

Truth for Today

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Paul's Letter to the Colossians: Introduction and Pre-eminence in all things - Colossians 1:1-18

In the days of the Apostle Paul, Colosse was merely a small town which was part of the Roman province of Asia. It is likely that the Gospel reached the area while Paul was living in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). However, it seems that Paul may never have visited the town himself (Colossians 2:1), but one of his fellow Christians, Epaphras, is thought to have carried the good news of Christ to the area (Colossians 1:7; Colossians 4:12-13). In fact, it was Epaphras who brought a report of the church to the Apostle which prompted this prison epistle (Colossians 1:4-8).

The epistle shows us how Paul deals with the false teachings which were permeating the church.

1. An important place was given by the false teachers to the powers of the spirit world. This degraded the Person and work of Christ. Paul combats this by teaching that Christ is the One in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells, even the Creator and Lord of all things in heaven and in earth (see Colossians 1:16).
2. Outward observances such as feasts, fasts, new moons, Sabbaths and circumcision were wrongly emphasised along with a form of works to gain righteousness. Paul argues that it is through the work of Christ alone that we have peace with God and, furthermore, that we, as a result, should put on Christ (Colossians 3:12). That is to say, to live lives in the power of the Spirit which reveal the life of Christ in and through us.
3. A philosophy of "higher" wisdom, knowledge and understanding was prevalent. Paul resists this by showing that the revealed secret of God, the "mystery", is found in Christ alone (Colossians 1:27). Therefore, in overall terms, we may say that the epistle deals with the glories of Christ as Head over all things to the church.

The epistle may be broadly split into three main sections:

- a. Colossians 1:1-14: An introduction marked by thanksgivings and prayer for the Colossian believers;
- b. Colossians 1:15-2:3: A doctrinal section which deals with the supremacy of Christ viewed from every aspect; and,
- c. Colossians 2:4-4:18: A practical section warning against error, noting the results of union with Christ and, giving final greetings to the Colossians.

The section we are exploring today, Colossians 1:1-18, concludes with the pre-eminence of Christ in all things. Colossians 1:1-18 may be divided as follows:

1. Paul's greetings (Colossians 1:1-2);
2. Paul's gratitude for their faith, love, hope and fruitfulness (Colossians 1:3-6);
3. Paul's appreciation of Epaphras (Colossians 1:7-8);
4. Paul's intercession for their spiritual growth (Colossians 1:9-11);
5. The Father's work (Colossians 1:12-13);
6. The glories of Christ in relation to God, creation, the church and all things. (Colossians 1:14-18)

1. Colossians 1:1-2: Paul's greetings

Paul begins his greetings by expressing his Apostleship. He was not just a "sent one" which is the meaning of the word "apostle"; but one who had been directly commissioned and sent by the risen and exalted Christ Jesus (Colossians 1:1). This commission was by divine will (Colossians 1:1). That meant, Paul had the God-given authority to represent the anointed Saviour.

Timothy is identified with Paul in the writing of this letter. Paul calls him "the brother" (Colossians 1:1). In this way he emphasises the universal relationship between Christians as members of a family. The use of the direct article seems to show that Timothy is a good model of what every Christian brother should be like. Of course, Timothy, whose name means "honoured of God", is called a man of God (1 Timothy 6:11). This should always be our aim as children of God, whether male or female.

Paul writes to "*the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colosse*" (Colossians 1:1-2). The two nouns apply to the members of the same company. A "*saint*", in the context of the New Testament, is simply a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ seen from God's point of view. The word means "holy" or "set apart". Every Christian is classed as a saint. Each one is set apart for the possession, pleasure and purposes of God. If this is true positionally then, by the power of the Spirit of God, it should be worked out practically. We should be living God-steered, holy lives. Hence, as believers, it is our responsibility to cultivate our salvation (Philippians 2:12). These Christians are also called "*faithful brethren*" (Colossians 1:2). Not only were they all related to one another in Christ, but they were counted as being trustworthy and reliable. Let us always remember the words of our Lord in John 20:17: "...Go to **My brethren** and say unto them, *I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.*" Furthermore, in Hebrews 2:11 we read: "*For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason he is not ashamed to call them **brethren.***" It reminds us of our Lord's words while here upon earth: "*My mother and **my brethren** are these which hear the word of God, and do it*" (Luke 8:21). In other words, those in this unique family union with Christ are marked by obedience to the word of God.

Paul then greets them with a desire that grace should be given to them from God the Father (Colossians 1:2). God our Father is the spring and source of every blessing. Paul reminds them that the all-powerful, all-knowing, unchanging, ever-present God is now active for them as Father. As the Father, then He must (because of who He is) do what is best for His own. So grace, that is, "divine favour", flows from Him to these Christians at Colosse. Yet Paul would couple this grace with "peace" because one complements the other. The word "peace" speaks of harmonious relationships between us and God and, also, us and one another. Our God is the source of peace (Romans 15:33). We also know that we have peace with God because Christ has borne the judgement against our sins (Romans 5:1). Furthermore, we know the peace of God (Philippians 2:7; Colossians 3:15). That is to say, we have such confidence in the God of peace that we can be at rest in the varied circumstances of life. The act of worrying is a sin. It shows a lack of dependence upon God. Knowing God as our Father, we can cast all our care upon Him as simply as throwing a garment over the back of a donkey (compare 1 Peter 5:7; Luke 19:35).

2. Colossians 1:3-6: Paul's gratitude for their faith, love, hope and fruitfulness

In Colossians 1:3-6, we note Paul's gratitude for their faith, love, hope and fruitfulness. The Apostle, along with others is found thanking God for the Colossians as well as constantly praying for them. Prayer makes request while thanksgiving is the return of praise for requests answered. Those who praise or thank God are offering up spiritual sacrifices and giving the honour or glory to Him. The words "*the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Colossians 1:3) tell us that the same Father loves us even to the degree that He loves His own beloved Son. It is in Him that all the Father's counsels and purposes will be fulfilled. The expression is used six times in the New Testament (Romans 15:6; 2 Corinthians 1:3, 11:31; Ephesians 1:3, 1 Peter 1:3) showing Him to be the Subject of glory and praise; the Searcher of hearts; the Selector of those in Christ; the Comforter; and the merciful One who has secured our future.

Like Paul, we may find fresh causes for which we can thank God for our fellow believers. The faith of the Colossian Christians (Colossians 1:4), their love towards all other believers (Colossians 1:4), and the hope they possessed (Colossians 1:5) are the three reasons given for Paul's thanksgiving. Interestingly, Paul had heard these things witnessed about the Colossians (Colossians 1:6). They could not be classed as secret or passive disciples. They made, as we all should, the confession of their faith known. Is the testimony of our local church as commendable? Furthermore, do we, like Paul, give thanks for those whom we know fully trust in the exalted Saviour and act accordingly? Do we give thanks for those whose love for **all** their fellow Christians reflects the universal love of God? Do we give thanks that Christians are encouraged by that sure hope, namely, an inheritance secured for them in heaven? Peter describes it as "an inheritance which is incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4). It is therefore an inheritance which is both indestructible and pure, and one which retains its value eternally.

This triad of virtues (faith, love and hope) marks the life of the Christian. Faith rests in Christ and all that He has done and is doing. Love works in and through our hearts today. Hope looks to certainty in the future.

Paul reminds the Colossians that they had heard of this hope previously, perhaps when Epaphras (Colossians 1:7) preached the Gospel to them. Paul describes this as the "*word of the truth of the gospel*" which emphasises the **truth** of the good news that they had received as opposed to the **false** teachings that were, at that time, infiltrating their company.

In Colossians 1:6, the Apostle states that the word of truth of the Gospel "*is come unto you as in all the world.*" The Greek word for "is come" is usually that reserved for the coming of a person. It emphasises the fact that the glad tidings concern the Person of Christ. The fact that Paul refers to all the world, shows that the range of the Gospel was universal. What had been experienced at Colosse was happening everywhere the Gospel was preached. The

American Standard Version reads: *"Which is come unto you; even as it is also in all the world, bearing fruit and increasing"* (Colossians 1:6) This translation highlights the supernatural power of the Gospel because a plant does not naturally bear fruit and increase at the same time. Usually, it has to be pruned to be fruitful or else it grows wild with all of its life being drained in the growth of branches and leaves. The Gospel was bearing fruit in the salvation of souls and increasing in the growth of these new Christians spiritually.

The expression *"grace of God in truth"* (Colossians 1:6) reminds the Colossians that it is the undeserved favour of God that the Gospel exhibits. It is God's sovereign display of love which saves and sanctifies those who believe. This is in contrast to the false teaching that a person's own, so-called good works or keeping of rules and ordinances are able to save them.

3. Colossians 1:7-8: Paul's appreciation of Epaphras

Colossians 1:7-8 reveal Paul's appreciation of Epaphras. Firstly, Epaphras was a teacher (Colossians 1:7). We can see this in the words *"as ye also learned..."* He had brought the Gospel message to the Colossians and had nurtured it so that it affected their lives substantially. The Apostle describes him as a *"dear fellow-servant"* (Colossians 1:7). This, and what follows, sets the seal of approval upon what Epaphras was teaching. As a fellow-servant or bondsman then his position in Christ was the same as that of Paul and Timothy. They were bondsmen to the same Master. Therefore, his teaching and life was geared to the word of the Lord. Note too, that Epaphras was **dear** to them. He was both highly esteemed and loved. Furthermore, he is described as a *"faithful minister on our behalf"* (Colossians 1:7). As a representative of Paul to the Colossians, Epaphras was commended for his reliability and trustworthiness. It was also Epaphras who carried the report of their love in the Spirit to the Apostle (Colossians 1:8). This love is not merely human affection, but a genuine love which always seeks the best for the Lord and His people. It was a love promoted by the indwelling Spirit of God.

4. Colossians 1:9-14: Paul's intercession for their spiritual growth

The next section, Colossians 1:9-14, deals with the intercession of Paul for the spiritual growth of the Christians at Colosse. His prayers for them express an abundance which can be seen in his use of the words "all" and "every". Broadly, his unceasing prayer was that they should:

- a. Know God's will;
- b. Walk worthily;
- c. Work fruitfully;
- d. Grow in the knowledge of God;
- e. Be empowered to patience; and,
- f. Express a thankful spirit.

a. Know God's Will

Firstly, he wanted them to be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (Colossians 1:9). The Holy Spirit will give the spiritual insight whereby we can understand the will of God for our lives through God's word. Wisdom is the application of that understanding to our lives. Romans 12:2 shows us that obedience to His word will *"prove His will to be good, acceptable and perfect."*

b. Walk worthily

Secondly, he wanted their walk that is the course and conduct of their lives, to give pleasure to God (Colossians 1:10) just as the life of the Lord Jesus could draw forth the Father's expression of delight, *"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:17, 17:5).

c. Work fruitfully

Thirdly, they were to do good works (Colossians 1:10). A good work is one which is done to benefit others while giving the credit to God alone. His glory is the motive for good works. Only those who are new creatures in Christ are capable of doing good works (Ephesians 2:10 and Titus 3:8).

d. Grow in the knowledge of God

Fourthly, Paul wanted them to increase in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10). The only way to do this is through communion with Him in prayer, studying His revealed word and living in His will (Hosea 6:3).

e. Be empowered to patience

Fifthly, he wanted them to be *“filled with all might according to God’s glorious power unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness”* (Colossians 1:10). This power is tapped by prayer. The purpose for it is **not** to create marvellous preachers or the working of miracles, but rather to produce joyfulness in our lives when we are under great trial. “Patience” is a word which speaks of endurance under pressure and “long-suffering” expresses a quiet suffering of the failings of others or their abuse. Bentley writes “that ‘patience’ means ‘no giving-up’; ‘longsuffering’ infers ‘no giving-back’; and ‘with joyfulness’ suggests ‘no giving-in’” (Bentley, Michael: *Colossians & Philemon*: ISBN: 9780852344897).

f. Express a thankful spirit

Finally, Paul wants them to have thankful hearts in the light of what the Father has done for them (Colossians 1:12). Oh that our Christian lives might register these qualities also!

5. Colossians 1:12-13: The Father’s work

Colossians 1:12 introduces us to the Father’s work. Like the Colossians, we can give thanks to the Father for making us suitable to be sharers in the inheritance of the saints in light. It is the blood of Christ in completely atoning for our sins which has made us fit for the presence of God - He who dwells in light unapproachable (see 1 Timothy 6:16). Paul also shows us we are saints as discussed previously. Light speaks of the presence and the glory of God. *“... the light of the knowledge of His glory is seen in the face of Jesus Christ”* (2 Corinthians 4:6). When we are with Christ, then we shall know the brightness of that glory. Therefore, I suggest that the inheritance referred to here is nothing less than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself just as the LORD was the inheritance of Levi (Deuteronomy 10:9). It is an inheritance common to all real Christians and, to some degree, may be enjoyed now.

Moreover, Colossians 1:13 tells us that the Father has rescued us from the domain of Satan and *“translated us into the kingdom of His ‘dear’ Son”* (or better, *“the Son of His love”*). The word “translated” signifies conquerors capturing whole nations and taking them to distant lands. It reminds us of the Lord Jesus Christ who “through death, destroyed him that had the power of death, that is the devil; and delivered them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:14-15). So from the realm of darkness, danger and death we have been brought into a kingdom of light, love and life. Our rulers are no longer Satan and Sin, but the Son of the Father’s love and Righteousness. The Son of the Father’s love is the Lord Jesus Christ who is both the object of the Father’s love and the revealer of it. Matthew 3:17 and Matthew 17:5 inform us that the love of the Father for the Son was unoriginated and uninterrupted.

6. Colossians 1:14-18: The glories of Christ in relation to God, creation, the church and all things

In Colossians 1:14 the glories of Christ begin to emerge.

Firstly, He is, as we have seen, *“the Son of the Father’s love”* (Colossians 1:13). The Divine relationship between the Father and the Son prior to His entry into the world, during His manhood here on earth, and now in glory is indicated by the verses that follow.

Secondly, He is the Son *“in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”* (Colossians 1:14). This means that we are in union with the Son of the Father who has released us from bondage to sin and death by the payment of a ransom. He was made sin on our account. He suffered that terrible punishment of death. We hear it in His cry from the cross, *“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me”* (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). In Matthew 20:28 we read: *“Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* Christians are ransomed in this way as soon as they trust in Christ. We are assured that we will never come under God’s sword of judgement.

“Aphesis” is the Greek word meaning “forgiveness” in Colossians 1:14. It may also mean “to send away”. In our union with the Son our sins are dismissed so that they may never again be called against us. Therefore, we cannot be enslaved by Satan, the *“accuser of brethren”* (Revelation 12:10), ever again. It is God who justifies us through the work of His Son (see Romans 8:33).

Thirdly, the expression, *“who is the image of the invisible God”* (Colossians 1:15) shows us that the Son of the Father’s love is not just a divine copy or even a visible representation; but a real, essential embodiment of God. This is a proof of the Deity of Christ because only God could perfectly reveal God. The words “who is” suggest a continuance as such. The Son is the visible representation and manifestation of God to created beings. In John 1:18 we find, *“No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath*

declared him." Here He declares God, while in John 14:9, He reveals God as Father: *"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."*

Fourthly, the Son is presented to us as the *"firstborn of all creation"* (Colossians 1:15). The word "firstborn" in this verse denotes honour, rank or dignity. It tells us that the Son is pre-eminent over all creation. It shows priority of position rather than that of time. So, even when the Son became a man, creation, as it were, lay at His feet. In verse 16, we immediately read that all things were created by Him. This is better translated by the Revised Version and the American Standard Version as *"in Him were all things created"*. This means that He is the Source and Architect of creation. The power to create was in His Being. Every sphere of creation is then mentioned whether the heavens and the earth, things visible and invisible, along with all forms of power and rule (Colossians 1:16). The end of Colossians 1:16 tells us that *"all things were created by Him and for Him."* This pinpoints two facts. Firstly, that the Son was the Person of the Godhead who performed the creative act and, secondly, that the Son is the One on whose account all things were created. They were created for His possession, pleasure and glory. The whole verse emphasises the fact that Christ is Superior to all other beings because they are the created and He the Eternal, the Creator.

Colossians 1:17 stresses this in the words *"and He is before all things."* The present tense is used to show the timelessness of Deity. The Son is God! An example of this is found in John 8:58 where Christ says, *"Before Abraham was, I am."* Compare this with Exodus 3:14 where God declares His name to be *"I AM THAT I AM"* and instructs Moses to *"tell the people that 'I AM' had sent him to them"*. The Lord Jesus Christ claimed to be the Jehovah of the Old Testament. He claimed to be God.

Not only was He before all, but *"by Him all things consist"* (Colossians 1:17). The whole universe is sustained by the Son of the Father's love. As Hebrews 1:3 indicates, *"[He is] upholding all things by the word of His power."* It is a power which He demonstrated on earth when He calmed the storm with the words, *"Peace, be still"* (Mark 4:39). Paul wanted to focus the attention of the Colossian Christians upon the *"Son of the Father's love"* (Colossians 1:13). May this be our daily focus, in order that God may fill our hearts with His peace in the face of all opposition.

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