

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 12 – Colossians

Paul wrote several of his letters to different churches while imprisoned in Rome, including his epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. If they seem at times very similar in content, it is probably because he wrote them one after the other. Both point to the relationship of Christ and the Church. In Ephesians, though, the focus is more on the Church as the body of Christ; in Colossians the focus is clearly on Christ as the Head of the Church.

The leaders of the Colossian church were having trouble dealing with a particular heresy that was gaining ground in the area around them, so they sent Epaphras to Rome to consult with Paul in order to learn how they might combat it. Epaphras told the apostle of the Colossians' faith, of their love for him, and, of course, of the heretical threat. For whatever reason, however, Epaphras was imprisoned with Paul, and so Paul wrote this letter and sent it back to Colosse with Tychicus.

The heresy, probably an outside problem rather than one that affected the church internally, consisted of a mixture of Jewish legalism, Greek philosophy and Oriental mysticism. It is noteworthy, and most instructive for all believers, that Paul confronts the heresy not so much negatively (tearing apart the false teaching) but positively (pointing to the person and work of Christ and how believers receive everything they need in Him).

Charles Erdman wrote, "Does one yearn for a knowledge of the invisible God? He will find in Christ the image and the revelation of the Father, for in Christ dwell all the divine perfections in bodily form. Does one long for pardon and acceptance and fellowship with God? Through Christ he finds complete reconciliation with the Father. Does one aspire to an ideal moral development? This is possible by faith in Christ, by union with Him, by sharing His resurrection life. These are among the great truths needed in the present day which are sufficient to meet and overthrow the errors that abound on every hand."

O Christian, are you sometimes distracted and confused? "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace"! It is said of people who are experts in spotting counterfeit money that they do not spend their time and energy in

analyzing fake currency. There are just too many variants to memorize them all. They spend themselves, rather, in analyzing true currency, studying the genuine article as carefully as they can, so they can spot the counterfeit bill the moment they see it. This is a good lesson for all believers. Let us learn as much about the true gospel as we possibly can, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, in order to discern and resist every false gospel when it comes along.

Chapter 1 establishes the deity and preeminence of Christ. He is the Creator; all things were created *by* Him. Oh, but He is also the firstborn over all creation, which means that He is the legal heir to everything, too; all things were created by Him and through Him, but the point here is that they were created *for* Him as well. What is more, Christ is the firstborn from the dead, which means that He is the legal heir to everything He has made for the sake of the Church, for the sake of His blood-bought people, upon whom He, as the Elder Brother, is pleased to lavish all the riches of this glorious and everlasting inheritance. We might think it enough to know that Christ is the firstborn from the dead, but, no, believers need first to know that He is the firstborn over all creation, so that they might understand and be assured that He can and does work all things – that is right, everything without exception – together for their good.

Jesus Christ, being fully God as well as fully man, is the only Mediator between the two, and, though believers were once the enemies of God, Christ, the Son of God, has reconciled them to God the Father by His own atoning sacrifice at Calvary. The instrument by which they lay hold of this blessing is faith, but they must continue in faith if it is to prove to be a true and saving faith. It must also be a Christ-centred faith, a faith which lays hold of Christ and relies on Him alone for salvation, and this is the mystery kept hidden from the Gentile world until now, namely, Christ in the believer is his sure and only hope of glory.

Paul has a very personal contact with the Philippians, but not that same close relationship with these Colossians – many of them, in fact, had never met him – yet, in spite of that, he seeks to assure them of his keen desire to see them rooted and built up in Christ. In chapter 2, therefore, he calls them to beware of vain philosophies, man-made traditions and worldly ways. In Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; everything one needs for this life and the next is

to be found in Him. Everything else is a distraction, a counterfeit gospel, which if followed can only lead the unsuspecting astray.

It is commonly believed that one can be saved by doing good works or by maintaining prescribed rituals, by relying on special insights or other spiritual powers, but it is a lie, and one that sends countless numbers of blind and wishful souls to a Christless eternity (Proverbs 14:12). The Lord Jesus is the only name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12), no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 6:14), He is able to save to the uttermost those who do come to the Father through Him (Hebrews 7:25), and those who come to Him, in turn, He will by no means cast out (John 6:37).

One of the things the heretics insisted on was being circumcised. Paul reminded the believers in Colosse that they had something better, that they were circumcised in heart, which is to be born again, or regenerated. Old Testament circumcision has been replaced by New Testament baptism, and that is why the apostle calls baptism, the new symbol of regeneration, “the circumcision of Christ.” He also writes of “the circumcision made without hands,” which is not the outward sprinkling of water, but the inward reality, that work of the Holy Spirit or regeneration which the sprinkled water is meant to portray.

Being buried with Christ in baptism (that is, regenerated), they were also raised to faith in Christ (or converted). Note carefully that the outward sign, water baptism, does not necessarily lead to conversion – sadly, too often it does not – the inward reality, however, what is called Spirit baptism or regeneration, does bring conversion, always and inevitably. The conversion of these Colossians meant they were forgiven all their sins, but it also meant that they were now free from the burden of ceremonial laws which had marked the lives of believers until the coming of Christ.

Not only had these Christians been released from the ceremonial laws which pointed ahead to the coming of Christ, which laws were now therefore superfluous, but these new converts were never again to allow any man-made regulations – whether the pretense of humility, the worship of angels, or any other such practice – keep them from holding fast to Christ, their Saviour and Lord.

Chapter 3 begins the practical application of this teaching. All those who are converted should now seek heavenly things, which includes putting away their worldly practices in which they once walked (verses 5-11) and letting the word of Christ dwell richly within them to the end that they might live it out in their lives (verses 12-17). Order is then established for the Christian home with principles of conduct which apply also to the workplace and political realm (3:18-4:1).

What is particularly noteworthy here is that responsibility goes both ways, wives to husbands, husbands to wives, and so on. A wife is to submit to her husband, but not blindly, nor in a manner that would be contrary to her serving the Lord (see Acts 5:29), but rather as a part of her service to Christ Himself. A husband is to love his wife without reservation (see Ephesians 5:25) and not harbour any bitterness toward her (see Ephesians 5:28-31).

Children are to obey their parents, and fathers, bearing particular responsibility as head of the home, are to raise their children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord (see Ephesians 6:4), not provoking them to anger lest they become discouraged.

Slaves (including employees, citizens, and any people under a governing authority) are to obey their masters heartily as to the Lord (see Romans 13:1,2), and masters are to treat those under them as they would wish to be treated themselves, remembering that their own Master is in heaven and that they are accountable to Him.

Chapter 4 is a call to pray for those who preach Christ, as well as a call to exercise wisdom in order to answer those unbelievers who ask questions concerning Him. As Christ is preeminent in all things, let us make Him so in everything we do. The letter concludes with a number of greetings from fellow believers and with a request that it be read also by the church in Laodicea. As it continues to be read today all over the world, may God grant that the hearts of people be opened to, and moved to receive, the wonderful things of this glorious letter!

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