

SIX LESSONS ON COLOSSIANS

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)

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Christ In You, The Hope Of Glory (1:21-29)

21 And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has not reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, 23 provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete 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 divine office which was given to me for you, to make the words of God fully known, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest 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. 28 Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

V. 21 And You, Who Once Were Estranged – The word for “estranged” was used to describe what was alienated, separated, and even in medical language for what had been surgically removed. Sin had caused this alienation from God, which is graphically described in Eph. 2:1-3, 11-12.

And Hostile In Mind – The word for “hostile” was the standard word for an “enemy” in the Greek language. Sin had produced separation from God, and separation had produced hostility. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the guilty sinner harbors a suspicious resentment toward God.

Doing Evil Deeds – As it seems plain also in Eph. 2:1-3, this separation and hostility are not God's doing. The sinner himself is guilty of “doing evil deeds,” and this is what separates him from God.

V. 22 He Has Now Reconciled – The work of salvation was initiated by God, not man, while man was still dead in his sins (Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:5). The great gulf of separation was crossed by God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Why was Paul reviewing these obvious facts about God's plan of salvation? Answer: He was building the basis for an attack against the teaching of the Colossian heretics. They were teaching salvation by the attainment of special knowledge and the achievement of rigorous self-denial (2:8-23). Paul wanted to remind them that salvation

was a gift of God's grace, not a reward for man's goodness.

In His Body Of Flesh By His Death – Paul's continuing emphasis on blood and death (1:20, 22, 24; 2:9, 12, 14) seems to indicate that the false teachers of Colossae were trying to minimize the truth of the incarnation. Perhaps they were beginning to teach, with the fully-developed Gnostics of the second century, that Jesus could not have really died on the cross. He was actually laughing at the soldiers from the clouds while they crucified a phantom.

Modern theology also tries to preach a “bloodless” Christianity. It remains the true core of the gospel, however, that Jesus historically lived, died, and rose again.

In Order To Present You Holy And Blameless And Irreproachable Before Him – When men lose sight of the truth about God, they also lose sight of the truth about themselves. Even in the midst of outward righteousness (2:16-23), the Colossians still needed a strong exhortation toward right ethical behavior (3:1-4:6). God's purpose in saving them was to make them holy (“set apart”), blameless (“without blemish”), and irreproachable (“not liable to accusation, not able to be charged with fault”).

V. 23 Provided That You Continue In The Faith – God's plan for salvation is dependent upon the continuing cooperation of the saved. They must persevere in their commitment to Christ.

Stable And Steadfast, Not Shifting – Paul wanted the Colossians to be stable (“built on a foundation”), steadfast (“firmly seated”), and not shifting (“moving around from place to place”). Otherwise they would be “tossed by the waves and blown around by the winds” of false doctrine (Eph. 4:14).

From The Hope Of The Gospel Which You Heard – Just as in Gal. 1:9, the Christians were considered competent to judge for themselves the teachings they heard. Is the teaching in line with the gospel as originally preached? If not, it is false. The original gospel message is true.

Which Has Been Preached To Every Creature Under Heaven – Paul again pointed to the test of universality. (See Col. 1:6 and Rom. 1:8.) The teaching of certain Colossian digressives was a local, inferior heresy.

And Of Which I, Paul, Became A Minister – Paul was a “servant” (1:7) of the gospel. Paul was not in charge of the gospel; the gospel was in charge of him.

V. 24 Now I Rejoice In My Sufferings For Your Sake – Mention of the gospel and his own service gave Paul occasion to speak briefly of his own toiling and suffering (1:24 – 2:5). Refer back to Phil. 1:12-30; 2:17-

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18; 4:4, 11-19 for Paul's attitude toward this imprisonment.

In My Flesh I Complete What Is Lacking In Christ's Afflictions For The Sake Of His Body – What was lacking in Christ's afflictions? Was his atoning death inadequate? What more was needed? Only this: someone had to tell men of Christ's death for them (Rom. 10:14) or—for them, at least—Christ would have died in vain. Christ suffered to pay, Paul suffered to tell.

For The Sake Of His Body, That Is, The Church – Paul could make an easy transition from the Lord's flesh body to his church body. He also saw the church body as continuing in the role of suffering servant, just as the flesh body did. Paul's own part in this suffering was gladly accepted.

V. 25 Of Which I Became A Minister – Just as Paul was a servant of the gospel (v. 23), he was also a “servant” of the church.

According To The Divine Office Which Was Given To Me For You – “Divine office” is an unfortunate translation for the “stewardship of God” which was given to Paul. Just as a trusted servant who is put in charge of a house responsibility. Paul became an entrusted carrier of the gospel. Paul was not magnifying himself or his job responsibility (“office”); the opposite was true. He minimized himself and glorified the Lord.

To Make The Word Of God Fully Known – This was Paul's job responsibility. This was what he did to “complete what was lacking in Christ's afflictions.”

V. 26 The Mystery For Ages And Generations – In the Bible, the word “mystery” does not mean something that will always be difficult to understand. The word simply means a secret—something one would never know until told (I Cor. 2:9). Through all the centuries of time, until the very day at Calvary, no man knew that God would sacrifice his own Son for the sins of the world.

But Now Made Manifest To His Saints – Now the secret has been told; the plan has been exposed. All God's people can now see how God worked from the very beginning of creation to accomplish salvation through his Son.

V. 27 To Them God Chose To Make Known – God kept secret his gospel plan, not even allowing angels to look into it (I Pet. 1:12). Then at the point in history chosen by God (Gal. 4:2-4), he brought his plan out into the open.

How Great Among The Gentiles Are The Riches Of The Glory Of This Mystery – The real beauty of God's plan was that unlike the covenant made with Abraham and his descendants, the gospel plan included the Gentiles! Thus, as Paul said in the next verse, every man is warned and taught and intended to stand before Christ.

Which Is Christ In You, The Hope Of Glory – This is the precious core of the mystery: Jesus died for us to live in us. Our only hope of participating in the glory of God—here or in heaven—is by Christ dwelling in our hearts (Eph. 3:17). As William Temple put it:

“It is not good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it; I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like that of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it; I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me then I could write plays like that. And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could live a life like that.”

Christ in you is the same as the Holy Spirit. (See John 14:21, 23; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17; Rom. 8:9).

In the final analysis, the “hope of glory” is the hope of the Christian to join the Lord in heaven and dwell there with him in his glory (Col. 1:5; 3:4; Eph. 1:14).

V. 28 Him We Proclaim, Warning Every Man And Teaching Every Man In All Wisdom – The proclaiming of Christ is done in two stages. The word for “warning” has to do with the will and feelings of a man, and leads toward a commitment of that man's will to Christ. The word for “teaching” has to do with the development and guidance of the intellect. These two words rightly belong together if the man is ever to be presented “complete” in Christ.

That We May Present Every Man Mature In Christ – Notice that Paul has said “every man” three times in this verse. He was not interested in developing an elite group of super-saints, as the Gnostics later tried to do. It was Paul's goal that every convert should “grow up to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

V. 29 For This I Toil – This is a strong word, implying toil to the point of weariness or exhaustion (Phil. 2:16).

Striving With All The Energy Which He Mightily Inspires With Me – “Striving” was a common athletic term for participating in a great contest. The intensity of the word (*agonizomai*) can be seen in the English derivative “agonize.” Paul was not toiling and striving on his own, however. His strength came from God's “energy which was being energized in him with power” (*dynamis*). This same inner strength was available to the Colossians (1:11) and to us (Eph. 3:20-21).

Christ, The Mystery Of God (2:1-5)

I For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you, and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not

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seen my face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love, to have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, 3 in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with beguiling speech. 5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

V. 1 For I Want You To Know How Greatly I Strive For You – “The same Greek word for “strive” is used both here and in the preceding verse.) Paul’s whole ministry was devoted to the spiritual progress of all his converts. This also included all the new Christians converted through the agency of his helpers, as in the case of the Colossians. Paul also continued to strive for these people in his prayers (1:9). Perhaps this verse speaks of both his ministry and his prayers.

And For Those At Laodicea – Laodicea was a neighboring city which lay about ten miles to the northwest of Colossae. The city is important in New Testament study because of the mention of “the epistle out of Leodicea” (4:16) and the message given to the church there in Rev. 3:14-22.

And For All Who Have Not Seen My Face – In many nearby cities, such as Hierapolis (4:13), there were Christians who knew Paul only through his assistants. Paul’s toil and prayers were extended in their behalf as well.

V. 2 That Their Hearts May Be Encouraged – To comfort and encourage (*parakaleo*) is especially the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter (*parakletos*). There is perhaps a connection between this verse and the phrase “Christ in you, the hope of glory” which was just four verses prior.

As They Are Knit Together In Love – The word for “knit together” originally meant “to cause to stride together; to walk in step.” The word meant to bring together diverse parts and fit them together in perfect harmony. (See the same word in Eph. 4:16 and Col. 2:19.) Love is the secret bond which makes this kind of unity possible (3:14).

To Have All The Riches Of Assured Understanding And The Knowledge Of God’s Mystery – To have all this understanding and knowledge would mean that the Colossians would no longer feel the need to turn to other teachers, who promised secret insights into heaven through philosophy, visions, and asceticism.

“Assured understanding” meant complete confidence or full conviction, even in the face of opposition. (See Heb. 6:11 and 10:22.) God’s “mystery,” as in 1:26, was simply God’s “secret plan” for the salvation of mankind.

Of Christ – Christ was God’s secret plan. He himself was the mystery. He was the only “secret” the Colossians ever needed to learn. (See I Cor. 1:30.)

V. 3 In Whom Are Hid All The Treasures Of Wisdom And Knowledge – The precious “knowledge” offered by the heretics of Colossae and by the later Gnostics was counterfeit. The only real treasures are found in Christ. The Colossians did not need to turn elsewhere to obtain wisdom (1:9, 28; 3:16) or knowledge (1:9, 10; 3:10).

The later Gnostics are known to have made much use of the same word “hid” when they promised access to secret knowledge. It seems there have always been those who prey upon God’s innocent children, promising them a taste of the “forbidden fruit” of the “tree of knowledge.”

V. 4 I Say This In Order That No One May Delude You – Paul was using no clever subtlety. He knew that clear arguments and frank honesty were the best weapons against false teachers.

To “delude” meant to defraud; to reason falsely; to mislead with fallacious reasoning; to “disguise” one’s words.

With Beguiling Speech – This word meant the use of persuasive, plausible arguments. If it had not been used in context with the word “delude,” this word would have been virtuous and admirable.

V. 5 For Though I Am Absent In Body, Yet I Am With You In Spirit – If not restrained by the chains of imprisonment, Paul would have been with them in person. As it was, he was with them in the only manner possible to him—in his spirit. Notice the parallel in I Cor. 5:3-5.

Rejoicing To See Your Good Order And The Firmness Of Your Faith In Christ – As in the epistle to the Philippians, Paul found reason for rejoicing even in imprisonment (Col. 1:24). He rejoiced in their “good order,” a word used to describe either a well-arranged army or a carefully organized household. He also rejoiced in their “firmness” of faith, a word denoting firm structure and solidity.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. In what way had the Colossians been “estranged” from God? What had caused this estrangement?
2. Why the emphasis on Jesus’ “body of flesh” in his work of reconciliation?

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3. List the words which describe the mature Christian in 1:23, 28; 2:2 and 5.
4. What was lacking in the afflictions of Christ? How did Paul complete what was lacking?
5. What was Paul's "divine office"?
6. What is the "mystery" of God said to be in 1:27 and 2:2?
7. Was Paul interested in developing an elite group of super-saints?
8. If "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hid in Christ, where does modern knowledge about medicine, physics, etc. fit in?
9. Are there people today who try to delude God's family with beguiling speech? What makes them so appealing?
10. How could Paul rejoice in the good order and firmness of the Colossian church when it was surrounded with heresy?

Lesson Nine

(2:6-23)

Steadfast Life In Christ (2:6-15)

6 As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established

in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

8 See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 and you were 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. 13 And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

V. 6 As Therefore You Received Christ Jesus The Lord – The unchanging standard of truth for all Christians is Jesus Christ and the gospel as originally preached. The Colossians could test for themselves to determine whether a new teaching was in line with the original truth or not (Col. 1:23; Gal. 1:9).

So Live In Him – Literally, "walk in him." The picture of the Christian life as a "walk" is common in Paul's letters (1:10), showing that the Christian life has movement, direction, and purpose.

When the Colossians originally heard the simple truth of the gospel, they gave their allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Now Paul called for them to live their lives in a manner that was consistent with that beginning.

As Paul was about to explain in detail, to "live in him" includes both right doctrine (2:8-23) and right conduct (3:1-4:6).

V. 7 Rooted And Built Up In Him – Paul blended two pictures here to describe the desired firmness of life in Christ. "Rooted" as a tree and "built upon a foundation" as a house, the Christian will have the strength and endurance to stand against the onslaught of evil.

Notice how often "in him," "in Christ," and "with him" occur in these verses. It has been well said that the best summary of the message of Colossians is simply the phrase, "in him."

And Established In The Faith – "Established" had become primarily a legal term in the Greek language. It referred to things that were legal and valid; hence, certain and reliable. If Christian faith is "rooted and built up" in Christ, it will be unshakable and durable. (See Eph. 4:14.)