. Gnostics (from the Greek *gnosis*, “knowledge”) claimed to have the secret knowledge which alone could give a man access to God. Their teachings were a blend of Greek philosophy, eastern mysticism, Jewish legalism, and a smattering of orthodox Christianity.

It is not possible to determine the extent to which Paul was writing against an early form of this Gnosticism. It is clear, however, that Paul is careful to keep knowledge in proper perspective, and to keep Christ as the source of real knowledge.

V. 11 May You Be Strengthened With All Power, According To His Glorious Might – It is true in both religion and physics that all energy comes from God. Man never creates power; he only learns to harness it. (Compare Eph. 1:18-20; 3:20-21.)

For All Endurance And Patience With Joy – Endurance is the ability to “bear up under” difficult situations. Patience is the “long-tempered” ability to put up with difficult people. While both these virtues were admired by Greek philosophers, Paul added a quality quite foreign to their thinking: with joy!

V. 12 Giving Thanks To The Father, Who Has Qualified Us – Despite the fact that God had “made sufficient” all his children, certain false teachers in Colossae were pronouncing them disqualified (2:18). Let

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no man attempt to undo, improve, or otherwise change what God had done!

To Share In The Inheritance Of The Saints In Light – Those whom God has qualified will finally join him and live with him in heaven. He who dwells in “unapproachable light” (I Tim. 6:16) will open his eternal tents to his children.

V. 13 He Has Delivered Us From The Dominion Of Darkness – Literally, “rescued us.” The dominion of darkness (Luke 22:53) refers to the present earthly state as opposed to God’s eternal kingdom. We are no longer subject to the “world rulers of this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12), for God has called us “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Pet. 2:9).

And Transferred Us To The Kingdom Of His Beloved Son – When ancient kings won a military victory, they would often carry out a mass deportation of the conquered people. The Old Testament tells how Israel was transferred to Assyria and how Judah was transferred to Babylon. Christians have thus been transferred into Jesus’ kingdom—but not in defeat. They will reign with him! (See II Tim. 2:12.)

V. 14 In Whom We Have Redemption – Redemption means “paying the ransom price.” The debt was our own sin, and the price was Jesus’ blood (Eph. 1:7; I Pet. 1:18-19).

The Forgiveness Of Sins – Sin is the guilty act of “missing the mark.” Forgiveness is the act of “sending away” or dismissing sins, as made possible by the substitutionary death of Christ.

Lord Of Creation And Lord Of The Church (1:15-20)

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, 16 for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 He is therefore all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. 19 For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

V. 15 He Is The Image Of The Invisible God – In order to appreciate properly the importance of these verses, it will be necessary to understand something of first century thinking. Many of the ancient philosophers understood the universe in terms of “dualism.” This meant that God = spirit = good, while physical material = evil. The Gnostics later developed this line of thinking with

these results: God is absolutely good and absolutely separate from contact with the blemished universe; Jesus was spiritual and did not possess flesh and blood; man is a good spirit inhabiting an evil body. Either he must free himself from fleshly contamination by seeking knowledge (*gnosis*) and denying all physical desires, or he can turn his body loose to do every base desire, knowing it is only his body—not his spirit—which does the evil.

The heart of the Colossian heresy was a failure to understand who Jesus is, so Paul began here. Jesus is the “making visible” of the invisible God. As the “image” of God, Jesus is not just a feeble copy of the original, but the illumination of God’s very core and essence. While no man had ever seen God (John 1:18), Jesus could say in fullest truth, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The scriptures further state, “He is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). (See John 12:45 and II Cor. 4:4, 6.)

The First-Born Of All Creation – The emphasis of the word “first-born” is supreme rank or authority. While the word originally referred to the fact that the eldest son had been “born first,” it later came to refer to his special rank. This emphasis on rank, not time of birth, may be clearly seen in Ex. 4:22 and Psalm 89:27.

Jesus is never spoken of in the scriptures as “created.” His relationship with the Father is not that of a manufactured object, but that of a begotten Son. The heresy that God first existed alone and later “created” Jesus was taught by Arius in the fourth century and is promoted by Jehovah’s Witnesses today. (Compare Gen. 1:1; John 1:1; and Heb. 13:8.)

V. 16 For In Him All Things Were Created – The Jehovah’s Witnesses have changed their Bible to read “all other things were created,” in order to make room for Jesus as a created thing himself. God’s Word, on the other hand, clearly teaches that all created things were made through the Son, who already existed in the beginning (John 1:1-3).

In Heaven And On Earth, Visible And Invisible – To counter the Colossian heresy that angels should be worshipped (2:18), Paul affirmed that all beings—even angels—were created through and for the Son. Paul even used terminology from current Jewish speculations to refer to whatever ranks of angels there may be: thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities. (See also Col. 2:15; Eph. 3:10, 6:12; and Rom. 3:38.)

V. 17 He is Before All Things – As F. F. Bruce has said, “No matter how far back we may press in our imagination, we can never reach a point of which we may say, with Arius, ‘There was once when He was not.’”

In Him All Things Hold Together – The scriptures clearly teach that Jesus was not only the effective agent

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through whom the universe was created; he is also the sustaining power that holds it together (Heb. 1:2-3). Contrary to the teaching of ancient dualism, God is very much involved in the physical world—in and through his Son Jesus Christ.

V. 18 He Is The Head Of The Body, The Church – The description of Christ and his church as head and body is not found in Paul’s writings before Ephesians and Colossians. It is a key concept here, allowing the Christian to get a proper perspective of himself and his Lord. The head exercises control and direction; the body obeys and performs the work. The church (*ekklesia*, “called out ones”) is a collective body of believers. There was no provision for a separate and elite group of “knowers of secret knowledge” within the body. (See Col. 2:19.)

He Is The Beginning, The First-Born From The Dead – The “beginning” was a favorite word among philosophers for that origin, source, or first cause from which all things resulted. Jesus was this, and more. He was also raised from the dead, and shall have supreme rank (“first-born”) over all those who pass through death into life everlasting. In all things, Jesus shall be “pre-eminent,” taking first place.

V. 19 For In Him All The Fulness Of God Was Pleased To Dwell – It was the ultimate Gnostic aim to divide the “fulness” of God into many levels, each represented by a rank of angels slightly less divine than the rank above. To forewarn us against any such deception, Paul made it plain: all the fulness was found in Jesus Christ—bodily (2:9).

V. 20 And Through Him To Reconcile To Himself All Things – God’s eternal purpose has always been the reconciliation of men to himself. The avenue of reconciliation for men is not meritorious achievement or secret knowledge, but Christ. He alone is the way to the Father (John 14:6). (See also Rom. 5:10; II Cor. 5:18-20; and Eph. 2:16.)

Whether On Earth Or In Heaven – No one anywhere, not even the angels, can hope to secure reconciliation to God through any other means.

Making Peace By The Blood Of His Cross – Jesus indeed took on himself a body of flesh and blood; and with this body, he paid the price of sin. He forever excluded Jewish reliance on animal sacrifice; he forever destroyed Gnostic contempt for the flesh. (See Eph. 2:13-17.)

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What was the background of Colossae? Had Paul ever been there? What diverse religious and philosophical elements were present?

2. What two words are always found at the opening of Paul’s epistles? What particular relevance would they have had for the Colossians? (Note 1:12; 2:16, 18.)
3. What did the Colossians have which marked them as real Christians? (V. 4-5)
4. What is known about Epaphras?
5. What is the purpose of knowledge?
6. What constitutes living a life pleasing to the Lord?
7. Can we qualify and disqualify one another in the family of God?
8. What is the relationship of Jesus to God the Father? What is his relationship to the created universe?
9. Is there any provision for an elite body of “super-saints” within the body of Christ? Are there people today who try to promote this kind of division?
10. How was God “in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (II Cor. 5:19)?

Lesson Eight

(1:21 – 2:5)