

Colossians

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FOUNDERS STUDY GUIDE COMMENTARY

Colossians

Christ All-Sufficient

Baruch Maoz



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Dedication

Dedicated to Avital, Shlomit and Tamar,
who have brought me much joy
and challenged me often
to be more of what I ought to be in Christ
and less of what I am.

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Preface

As in my previous devotional commentaries, I offer at the beginning of each chapter my translation of Colossians. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations of other Scriptures are mine as well. I do not presume to provide a proper literary rendering of the Greek. My object is to try to give a sense of the text that more traditional translations cannot offer because of grammatical and literary expectations they are obliged to meet.

Paul's thoughts are complicated. His sentences are often long as history (see, for example, Colossians 1:5–21). His thoughts are closely interwoven, with one idea leading to another while enlarging on earlier thoughts. Translations, especially modern translations, tend to abbreviate sentences and force texts into literary conventions. As a result, they must sometimes obscure the connection between ideas.

In effort to draw readers closer to the text and enable them to discover more of its nuances, I've provided a somewhat more literal, decidedly less literary rendition of the New Testament text. Sometimes my translation transgresses modern grammatical rules or is stilted in terms of flow. This is the inevitable product of an effort to render the text in a more literal fashion. I am trying to convey the actual text, thereby allowing readers to measure my comments by the text and to determine the meaning for themselves.

In this context, there are two distinctions made in what follows and to which I wish to draw your attention. First, Paul draws a distinction between faith as an attitude of heart and the Faith, which refers to the content of what is believed. I have sought to draw the same distinction. Second, and no less important, it seems to me that Paul draws a distinction between law in general and the Law given to Israel at Sinai. At least in most cases (especially in his letters to the Romans and to the Gala-

tians), he speaks of law in general without the definite article and of the Law of Moses by employing it. Again, assuming I am right, I have sought to make the same distinction.

Many commentaries, far better than this one, tend to focus on the trees of Paul's wording rather than on the forest of his broader intentions. Some of my earlier books suffer from the same shortcoming. I am referring to the tendency to deal with texts sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, often with little reference to the main theme or themes of the composition as a whole. This is especially evident when looking at the "practical" sections of Paul's letters. The biblical message was delivered as an entire text, not isolated passages, let alone isolated verses, and in response to specific situations. The principles enunciated and the practices called for are consistent with the issues raised and the situations addressed. I have endeavored to draw the reader's attention to this relationship in the course of my comments, with the goal of encouraging readers to constantly view the book as a whole. This is not a criticism of those others works; it is merely an attempt to explain the logic of the approach adopted in this work. If some do not see the forest for the trees, I am aware of the equal truth that there cannot be a forest without trees. Both approaches are needed.

This is not an academic commentary. It is not meant to stand alongside those excellent works of careful exegesis scholars produce and from which my effort at understanding Paul has benefited so much. What I have learned from them is, I hope, reflected in what follows. The goal set for this work is to explain the text in a devotional, nontechnical manner that will assist readers in applying the Scriptures to their lives. It is also meant to encourage reading biblical books as a unified whole, rather than according to the piecemeal approach we often adopt in our preaching and devotions.

My longing in this series is to encourage a love of God's Word, born out of a vivid understanding of the text and an affectionate comprehension of its relevancy. I long to help readers fall in love with Jesus and grow in loving obedience to him. I long to draw you, dear reader, closer to God; provide you with a broad, practical understanding of the gospel; help you realize you need nothing beyond Christ, and that you *do* need him. To that end, I have tried to write in a way that is easy to follow and yet challenging and helpful.

If I manage to discomfort you through the truths of this amazing letter, encourage you toward a more conscious dependency on Christ, or

help you understand something more of the power of the gospel; if the Spirit of Jesus works in your life, transforming these words from mere verbiage into God's power to save, bless and sanctify, I will have achieved my desire.

May God bless you as you read.

Baruch Maoz
Mazkeret Batya, Israel
June 2017

Introduction

TO THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

Paul

Paul of Tarsus, the author of this letter to the church in Colossae, was born and initially educated in what appears to have been a rather wealthy Jewish family near Antioch of Syria, in the Roman province of Cilicia. (This area is now eastern Turkey. There was another Antioch, in Pisidia, which was part of the province of Asia in what is now central western Turkey.) He “conformed to the strictest sect [of Judaism], living as a Pharisee” (Acts 26:5), which is why he traveled to Jerusalem to study under Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the most influential rabbis in Jewish history. There he was “taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers and was zealous toward God” (Acts 22:3; see also Philipians 3:2), so much so that he took an active part in the initial attempts to stamp out faith in Jesus, the Christ, and “persecuted the followers of this way unto death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison” (Acts 22:4).

The apostle had all the credentials necessary for a thorough understanding of the Jewish Faith. He knew the Torah, the Jewish tradition, and the distinct interpretations of both as formulated by the Pharisees, the forefathers of modern Judaism.

When faith in Jesus first emerged within the Jewish nation, Paul sought authorization from the High Priests to extinguish it among adherents as far away as Damascus (Acts 9:1–2). On his way there he was stopped in his tracks by the living Jesus, converted to the Faith he sought to destroy, and baptized shortly after arriving in the city (Acts 9:3–18).

Following some three years of contemplation in the wilderness (Galatians 1:15–18), Paul returned to Damascus, proclaimed the Faith, and then was forced to flee for his life (Acts 9:19–25). When he arrived in Jerusalem, the church there viewed him as troublesome and sent him home (Acts 9:26–31). Obviously, although called, he was not yet mature enough in the Faith to embark onto his mission. That would require some more years of spiritual and personal growth and a confirmation of his call by the Holy Spirit through the church.

Many years later, he was called to work alongside Barnabas in Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:26) and embarked with him, as his junior, onto what turned out to be his first missionary journey (Acts 13:1–14:27). When a controversy arose in the church regarding the place of the ritual law and of Jewish tradition in the Christian life (Galatians 2:11–21), the church sent him and Barnabas to have the matter discussed and determined by the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–2). This occurred some 14–17 years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18, 2:1) There in Jerusalem, Paul, the former student of the famously strict Pharisaic Rabbi Gamliel, insisted everything the Torah and tradition promised but could not deliver was to be found in Christ, and that Christian commitment was now to be directed exclusively toward Jesus, the Christ, rather than to the Torah or Jewish tradition. His view won the day.

In all, Paul conducted what turned out to be three missionary tours, the first in the company of Barnabas and during which he emerged as the leader among the two. The other two on his own (Acts 15:1–18:18; 18:19–21:7). Each tour reached an ever-broader area of the Roman world and Paul laid out plans to travel with the gospel as far as Spain (Romans 15:24, 28). He might had gone still farther if God in His providence had not chosen otherwise. The apostle aspired to conquer the world for Jesus and to bring all nations under Christ's sway. He passionately believed God was not only the God of the Jews but also of the Gentiles.

Most of the time Paul itinerated, spending only a few weeks in any one location. But he chose to stay in Corinth (Greece) and Ephesus (what is now western Turkey) for extended periods (Acts 18:1–11; 19:1–10). In the course of his tours, he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, the two letters to the Corinthians, and Romans. At the end of each of the first two tours, he returned to Antioch and reported to the church there (Acts 14:24–28; 18:18–24). The third tour ended in Jerusalem (Acts 21:1–15).

While in Jerusalem, he was arrested after being falsely charged with desecrating the temple and almost lynched by an angry mob (Acts 21:27–

36). He remained for two years under arrest in Caesarea (Acts 23:12–26:32) and then was shipped, at his request, to be tried before Nero, the Roman Caesar. In Rome, he awaited imperial decision under detention for another two years (Acts 28:16–31) before being released. Meanwhile, he wrote Ephesians (probably a circular letter to churches; the copy we have was delivered to the church in Ephesus), Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians.

Upon release, Paul traveled to Ephesus and Crete (1 Timothy 1:3; Titus 1:5), among other places (2 Timothy 4:13, 20), and wrote his final letters to Timothy and Titus. He was executed in Rome somewhere around AD 64. This would date Paul's letter to the Colossians somewhere around AD 62–63. The exact dates of the apostle's career are a matter of scholarly debate into which we need not enter. The dates quoted here are approximate. What is impressive is how short Paul's career turned out to be and what an impact it had on the world. Paul was converted somewhere around 33 AD and set out on his first missionary journey at or after 46 AD, at least 14 years later. That indicates a maximum of 18 years of extremely productive ministry that, literally, changed the course of history. Few have ever achieved so much in so short a time.

A central theme in Paul's preaching and writing was the completeness and sufficiency of Christ's achievements. These, the apostle insisted, were the grounds of saving and sanctifying grace. They were also the grounds for Christian fellowship. Paul could not imagine a salvation that did not include sanctification; that is to say, the spiritual and moral transformation of individuals, communities, and nations.

Nor could he imagine such a transformation apart from grace. Grace, in Paul's view, is God in action; it pointed both to God's independence of, and love for, man. It secured the purposes of God for the world and was, therefore, the impetus behind both the doctrine of the church and the doctrine of last things (also known by the term eschatology). Grace was to find practical expression in the lives of those who experienced salvation: they were to conduct moral lives, their morality motivated, shaped, and directed by a loving fear of God and an appreciation of His kindness. That, in Paul's mind, was a fundamental expression of true spirituality.

Christians were to proclaim the gospel by their conduct, pointing to the sufficiency of grace by pointing to the sufficiency of Christ's achievements in all walks of life. Among other ways, this was to be shown by the fact that distinctions between people were rendered immaterial: social standing and gender (both major issues in the Roman world), nationality

(a major issue to Jewish minds), culture (an important aspect of Greek and Roman thinking) — none of these could form the basis for anything of value before God. Nor should they be allowed to separate Christians. It did not matter if you were a slave or a freeman, a man or a woman, a Jew or a Gentile; only grace made a difference, and it made all the difference in the world.

That is why Paul insisted on unity between Jews and Gentiles and of others in the church. Such unity pointed to Christ, demonstrated the power of the gospel, taught men and women to rely on no one but Christ, assured them of God's ultimate victory on the grounds of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and provided them with a vivid, practical view of Christ's wondrous glory.

Paul did not think of church life extemporaneously. Nor did he look for the most "effective" way to promote his message. While no one in history could claim more evangelistic zeal than Paul, his concept of church life was not focused on evangelism but on God, as He is known in Christ, and on the nature of the gospel. He understood the church to be a visible manifestation of the gospel and was guided by the essential principles of that gospel. There was nothing *ad hoc*, nothing motivated by practicality in his understanding of the required conduct of the church. He lived out his theology and expected the churches he founded to live in the same way. Was he wrong, or is there something we need to learn with regard to church practice today?

Colossae

Colossae was situated in what was then known as Phrygian territory, an area colonized for hundreds of years by Greek settlers, now known as mid-western Turkey and then the Roman province of Asia (Acts 16:6; 19:10, 26). The culture was a brew of mystical, notoriously excitable Phrygian practices and thoughtful, almost rationalistic Greek intellectual guesses at the nature of reality, mixed with the belief in many gods.

The city had known much better days. Hierapolis and Laodicea were close by, but Colossae's position had formerly given it prominence. It was situated at the junction of the Lycus River near a mountain pass and two important tributaries, perched above a fertile valley through which one could travel north east to the great city of Smyrna, westward and downriver to the port of bustling Miletus, or west to the prestigious port of Ephesus. Colossae had served as an important depot on the way from

the Euphrates River via Persia, all the way to the country now known as India. The city was also known for its excellent climate and its famous textile and dyeing industry.

The Jewish community in the city was largely the product of Antiochus the Great's deportation of two thousand Jewish families from Babylon to the area. However, some Israelites settled in there as far back as the Assyrian dispersion of the ten tribes, just under eight hundred years earlier. The Babylonian Talmudic Tractate, Sabbath (147, b), compiled some 100 to 150 years later, complained that the pleasures of Phrygia caused many of the Jewish families to assimilate, turning their backs on Jewish customs. Some of these families would have resided in Colossae. In his book *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, John Lightfoot mentioned that in AD 62 there was a confiscation of money, collected by the Jews of the area, for the temple in Jerusalem, the sum of which indicates a population of some eleven thousand adults.¹ Acts 2:10 makes mention of Phrygians among those who came to worship in Jerusalem, some of whom were likely to have been from Colossae.

Xerxes and Cyrus the Younger stopped here in 481 and 401 BC respectively on their way to invade Greece. Anyone of any prominence who traveled in the area inevitably passed through or near Colossae at some time: tribunes with their courtiers, soldiers, senators on the way to or from the East, merchants from the East and the West burdened with their wares and strange religions, the sumptuous and the ill to visit the local hot springs, rabbis, market philosophers and mystic visionaries who peddled their theories. The city had throbbed with confident expectation of even better days.

Those better days never came. Instead, following an earthquake in AD 17 (followed by another in AD 60), Colossae became a municipal has-been, its economy in decline and its population despondent, with all the social and psychological effects of such circumstances. The city lost its vigor. The inhabitants sank into the petty sullenness that so often characterizes backwater townships void of the exhilaration of expectation and achievement, the Colossians became bored, disenchanted busybodies, engrossed in petty minutia. They lived on the shreds of the past rather than thriving on hopes for the future. There did not seem to be a future. The city's slow decline continued until, by AD 400, only ruins remained.

¹ John Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 20.

When Paul composed this letter, he had not visited Colossae (Colossians 1:4, 9, 23; 2:1), although he may or may not have gone through the city in the course of previous travels. The church seems to have been founded by Epaphras (Colossians 1:7–8; not to be confused with Epaphroditus mentioned in the letter to the Philippians. See also Philemon v. 23), a resident of the city (Colossians 4:12). The church was founded sometime in the course of Paul’s second missionary journey, during which he spent two to three years in nearby Ephesus (AD 54–57; see Acts 20:31). This might help explain Luke’s statement that “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).

Philemon was a prominent believer in the city (Philemon v. 1). He hosted a church in his home (Philemon v. 2) while another was apparently hosted by Nympha (Colossians 4:15). Onesimus (Philemon 10–16; Colossians 4:3, 10, 18), a runaway slave from Philemon’s household, had somehow come into contact with Paul during the latter’s first confinement to Rome, was converted through the apostle’s testimony, and was sent back to Philemon, not only as a slave returning to his owner, but as a brother in Christ. Apparently Philemon was a wealthy person.

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is one of the four so-called Prison Letters (the other three are the letters to the Philippians, Philemon, and the Ephesians), all composed while Paul was under guard in Rome sometime near AD 61, no more than six years after the church in Colossae was founded, perhaps less.

The letter to the Colossians was brought to Colossae by Tychicus (4:7–9), who traveled with Onesimus and therefore also carried the letter to Philemon. It was to be shared with the church in Laodicea (4:16), which also received a letter and was to share it with the church in Colossae (4:16).

Paul’s letter to the Colossians contains many unique terms (*hapaxlegomena*)—thirty-four to be exact—most of which are in what is probably a hymn quoted in Colossians 1:15–20, and in the apostle’s response to false teachers in 2:8–23. Apparently the apostle adopted terms used by the false teachers as a means to demonstrate that the valid aspirations those teachers purported to address are satisfied in Christ.

There are extensive similarities between Paul’s language and the arguments of the letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians. The style and many phrases used are identical. This is a significant factor when discussing issues of authorship. To deny that the same author is respon-

sible for both letters is to fly in the face of the evidence. The theology of the letter to the Colossians is identical with that in Paul's other letters, with distinct emphases dictated by the specifics of reality in Colossae. Paul always insisted on the sufficiency of Christ's accomplishments on behalf of the redeemed.

Like most in his day, Paul used lengthy, complicated sentences, long enough to make an asthmatic run out of breath. The temptation to shorten these in the course of translation is great, but to do so is to lose something of the close connection between the apostle's various statements. For this reason, I have chosen in most cases to render Paul's long—sometimes very long—sentences intact.

Influences

Colossae's position, on a busy thoroughfare between East and West, exposed the city to the best and the worst of Roman-era cultures, as did the makeup of its population. The worship of the Phrygian goddess Cybele was accompanied by frenzied, orgiastic celebrations in which devoted adherents were said to gain access to hidden knowledge of the future. What scholars now describe as a "proto-Gnosticism," probably imported from the East, had begun to influence people's thinking. Assertive mysticism offered the Colossians an illusion of the importance their city had begun to lose: access to the hidden mysteries of the universe, a knowledge unreached by others either because it was not granted or they did not do what was necessary to achieve it. The Christian community in Colossae was not immune.

H. C. G. Moule put it well in his book *Colossian and Philemon Studies* when he said there were those in Colossae to whom "Christ was much, but not enough."² The heretics did not deny the validity of their fellow believers' experiences: Jesus saved all Christians and granted them forgiveness of sins. But the Colossian believers were being invited to a purportedly higher spiritual reality that exceeded mere faith and forgiveness: they could have a fuller vision of God, could better comprehend His grandeur, and could achieve a kind of perfection and have direct contact with heavenly beings. In short, they could become super-spiritual. Why, then, settle for less?

² H. C. G. Moule, *Colossian and Philemon Studies* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1932, reprint 1975), 115

The false teachers in Colossae did not understand that the whole of their salvation was in Jesus, that there is no justification for seeking anything beyond Him. Paul enlisted their terminology and turned it around to point to Jesus. This explains his repeated emphasis on terms such as *body* and *flesh*, *fullness*, *full*, *thorough*, and *complete*, as well as his references to *light*, and *knowledge*.

From what Paul said in his letter to the Colossians, we learn that the false teachers claimed to have the means to gain spiritual knowledge, wisdom, and power (1:9–11) and to experience unique access to “the inheritance of the consecrated ones in light” (1:12) through which believers could achieve a higher spirituality and escape “the domain of darkness” (1:13).

The heretics further claimed to be able to contact the *pleroma* (fullness, 1:20), a descending graduation of deities (1:19; 2:9, 18) connecting heaven and earth. Contact with these was said to enable a person to escape the confines of earthly and bodily existence, to access mysteries (1:24, 26–27; 2:2), and to obtain “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3).

Just as the ultimate God was at the top of the ladder of emanations, so the ultimate good was thought to be at the top of the ladder of spiritual enlightenment. Just as the demiurge, the crassest, lowest of divine emanations, was said to have created the material world, so the crassest of Christians lived in touch with the world. Fullness of spirituality was to be achieved by ascending the ladder until the Ultimate was achieved. Some in Colossae believed they had access to angelic patrons who would guide them in the path of enlightenment. Mind you, these heavenly patrons were not to be confused with almighty God; they were of a lower level. But fuller, truer knowledge of God was to be had through them, and through them alone. Spirituality, like the Godhead, was a matter of degrees.

Does this sound familiar? The same promise has been pandered since time began: “You will be like God.” “To be such, your eyes need to be opened, and for that to happen you need to reach out beyond the confines of mundane spirituality to the Ultimate. True, few achieve this goal, but you’re special. You can do it. Yes, you can.”

Some form of what was probably a highly syncretic form of Judaism also had made an impact, resulting in a fascinating list of legalistic ‘dos’ and ‘do nots’ including circumcision, practices of self-abasement (including strict prohibitions, see 2:21), and the observance of special

days (2:16–18). These easily combined with the various other influences because, contrary to its present reputation, Judaism has always been a highly syncretic religion that imbibed elements from Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Gnostic, and Roman religions.

The proponents of this distorted view of the gospel insisted there were many things truly spiritual Christians shouldn't do and others they should, many of which had to do with worship, how one related to the spiritual and physical world, or what one ate or drank or allowed himself to handle.

Every one of these impositions became a badge of honor, evidence of increased spiritual achievement. The Colossian heretics were devout, serious-minded individuals, willing to forgo earthly pleasures for what they believed to be the gospel. They were intent on spiritual advancement. To that end they developed a series of doctrinal test-terms. The faithful considered themselves to be spiritual elites. Such presumptions always tend to promote arrogance: "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like those others. I am seriously spiritual. I don't do what many Christians do, and I do what they don't. I read the right books, worship in the right congregation, baptize in the correct fashion, and enjoy those things that are conducive to my spirituality. I'm sure you are as pleased with me as I am with myself. Of course, I willingly admit such knowledge is a gift of grace—that's part of my theology—but I have grace, which probably means that, in some mysterious way, I am better than others although my theology asserts the opposite." Those who lacked what these Christians claimed to have belonged to a lower class, however sincere their faith. They were brethren of a lesser sort. Purporting to achieve a higher wisdom and to walk the path to higher spirituality led to pride and therefore to disrupted personal relations (3:1–4:1). Once again, there are modern parallels.

Paul knew better. He insisted in this letter that Christ came in the flesh, that the fullness of the godhead dwells in Him, and that the fullness of spiritual blessing is to be found in Him and in Him alone. Paul knew Christ is all in all, a fully sufficient Savior. He also knew that any obscuring of this truth reflected on the glory of Christ and the sufficiency of His accomplishments. That is why he so firmly opposed the false teaching and sought to rectify its impact. Whatever might have been the intentions of such promoters of higher spirituality; their view of the Faith made light of Christ and offered but a clouded view of His glory. To quote Moule again, who wrote with prophetic insight:

The new voices at Colossae would have many things to discourse upon; and among these many things would be Jesus Christ. But he would not be the magnetic Centre of their discourses. They would not gravitate to Him, and be as if they could never have done with setting forth his holy greatness, and his vital necessity, and his “all-sufficiency in all things.” His dying love would not set the speakers’ hearts and words on fire, nor would they dilate upon his rising power, and the double blessing of His presence, for his disciples upon the Throne, and His disciples in the heart. The wonder of His incarnation would be little spoken of, and the solemn joy of the hope of His Return as little. The favorite topics of conversation and of preaching would be of a very different kind. Circumcisions, a calendar of obligatory holidays, a code of ceremonial abstinence, a philosophy of unseen powers, and secret ways and rules for approach to them in adoration; these would be the congenial and really characteristic themes of this “other gospel.”

Now this, as we know, (thanks under God to our Colossian Epistle among other oracles of the Truth), is exactly unlike the authentic gospel. What is the gospel of the New Testament, or rather of the whole Scriptures, as the New Testament unfolds the hidden glories of the Old? It is not this thing, or that, and the other; it is our Lord Jesus Christ. It is “the proclamation of Jesus Christ.” ...

No surer test, according to the Holy Scriptures, can be applied to anything claiming to be Christian than this: Where does it put Jesus Christ. Is He something in it, or is He all? Is He the Sun of the true solar system, so that every planet gets its place and its light from Him? Or is He at best a sort Ptolomaic sun, rolling together with other luminaries around an earthly centre—whether that centre take the form of an observance, a constitution, or a philosophy?³

Such theories are often devised with the best intentions in an effort to promote spirituality. But they result in a form of pride that is all the more difficult to uproot—or even detect—precisely because they are disguised as a form of a thoroughgoing spirituality. To the extent that we are like the Colossians (and I suspect there is a Colossian lurking in every one of us), Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae is a useful antidote. He carefully crafted it to serve as such, and the Holy Spirit guided him.

³ H. C. G. Moule, *Colossian and Philemon Studies*, 13–15.

LET'S SUMMARIZE

- Paul wrote this letter around the same time he wrote to the Ephesians and to Philemon, while under detention in Rome. He was equipped by education, experience, and calling to address the issues raised.
- Paul's desire was to bring the world under the rule of Christ, to have all mankind appreciate the wonder of Jesus' saving, sanctifying accomplishments.
- The Christians in Colossae were being invited to aspire to a higher spiritual level than they had upon conversion. This higher level had to do with a mixture of mystical and Jewish elements. Paul opposed the idea that there is anything to be had from God beyond what is provided in Christ. He believed grace, not human endeavor or achievement, is the basis of spirituality and of church unity.
- Paul was a thoughtful man who understood that church life should be expressive of the principles of the gospel.

LET'S PRAY

Great God of glory and of grace,
the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Christ,
Lord of all life and salvation,
we are humbled and challenged by Paul's example and desire
to follow him as he followed Christ the Savior.
We ask for grace to be what we ought to be,
relying fully on Jesus,
subjecting all our efforts to His majesty and goodness.
Teach us to lead lives consistent with the gospel,
we ask in Jesus' name, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND STUDY

1. What do you think were the reasons for Paul's devotion to Christ? Do you share those reasons? Do they impact you as they impacted him?
2. Expand from Scripture on the connection between the experience of salvation and a moral life. Which precedes which and why? Why is the gospel necessary? What does the gospel have to do with morality?
3. How does the essence of the gospel determine what the life of a church should be? To what extent does your church implement Paul's concept of Christ and of the gospel?
4. How does pride contradict a biblical view of the church and how is it to be countered?

CHAPTER 1

Opening Words

(COLOSSIANS 1:1–8)

1 Paul, an apostle of the Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy the brother, 2 to the consecrated and faithful brothers in Colossae: grace to you and peace from God our Father.

3 As we pray, we always give thanks for you to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ, 4 having heard of your faith in the Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the consecrated ones 5 because of the hope stored for you in the heavens, of which hope you heard earlier through the truthful word of the gospel 6 which is coming to you as it also does in all the world. It is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you from the day you heard and fully and truly experienced the grace of God, 7 as you learned from Epaphras our beloved fellow-slave who is a faithful servant of Christ for your sake, 8 who also described to us your sincere (or, hearty) love.

Who wrote the letter? How we relate to what we read is determined to a large extent by the answer to that question. A brief reminder on a napkin composed by the late president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, is more valuable by far, and its contents the valid object of more attention, than a carefully crafted letter by Mr. Nobody in Particular. Paul was not his own messenger. God sent him; Paul merely obeyed. God is the ultimate the author of this letter.

Could Paul have done otherwise than undertake his mission? Of course not. The God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, who commanded nothingness to become existence, ordered Paul: “Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9:6). As Hannaniah put it, “You will be his witness to all the people of what you have seen and heard. And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name” (Acts 22:15–16). “So then,” Paul said, “I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven” (Acts 26:19). He wrote to the Colossians as a messenger, appointed “by the will of God.”

In other words, Paul’s message was not his own. He was “an apostle of the Christ,” whom he identified as Jesus. Paul’s message had primarily to do with the Christ, which is probably why Paul added the definite article and at times mentioned Jesus’ title before his name, an order found only in the apostle’s writings. Paul’s words bore authority because he was Christ’s representative. Unlike many purported messengers who focus on health and wealth, the Law, Jewish roots, an experience of the Spirit, the gifts, Calvinism, or eschatology, Christ constitutes the main burden of Paul’s message. He was sent to promote Jesus, no one and nothing else. He spoke and wrote nothing but what he had been commissioned to speak and write, and his words were to be heard and heeded.

Paul did not write alone. The letter to the Colossians came from him and from “Timothy the brother.” Paul was not inclined to pull rank for a display of honor. When necessary, he did not hesitate to do so, but he also considered it his duty to mentor others, to train and promote them in the ways of the Lord. He did not hesitate to treat Timothy as an equal. Timothy is here described as a brother, Paul’s brother, and brother to the Colossians. As such, Timothy wrote with Paul out of concern for the welfare of the Colossian Christians and for the glory of God, on equal par with Paul.

The Colossians were dear to God. They were “the consecrated ones.” They had been set aside for Him by virtue of creation, through which mankind belongs to Him, and by the life, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit, through which the redeemed are His.

The Colossian Christians had been dedicated by God to Himself. Consecration is not a higher level of spirituality achieved by human means, as the false teachers in Colossae taught. All such human effort is the product of a divine initiative: He consecrates and man responds by devoting himself to God. Every spiritual blessing and every advancement in spiritual life that Christians enjoy are gifts from God in Christ.

Christians should live in the light of this truth. We should look on life as the framework in which we have been consecrated to the service of God.

The Colossians served because they were not only “consecrated,” they were also “faithful brothers.” They lived as they ought to have lived. It is worth noting, as other commentaries in this series have done, that both the Hebrew and the Greek language view faith and faithfulness as two sides of the same coin. None but those who have faith can be faithful; none can be faithful without faith; all who have faith are inevitably faithful, however much they fail.

These faithful, consecrated ones to which Paul wrote were not figures in a storybook. They were real people who lived in a real place, in this case, “in Colossae.” Colossae was the context in which they lived out their life in Christ, but they were to do so more like those who are in Christ than like the others who lived in the city. Their life in Christ was the determining factor, which at times meant they were obliged to resist local influences to be “faithful.”

Faithfulness, among other things, meant that the Colossians were to remain true to the faith they had learned from Epaphras. This was the purpose for which Paul penned this letter. He was anxious to encourage them to continue to trust in Jesus and in His accomplishments rather than supplementing what Jesus had done.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father.” Paul enlisted the familiar traditional greeting of his time, transforming it from mere lip service or a literary convention (“Dear so and so, ... Respectfully yours”) into a distinctly Christian greeting. Everything the gospel touches is transformed. Cultures are valid expressions of life experienced in community, and when addressed by the gospel, they are changed as lives are changed. Mere words become intentional, full of meaning.

“As we pray, we always give thanks for you to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ, having heard of your faith in the Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the consecrated ones.” Paul assumed the Colossians would take it for granted that he prayed. Prayer is as natural and as commonplace to Christians as breathing. When Paul prayed, he had reason to thank God for the Colossian Christians. The text does not clearly state if the reason of his gratitude was the fact that they believed, that they loved all the consecrated ones, or both (which is most likely), but think about it: Why would the apostle thank God for the Colossians’ faith or their love unless God was their effective cause? Paul attributed to God what we might be inclined to attribute to the Colossians.

It is not that God permitted the Colossians to believe or to love (God is glorious energy; He is never passive). It was not that He helped or enabled them to do so. Whatever the reason for Paul's thanksgiving, it was something for which God deserved to be thanked because He was the one who did it. Whatever part the Colossians played in believing and loving, the ultimate determining factor was God, not the Colossians. God's grace moved the Colossians to respond as they ought. That is why the apostle thanked God for what the Colossians did. This is the Paul's first denigration in this letter of human effort. Grace removes all grounds for human boasting, all confidence in human abilities.

Paul knew God as only a Christian can know Him, as "the Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ." Whatever else the title "Father" represents, it certainly represents a relationship identified by two main features. First, that in some way the Father is the origin of the Christ. This is an indication of Christ's deity, strengthened by yet another title Paul accorded Jesus in this passage: "Lord." Christ is divine. He is the Son of the Father and partakes of the same nature with the Father, just as a son partakes of his father's human nature. God is the Creator of the world in which we live. But He is the Father of the Lord Jesus.

Second, Christ is the object of the Father's affection. He is the "beloved," not because of anything he has done, but by necessity, by nature, by virtue of who both He and the Father are. The Father loves the Son as fathers inevitably, naturally, necessarily love their sons, only infinitely more so. The Father and the Son, two of the three glorious persons of the Trinity, love one another. They are a happy fellowship of holy, eternally unconditional affection.

The beloved one is also Lord. In this context, the title (*kurios* in Greek) indicates rule, sovereignty, mastery, power, and authority. Of course, the title was also used in those days much as we would use the term *Mister*. But Christ is not merely a Mister. Being God, He is Lord in the fullest sense of the term. He rules the universe. He rules history. He rules mankind and, in a particular, saving way, He rules those who put their trust in Him for salvation. He is the Master of their destiny, the Ruler of their lives, the faithful Preserver of their souls. His will is their law. His commandment is their duty. *Lord* implies kingship.

That is why Paul made sure to describe Christ as "our Lord." Jesus is Lord over a particular people, whose boast is in Him and whose allegiance is given to Him. Lordship is never abstract, and Christ's lordship is not contingent on man's agreement. His mastership is not derived. No

one makes Him Lord; He is such because He is what He is, and modern evangelical parlance, which speaks of “making Jesus Lord of our lives,” is less than biblical. Jesus rules because it is in the nature of His divine being. He extends His saving rule over whomever He wishes, and no one can limit His powers.

Conversion is ultimately an act of Christ, laying hold of rebels and changing the direction of their wills, begetting them anew by the power of his Spirit, enlightening their eyes, moving their hearts, convincing them of sin, driving them to repentance, granting them forgiveness, blessing them with assurance, motivating them to holiness, and transforming them still further, ever further, until they are glorified and once again bear the image of the God who created and redeemed them. Salvation is an act of God, an act of “our Lord Jesus the Christ.”

This Lord, this Christ, so strong to save, is none other but Jesus. It is amazing how much theology Paul packed into these few words. Jesus is the name of a man, born of a woman, who has a birthday, who ate and slept, coughed and perspired, laughed and wept as He walked on earth. He had a real body, a distinct voice, and a number of brothers and sisters. His birth was real. His pain was real. His death was real. His resurrection was as real as anything else that could be said of Him.

Note, it is not that Jesus was a man and is no longer such. He was not a man who achieved deification, nor can deity be earned or otherwise made one’s possession. He did not shed His human name when He rose. Enthroned at the right hand of God, He is still called Jesus. He was God at the same time that He was man, and continues to be man at the same time He is God. He rose bodily, as the man Christ Jesus, and ascended to sit at the right hand of God. He is human today, just as He is God, and He is Jesus today, just as He is Lord and Christ.

We concluded that Paul thanked God for one of two reasons, or (most likely) for both:

1. “Having heard of your faith in the Christ Jesus” and
2. Having heard “the love you have for all the consecrated ones.”

We’ve also noted that God was the author of the Colossians’ faith. Now we learn that their faith was directed toward “the Christ Jesus.” Of course, faith of the saving kind should be directed toward God, because only God saves. So here we have another indication of the deity of Christ. What does it mean to have faith in Him for salvation? It means to trust

Him, to confidently believe that He is capable of saving, and to entrust Him with our eternal destiny.

Could we trust anyone but God with such a treasure? Is Jesus worthy of such trust? Can He bear its weight? Or is He liable to give up on us at some stage or otherwise fail to do what is necessary for our salvation? The Colossians had faith in the Christ, and so should we as we go through the trials of life. When our conscience strikes us, we should turn to Jesus. When we fail, become confused, frightened, or just plain despondent, we should turn to Him. He is human—one of us. He is divine—able to save.

The second reason why Paul gave God thanks as he prayed was that the Colossians had a love “for all the consecrated ones.” The important word here is the word *all*, often misunderstood, as if Paul simply said he had heard merely of their love for fellow believers. *All* here, as in most cases in Scripture, means “without distinction.” The Colossians’ love was inclusive. It included Jews and Gentiles, men and women, people from any social status. It was a love that did not distinguish, it realized and therefore demonstrated that, in Christ, there is no difference (Romans 3:22; 10:12; Galatians 2:6). Distinctions that were so much part of the fabric of Roman society and of Israel’s thinking had no relevance in the church.

Yes, culture has its valid place, but where culture runs contrary to the gospel it is to be contradicted. Rome could not exist apart from the social structure it created and that sustained daily life. But from Paul’s point of view, Rome had no right to exist if it was so thoroughly committed to ungodly concepts that it was incapable of changing. Rodney Starks’s fascinating little book on the early church, *The Rise of Christianity*, demonstrates how the early Christians’ inclusive, practical love amazed and challenged the Roman world.⁴ The oft-quoted text, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:36), says as much.

This was a major issue in Paul’s mind because Christian inclusiveness constituted a denial of all distinctions and thereby implied the grace of the gospel. Grace implied the sufficiency of Christ’s achievement over and above human merit or failure. It further implied the primacy of Christ in the Christian life, including the life of the church.

The Colossians were not to be satisfied merely with believing the truth; they were to practice it. Grace was to be the foundation of all they

⁴ Philippi was in Greece. Colossae was across the sea and to the south, in Asia Minor.

did, and grace expresses itself in sacrificial love. Sincere love can never be satisfied with warm emotions; it demands practical expression in the way we treat others. As John put it, “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him” (1 John 3:17)?

As we shall see, these themes occupy a central place in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. The false teachers in Colossae denied Jesus’ primacy by denying the sufficiency of His achievements and thereby inevitably questioned the unity of the church. They taught that conversion was to be followed by a higher level of enlightenment through abstinence, ritual, and the worship of angels. In this way they divided Christians into two camps: the enlightened, and all the rest. Paul refused to accept such a division because he knew Christ’s work to be all-sufficient.

The Colossians’ faith and love had a foundation, a solid source. They existed “because of the hope stored for you in the heavens.” Paul elaborated on this idea in his letter to the Ephesians:

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus the Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding he made known to us to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (1:4–10).

We are studying Colossians, so we will focus on what Paul had to say here, but there is little doubt that what Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians makes his intention here clearer. The Colossians’ faith and love, particularly their love, had to do with their hope for the future, with what we now call eschatology. They loved all without distinction “because of the hope stored for them in the heavens” (Colossians 1:5), and that hope was for the accomplishment of God’s purposes, “to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment,” “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).

The false teachers insisted everything could be had in the here and now of life; there was no need to wait for what was to come. Paul insisted there is nothing more than Jesus. His achievements cannot be superseded. Paul further insisted that “we are saved by hope” (Romans 8:24). What we have now are but the firstfruits of the future, a future that lies in the hand of God and will not be forced until He decides its time has come.

Christians are always torn between present realities and their longing for perfection. The false teachers appealed to this valid longing. We humans tend to be impatient. The false teachers manipulated this weakness. They promised everything at once. But God has a purpose for the history of the world, and He will not be hurried. That purpose is the mystery that makes sense of it all, and we should rest in the confidence of God’s sure hand as He guides our history and that of the world.

Paul elaborated on the mystery later on in Colossians when he claimed to suffer “for the sake of His body, which is the church” (1:24), in which the eternally intended unity of mankind is achieved, and

of which I have become a servant in accordance with the responsibility God has given me for you, to accomplish the Word of God, the mystery that had been hidden from the beginning of the ages and from generations past, but has now been shown to His consecrated ones, to whom God wanted to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the nations [compare Ephesians 1:8–11; 2:11–3:6]. That mystery is Christ among you, Jews and Gentiles, the hope for the glory, whom we proclaim, warning every person and teaching every person with a full measure of wisdom, so we can present every person mature in Christ through the activity of Him who is powerfully active in me (1:25–29).

Paul’s repeated emphasis on “every person” (1:28, 2:1) parallels the Colossians “love for all the consecrated ones, (1:4)” but we will come to that.

The false teachers in Colossae insisted on the existence of a mystery of spirituality, accessible only to the few and faithful. The mystery of which Paul spoke is not of that kind. Christian mystery is not a secret to which only the initiated have access; it is something not quite clear in the past but now clarified to all.

Paul had a large view of the church. He viewed the church as a harbinger of the future as God designed it to be, the “here and now” and the “already” of the “there and then,” the “not yet” but is sure to be. The future has invaded the present, first in the person and work of Christ (“If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” [Matthew 12:28]), and second in the life and witness of the church. History has been knocked off its sinful course and forced back into the course of God’s original design: all in Christ, all subject to God in Christ.

Of course, even that is not quite correct, but I’m sure my point is clear. Every detail of the history of the world is under the guiding hand of God. We’ve already made reference to God’s eternal purpose. Now we’re discussing the practical implications of that purpose. Since God eternally intended to bring all under Christ, Satan’s apparent victories can only serve that purpose. Even what appears to be a deviation from God’s eternal purposes serves to that end: God intended the world to be united in Christ through the gospel, on the grounds of grace, and He will achieve exactly that. Grace is the means by which God has chosen to glorify Himself. Grace is the ground of our salvation, the grounds on which the church was formed, and the grounds on which we are to conduct church life “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:6).

That is what makes church life so important, and that is what makes how we do church so important. Truly biblical church life focuses on God and His glory. That is the purpose for which the world was created. We must be characterized, like the Colossians, by a “love for all the consecrated ones.” Race, culture, color, social standing, language, doctrinal preference—these and many other distinctions must not be allowed to divide us. No one and nothing but Him should characterize us. All who are consecrated by God for Himself are our brothers and sisters. We must actively love them by coming alongside them, living with them, serving, and worshipping God together without distinctions.

Is our love as bold and as inclusive? Do we really put God in Christ first as we formulate our choices, particularly with regard to church life? Do we seek to love or be loved, to honor God or be cuddled? Do we seek to give, to forbear, to forgive, and to encourage, or are we busy measuring churches by how much they give us? Does our church draw us closer to God or to ourselves? Is the preaching in our churches focused on glorifying God or meeting human expectations? These are fundamental questions we must ask ourselves in this selfish, me-first generation that has

lost so much of the power of the gospel because it has lost so much of God in its strivings and aspirations.

The hope that informed the Colossians' love was, Paul said, "stored" by God "for you in the heavens." Note: the hope stored for the Colossians was "in the heavens." It was not an earthly hope. It did not have to do with future earthly circumstances but with those in heaven.

It was stored, kept secure "where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:20), by the reliability of the One who did the storing. Paul was saying that whatever God purposes, He will achieve, and whatever blessings He intends for His people, they will enjoy. God in Christ is the faithful guardian of those blessings. Still further, the apostle assured the Colossian Christians that God had them in mind when He stored those blessings. The church is not an afterthought, nor was the salvation of any one of the Colossians incidental. God not merely stored His blessings, but he did so with certain people in mind.

We must hear the same message today: the hope that stirs our hearts and shapes our church life is stored in the heavens *for us*. If God's purposes were directed at everyone in general, they could not have been for anyone in particular. Paul believed God has individuals in mind and specific communities (such as the Colossians). He had, therefore, not merely stored the hope, but stored it for them (I hope you, dear reader, are included, which you are if you are in Christ) because it was eternally meant for them. They were to encourage themselves with the thought. When faced with the difficulties sin created, they were to remind themselves God had them and their circumstances in mind. Regardless of the difficulties, victory was stored for them, secure in heaven.

You can see, then, how a truly biblical eschatology informs practice, provides direction, and creates spiritual and moral muscle. The doctrine of the last things is not meant to satisfy curiosity or titillate feelings. It is meant to shape things in the present. Is that how you treat prophecy? Is that what eschatology does for you, or are you more interested in getting a handle on things? What impact does your eschatology have on your daily life?

Paul went on to say that the Colossians were informed of that hope when Epaphras first preached the gospel to them. Eschatology is part of the gospel because the gospel has to do with sin, which is disobedience, and with God-centered obedience, which is holiness and an affection for God. Creation and eschatology are related through the gospel because

eschatology is salvation worked out in full, and salvation is nothing less than the restoration of all things to their original purpose. That is also what eschatology is about: the subjection of all and everything to the glory of God. So, with reference to the hope, Paul said to the Colossians that it is a hope “of which you heard earlier through the truthful word of the gospel.”

One important result of sin is the animosity that exists between people. We are adept at justifying our arrogance and the rejection of any who are unlike us. Ever since Adam tried to lay the blame of his sin on Eve, we human beings have been at loggerheads one with another. Adam betrayed his wife. Cain murdered his brother. Lamech celebrated his cruel, selfish pride in a song (Genesis 4:23–24), and a short while later the earth was filled with violence (Genesis 6:11, 13), and so the story continues.

The history of the world is the history of man contending with man, nation suppressing nation. Warfare has been the most pronounced impetus in human progress, leading to research and development more than any other factor. The kingdom of Satan is divided against itself. Mankind is at war with itself, but the gospel establishes peace with God and peace among men by putting God’s glory first and, in this way, providing mankind with a common aspiration, the grounds for living together in love and generous kindness.

Imagine a world in which all nations are devoted to the glory of God. Imagine a world in which discussions at the United Nations are not the product of selfish national interests but of a shared desire to honor God by doing good one to another. The gospel begins with God and His purposes and concludes with the achievement of those purposes, calling the consecrated to live in their light and assuring them of those purposes’ accomplishment.

This is not merely a gospel, good news. It is “the truthful word of the gospel,” in tune with God, in tune with reality by challenging and transforming it, in tune with reality as it will assuredly be in the Ultimate Future. The gospel of Christ can and should be trusted. We can and should stake our lives on it, live by it, and rest in its promises.

It is also the true gospel in contrast with the Colossian heresy, which, instead of uniting, divided; instead of focusing on God, called Christians to focus on themselves; instead of pointing to the sufficiency of Christ, invited the Colossians to improve on Christ’s work by adding their own efforts. The result would inevitably be pride, self-satisfaction, deceit, and contention.

The gospel, Paul said, “is coming to you as it also does in all the world.” It “is coming”—present tense—because it was still spreading in Paul’s day, as it is in ours. Epaphras’ gospel, also taught by Paul, was the gospel that was being spread “in all the world.” The apostle was affirming that what he had to say to them was compatible with what they had heard originally from Epaphras; that what they heard from Epaphras was exactly what he taught, and that the two taught no foreign gospel but were teaching the truth of God. There was no disparity between Paul, Epaphras, and any true teacher of the gospel.

There was, however, substantial disparity between what Paul and Epaphras were teaching and the teachings of the Colossians’ new teachers.

New ideas are more likely mistaken than true. Can it be that no one, anytime, anywhere discovered what you, or the Colossian teachers discovered? Do you really think it is likely that all the Christians in all the world, in all generations, were unable to see what Mr. Wonderful has discovered? The gospel is too wide, too deep, and too comprehensive to be perfectly understood by any one individual, church, or generation. As Bernard of Chartres put it, “We are dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. Thus we see more things than they did and farther than they did, not because our sight is sharper or our height greater, but because they lift us into the sky and raise us up by means of their gigantic stature.”

In order to grow, we need a healthy dose of humility. We need to follow Paul’s example and advice when he said, “If anyone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know” (1 Corinthians 8:2). In that spirit he wrote later to the church in Philippi,

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained (Philippians 3:12–15).

One way we can live with others as we ought, has to do with the recognition that we have a good deal to learn and that we can be made wiser by all our teachers (Psalms 119:99).

That is part of the value of church life, of living in the fellowship of those with whom we disagree. Such disagreements challenge. They drive us to study further, to think more carefully, and to pray a good deal more. They are opportunities for growth in which we come to realize that the truth is wider than our minds, that there are aspects of truth others are better equipped to see.

With that in mind, Paul described the gospel as “coming” to the Colossians “as it also does in all the world.” The Colossians were not the only recipients of grace. The world was being impacted by the gospel. Of course, “all the world” is hyperbole. Paul did not mean to be understood literally. He was making a point. He was indicating the broad expanse of the gospel’s impact. Note, too, how Paul spoke of the gospel: it is not being brought but is “coming.” It has a life of its own, a power to change the world.

Paul was inviting the Colossians to compare the false doctrines of the purported teachers with what other Christians “in all the world” believed. If you think you’ve discovered something no one else has ever seen, you will have an inflated sense of importance and, again, you are more likely to be wrong than right.

The gospel that came to the Colossians and to many others was “bearing fruit and growing.” Individuals and communities were being transformed. Slaves’ suppressed dignity was reasserted. Slave owners’ arrogance was being challenged and replaced with kindness, respect, and the fear of God (read the letter to Philemon and you’ll get a sense of what I’m talking about). Jews and Gentiles related to one another as equals between whom there was no difference (read the book of Galatians and see how that came about). Women were accorded the social and religious same privileges as men. Unwanted babies were no longer thrown away like refuse. The weak were nurtured, the sick were tended, and the poor were fed. Men and women who formerly had no interest in God were moved to love Him, and those devoted to ritual were taught the importance of sincere devotion.

“As it also does among you from the day you heard and fully and truly experienced the grace of God.” The Colossians were likewise impacted from the get-go, from the very first day they heard and “heard and fully and truly experienced the grace of God.” It is not enough to know about grace. The grace of God needs to be *experienced*. Gospel grace is not so much a doctrine as it is a personal relationship with God and with one another. It is possible to be a superb theologian, to dot all the doctrinal i’s

and cross all the theological t's, yet know nothing of the reality of God's grace.

Do *you* know grace? Is your knowledge merely theoretical, or have you “heard and fully and truly experienced the grace of God”? Believe me, dear reader; that is one of the most important questions I can ask. Your eternal destiny hangs on an honest answer. So search your heart and answer in the presence of God.

Grace is kindness in the absence of merit. It is the very contrast of what the Colossian false teachers sought to promote. They spoke of going beyond grace, beyond Christ, beyond forgiveness and redemption to spiritual achievement. Paul (and Epaphras) spoke of grace, affirming there was nothing beyond what grace provided. No human achievement can accomplish what grace has accomplished for and in us.

“As you learned from Epaphras.” Once again we are reminded that Paul's letter is firmly established in historical reality. The Colossians were not residents of an imaginary never-never land that existed once upon a time. They actually existed and actually heard the gospel from an actual person whose name was Epaphras, the abbreviated form of Epaphroditus—a common name at the time. The New Testament knows of another individual by the same name (Philippians 2:25; 4:18), a member of the church in Philippi,⁵ but of the Colossian Epaphras we know nothing beyond what Paul said here and in verse 23 of Philemon. The Colossians knew, and that is all that counts.

Epaphras was “beloved” of Paul. *Beloved* is a term the apostle used quite often—twenty-nine times, twenty-six of which referred to fellow believers. Four times in his letters, he encouraged Christians to greet one another with a kiss (Romans 16:12; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26). He insisted on telling the Corinthians that he loved them (2 Corinthians 11:11; 12:15), and the end of his letter to the Romans is full of expressions of appreciation and affection to twenty-eight individuals, not taking into account groups of individuals he mentioned as well. Paul was far from the coldhearted individual some imagine him to be. If we take into further account the 116 times he addressed his fellow believers as brothers, we gain further insight into this remarkable man's life. He was a man in love with God. He was also a person who enjoyed close personal relations with others whom he held in high regard.

⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).

He was truly a warmhearted man. Loving God, he loved his fellow man. His affection for those with and among whom he labored was superseded only by his affection for God. His devotion to the community of believers, the church, is amazing, as we shall see further in what follows. Do we dare be as affectionate and as committed? Do we express our affection, or have we been persuaded by the false view that affection is effeminate, or somehow sub-Christian?

As we noted with reference to Timothy, Paul treated those with whom he served as equals. Epaphras is described as “our beloved fellow-slave who is a faithful servant of Christ for your sake.” Paul could have chosen to describe him as his assistant, or his understudy. He could have used some other term to distinguish himself from Epaphras (“young Epaphras,” for example). But Paul was not interested in promoting himself. He was interested in the glory of Christ and in promoting others in the service of Christ. So Epaphras is not only “beloved” and not only a “fellow-slave,” but he also commended as “a faithful servant of Christ for your sake.” This commendation gives us a sense of what we should all be like. We should serve God in Christ by promotion, not for self-satisfaction, but for their sake.

“Who also described to us your sincere (or, hearty) love.” What Paul knew of the church, he learned from others. As we saw, he was not the church’s founder, nor had he visited the church by the time he wrote this letter.

LET’S SUMMARIZE

- Jesus is the Father’s beloved, and should be ours. He is fully God, Lord of creation and salvation.
- Our focus should be on Christ in whom all is to be found. He is to be preeminent in everything we do, because the Father has made Him preeminent in all that He does in the world.
- God’s grace is the grounds of everything Christian. Christian unity between those who differ is a vivid demonstration of grace. Christian love must embrace all who are in Christ—in practice, not merely in theory.
- Eschatology properly understood motivates to morality; the church is to exemplify what the future holds in Christ.

LET'S PRAY

Eternal God,
whose purposes determine all things
and who has purposed to undo the consequences of sin,
we revel in expectation of the hope
secured for us by Christ in heaven
and seek Your help to live on earth
in accordance with that hope.
Help us love Your Son above all
and accord Him the preeminence in our lives,
both private and congregational.
Teach us to love all those whom You love
and welcome them as You welcomed us,
for the glory of Christ through the gospel, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND STUDY:

1. Discuss the mixture of humility and authority Paul exercised. What practical lessons are we to learn from his example?
2. What are the practical implications of the preeminence and lordship of Christ in church life?
3. Scan and summarize what Paul has to say about eschatology in this letter and indicate how your findings should impact your church's conduct.
4. What is the relation between eschatology and the doctrine of salvation in this letter?
5. From what we have learned in this section, what is the value and importance of church life?