

Mid Week • Colossians 1

INTRODUCTION

Each of Paul's letters seem to possess a theme that drives their content.

It's like Paul's heart and mind were preoccupied with one thought or one overarching point he was trying to communicate.

In Romans, the theme is justification by faith.

In Galatians, it's grace versus the law.

In Ephesians, it's the mystery of Christ and His Church.

In Philippians, the theme is joy in the Lord.

The theme that dominates Colossians is the *absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Christ*.

Paul spend much time in this letter of 4 chapters, exalting Christ, and then ends by calling us to set our attention on Him who is exalted.

BACKGROUND

At one time, Colosse had been an important city in the Lycus River Valley of the province of Asia – the area that today we refer to as Asia Minor – or the nation of Turkey.

Colosse lies about 80 miles east of Ephesus, near the larger and more important cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Though at one time it had been an important city in terms of it's influence in the region, by the time of Paul's writing, it had become a shadow of its former self and most of the influence of the region had passed to either Laodicea or Hierapolis, both of which were fairly prosperous and larger than Colosse.

The church in Colosse had been started while Paul spent his two years of ministry in Ephesus.

Though Paul had never been to Colosse, two men from the city had traveled to Ephesus and there encountered Paul and his message.

They were converted, discipled, and took the work back to their home town where they planted a successful church.

In Acts 19 we read that while Paul was in Ephesus, the word of God spread to all who lived in the province of Asia.

In fact, this was part of Paul's strategy: He picked central cities whose influence was felt throughout a region.

He labored to plants healthy churches in these centers, trusting that people who came to them to do business would be converted, and would carry the message back to their home towns.

That is precisely what happened in Ephesus as churches sprang up in Colosse, Laodicea, Hierapolis and the other towns of Phrygia.

The two men who started the church in Colosse were *Epaphras* and *Philemon*.

Philemon opened his house for the church to meet in, and it appears that Epaphras was their leader, the one who served as their pastor.

Some time has passed since Paul's work in Ephesus and the planting of the Colossian fellowship.

Paul is in Rome, under house arrest, when he gets a visit from Epaphras.

The pastor from Colosse has some disturbing news.

A false teaching has surfaced that is posing a grave threat to the churches of Asia Minor and it is making great inroads into the fellowship at Colosse.

Epaphras knows Paul will be able to help him find a way to fight this dangerous heresy that is beginning to draw away some of the people from the truth.

Colossians is Paul's assistance in combating the Colossian heresy.

The Colossian Heresy

As I mentioned Sunday, while Paul doesn't spell out exactly *what* false teaching he was dealing with and attack it directly, there is no mystery that what he was dealing with was a cult that later became known as *Gnosticism*.

At the early date Paul wrote this, gnosticism hadn't gelled in to the full blown religion it later became in the second century.

But all the seeds and basic errors were well in place – and Paul deals with them in Colossians by *refuting* their tenets.

Let me give you a little background on Gnosticism.

The word itself comes from the Greek word for *knowledge*, *gnosis*.

The Gnostics were those who were “in the know.”

They believed in an esoteric, special, secret set of truths that only those who had proven themselves worthy were able to attain.

And this knowledge, they claimed was the great secret of life, the key that unlocked the door to all the desires and dreams of the human heart and soul.

Gnosticism was a blending of Greek philosophy, Eastern mystery religions and Christian terminology.

From Greek philosophy, they gained the idea that all matter was evil while the spiritual realm was good.

Therefore, God could not have made the physical universe, because matter is evil and He as pure spirit is perfect and good.

What God did, they said, was to create lesser deities, who in turn created even lesser deities, and so on in a virtually endless line of emanations – until eventually, there was a deity, so far removed from God that it was actually evil enough to be able to create the world.

Human beings, the Gnostics said – were physical creatures who possessed spirits.

And since spirits are good while flesh is evil, the great aim of every person is to find liberation from the flesh and emergence into the spirit realm.

This liberation came through the acquisition of KNOWLEDGE – the *gnosis*!

But this *gnosis* wasn't just broadcast freely.

It came via a system of steps – each step being guarded by one of those

emanations from God.

Jesus was the lowest of the good emanations who was the doorman, the greeter, the circus barker who stood at the bottom of the ladder to spiritual perfection and invited all to begin the journey.

Once people joined, they would learn secret password, would learn how to meditate properly, and would be initiated into secret rituals and meetings where they would be introduced to the next emanation along the spiritual highway to God who would give them further enlightenment.

And each step up, of course, would cost you something.

Attached to Gnosticism was an extreme form of asceticism.

Since the Gnostics believed matter was inherently evil – they found in the Jewish dietary code and the Christian moral code some appealing things and adopted them – but then made them absolutes.

Observing special days – avoiding certain foods – forcing the body into a specific physical regimen – all these were a part of gnosticism.

Since the Gnostics denigrated the person and work of Jesus Christ, Paul punches a hole in their house of cards by exalting Christ and showing who he really is. If the Colossians grasp the truth about Jesus, the errors of gnosticism will be revealed.

The reason why Colossians is such an important letter for us today is because a *new* gnosticism has risen in the New Age Movement, which is really little more than ancient Gnosticism reheated with fanciful stories for the modern mind.

And tenets of gnosticism have infiltrated the church via the Word-Faith movement that has infect so much of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.

TEXT

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

²To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are in Colosse*: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul had never met the Colossians – at least, he had never been to their city.

He depended on the report of Epaphras, their pastor who had come to Paul in Rome.

The report Epaphras had given of the quality of spiritual life in Colosse had encouraged Paul and he greets them in terms meant to encourage them.

Paul calls them “brethren.”

We know from the writings of the church fathers at this time that calling a fellow Christian “brother” or “sister” was typical; it was the standard way to refer to one another.

And even though Paul had not met this church at large, they were still reckoned in his mind and heart as relatives in a larger family he was a part of.

This last Sunday, I was in the kitchen between services, grabbing a drink of water,

when a visitor walked in to the kitchen, and proceeded to walk up to me with a very intense look on her face.

I thought, “Oh no, what’s this?”

But as I focused in the face, I realized I recognized her – At first, I was lost as to who it was, but I knew I knew her and ought to really know her!

Then it hit me – it’s my cousin who I haven’t seen in years and years.

I got her name wrong but she corrected me and didn’t seem at all put off that I had forgotten her name.

I was stunned that she was here, and all the feelings of my family, the many awesome relatives on my mother’s side just overwhelmed me.

They left as soon as service was over, and from right there, she mouthed at me, “See you in May.” [Explain]

You and I are part of a massive family!

We all share the same Father and have a common big brother in Jesus Christ.

That parentage makes all of us brothers and sisters.

And like brothers and sisters, we ought to be generous and devoted to one another.

Paul then unties both the Greek and Jewish greetings into one unique new Christian greeting –

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Grace is the Greek greeting while shalom, peace is the Jewish greeting.

Now, in Christ, we have both grace and peace.

³We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints;

⁵because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel,

There are three words here which form the hub around which the rest of Paul’s introductory remarks spin.

Those three words are Faith, Hope, and Love.

Let’s read it again . . .

³We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints;

⁵because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel,

Their faith in Jesus Christ had resulted in their love for others, specially for other believers, and that faith and love developed within them a solid hope in heaven.

Faith in Christ proves it’s reality by love toward others, just as John says in his first epistle.

And love for others will always move toward an earnest expectation of and hope in heaven, because the more we love people, the more we want the best for them, and the very best we could wish for is heaven.

What caused Paul to rejoice was the undiluted love and lack of favoritism that was manifest in the Colossian church.

They loved ALL the saints, not just the lovely or the socially acceptable.

Love was not marred by prejudice. They loved all!

How are we at this? Is our love reserved only for the lovely, for those who dress like we do, or live in the same neighborhood?

Are we demonstrating love for one another?

Paul goes on . . .

⁶which has come to you, as *it* has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as *it* is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;

By “all the world” Paul does not mean to be understood as to every single tribe on the face of the planet.

He’s referring to the Roman world – or as it was considered in popular thought, the civilized world.

His point was that while many religions of the ancient world were *regional* and only for a given area because the deity they believed in only possessed power over a certain locale, the gospel was truth that applied to *all* people, *everywhere* and in *every time*!

The power of the truth of the gospel message was being proven everywhere it went as men and women were converted and the fruit of changed lives was being manifest.

It had to be deeply rewarding for Paul to realize that his faithful ministry in Ephesus had led to the multiplication of the work of Christ in dozens of other cities of that area, and from those cities to other cities.

The work just kept expanding like ripples in a pond.

But you now that happens in a pond right?

Those ripples hit the shore and then rebound back toward the center of the pond where the ripple began.

You’ve heard me share about the Welsh Revival that had such a dramatic impact on Wales, England, and across the Atlantic here in the US.

Welsh missionaries, converted during the Revival went to Argentina where they met a young man on the streets of Buenos Aires named Luis Palau.

They led him to faith in Christ.

Palau went on to become the Billy Graham of Latin America – a powerful and anointed man of God whose ministry has resulted in the conversion of tens of thousands to Christ.

Some years ago, Palau made a trip to Wales to express his appreciation for the Welsh Revival and the missionaries who came to share the gospel with him.

What greeted him was a region of England that has virtually no Christian witness.

The churches stand empty.

Palau was shaken and determined to try to bring the gospel back to Wales.

Interestingly, while Acts 19 says that the gospel spread to this entire region while Paul was in Ephesus, today, the percentage of Christians is less than one half of 1%.

It is mostly Muslim.

Yet, despite that, missionaries are going in to strengthen the believers there and slowly but surely the gospel is once again making converts to the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf,

⁸who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;

We can learn a lot from studying the prayers Paul said he was praying for the churches.

Here he says he was praying that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will.

This spoke directly to the deceitful ploy of the Gnostics who claimed *they* were all about *knowledge*.

Paul says, "You don't have to spend your life savings on gaining an esoteric kind of knowledge that's doled out piece-meal as you can afford it. Just pray for it and God will give it to you along with wisdom and spiritual understanding."

The word Paul uses for knowledge is an intensified and emphatic form of the word for knowledge.

General knowledge is gnosis; but here he says he was praying for epignosis; full knowledge!

Here's what such wisdom, understanding and complete knowledge will result in . . .

¹⁰that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

Our walk refers to our conduct, the way we live our lives, lifestyle!

Knowing God's will and holding it wisely means living in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing to Him, and being productive for the Kingdom of God.

¹¹strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy;

¹²giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.

All of this is what Paul was praying continually for the Colossians.

Look at the list again . . .

Knowledge – Wisdom – Understanding

Good conduct

Fruitfulness
Increasing Knowledge of God
Strength
Patience
Longsuffering
Joy
Thankfulness

That's quite a list – but it gives us a great framework for how we can pray for others.

Friend, never underestimate the power of intercessory prayer!

God hears your prayers for another!

There is a well known and documented story about Raymond Edman, a American missionary to Ecuador.

Edman stumbled in from the jungle one day, desperately ill.

The doctor said he'd be dead by morning.

His wife, knowing that burials had to take place immediately in that climate, took her wedding dress and died it black so she'd be ready for the funeral.

But that evening in Boston, at a prayer meeting, Dr. Joseph Evans, one of Edman's closest friends stood up and said, "I feel we must pray for Ray Edman in Ecuador."

The group cried out to God for his deliverance until Dr. Evans called out, "Praise the Lord! The victory is won!"

Ray Edman's recovery is dated to that very moment.

He rose from the bed, healed.

His wife's dress a lasting testimony to the severity of his illness and the miracle of his cure.

Edman went on to become the president of Wheaton College, and to minister for another 40 years!

There is power in prayer!

¹³He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love,

¹⁴in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

"Delivered us, in v. 13 means "rescued from danger."

We could not deliver ourselves from the guilt and penalty of sin, but Jesus could and did deliver us.

We were in danger of spending eternity apart from God.

The sword of God's judgment was hanging over our heads!

But this deliverance involved something else: we were delivered from the authority of Satan and the powers of darkness.

The gnostic false teachers believed in an organization of evil spirits that controlled the world (see Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15): angels, archangels, principalities, powers, virtues, dominions, and thrones.

John Milton used these titles when describing Satan's forces in his classic *Paradise Lost*.^[1]

The word "conveyed" pictures a deportation of a population from one country into another.

Jesus Christ did not release us from bondage, only to have us wander aimlessly. He moved us into His own kingdom of light and made us victors over Satan's kingdom of darkness.

Earthly rulers transported the defeated people, but Jesus Christ transported the winners.

What has happened to us in our deliverance is foreshadowed by Israel in the Old Testament.

God delivered them from bondage in Egypt and took them into the Promised Land.

In the same way, God brings us *out* that He might bring us in.^[2]

In v. 14, Paul says we have *redemption*.

The word means "to release a prisoner by the payment of a ransom."

But a lot of people have gotten confused over this and ask the question, to whom did Christ pay the ransom?

Did he pay it to the devil?

No! By His death and resurrection, Jesus met the holy demands of God's Law.

The idea of our redemption in Christ looks less to the one the ransom was paid to and more to the price that was paid and the release that was affected.

If there was anyone to whom the ransom was due, you'd have to say it was God because it was His holy law that was violated and that to be appeased.

Satan does not own mankind – he has wrested control of the human race but has done so illegally through fraud and deceit.

So he does not possess real ownership of either earth or mankind.

He's a thief, crook, and liar whose fraud will soon be up-ended.

Finally in v. 14 we read that we have the forgiveness of sins.

The word translated *forgiveness* means "to send away" or "to cancel a debt."

Christ not only set us free and transferred us to a new kingdom, He has also canceled every debt so that we cannot be enslaved again.

Satan cannot find anything in the files that will indict us!

In recent years, the Church has rediscovered the freedom of forgiveness.

God's forgiveness of sinners is an act of His grace.

We did not *deserve* to be forgiven, nor can we *earn* forgiveness.

Knowing that we are forgiven makes it possible for us to fellowship with God, enjoy His grace, and seek to do His will.

Forgiveness is not an excuse for sin; rather, it is an encouragement for obedience.

And, because we have been forgiven, we can forgive others. Which is a truth

Paul hits hard in chapter 3:13.

Paul's point in these verses is that Jesus Christ is preeminent in salvation.

No other person could redeem us, forgive us, transfer us out of Satan's kingdom into God's kingdom, and do it wholly by grace.

The phrase, "through His blood," reminds us of the *cost* of our salvation.

Now we get to the verses we looked at on Sunday morning . . .

15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

16For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.

17And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

If you weren't here, I suggest you get a copy of the tape.

These verses describe Jesus' supremacy over all creation.

So many of the cults today want to say that Jesus is just a part of the creation – an important part, in fact, the most important part, but yet, he is still just part of the creation.

Paul's words here make it ultra clear no such thinking is permitted the person who says they believe the bible.

Paul defines two great categories of being – God and everything else / Creator and Creation.

Jesus, he says, belongs to the God side of the equation.

Next, He launches into the role of Jesus in relation to the Church . . .

18And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

Just as Jesus is sovereign over creation, so He is sovereign over the Church.

He is not one distant emanation from God – some lower functionary in the heavenly hierarchy.

He is the head of the Church, which is His body.

No believer on earth is the head of the church.

Not the Pope, not not the Archbishop of Canterbury, not Billy Graham, not Chuck Smith.

This position is reserved exclusively for Jesus Christ.

When Paul says he is the "beginning" he means Jesus is the origin of the Church.

It exists for and by Him.

He is the firstborn form the dead, meaning that in Him is the source of the resurrection.

He was the first to be raised from the dead in a new body.

Others who were raised for the dead merely had the old body resuscitated.

Jesus' resurrection was different in that His body was changed to become a vehicle fit for the spiritual realm.

V. 18 ends with the theme of this entire section: "That in all things He might have

the preeminence.”

This was God’s purpose in making His Son the Saviour, Creator, and Head of the church.

The word translated “preeminence” is used nowhere else in the New Testament.

Paul picks this word to describe Jesus’ complete supremacy and dominance of everything.

Such a phrase would send the Gnostics running.

Now Paul turns to deal with another issue the Gnostics were denying, the closeness of the relationship between Jesus and The Father.

You see in their system, the Father was God, the highest God – the real God.

But Jesus was just a lower and lowly emanation.

Notice how Paul deals with this . . .

19For it pleased *the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell,*

What Paul writes here simply smashes the Gnostics!

One of their key words was *pleroma* (play-RO-ma).

It was a technical term in their vocabulary that meant “the sum total of all the divine power and attributes.”

They NEVER would use it in regards to Christ.

Paul uses it 8 times in Colossians in regards to Jesus!

He takes one of their tools and uses it to beat them over the head with.

The word *dwell* is equally important.

It means much more than merely “to reside.”

The form of the verb Paul uses here means “to be at home permanently.”

Paul is being pre-emptive.

He knew the Gnostics would counter his statement that Jesus possessed the all the fullness of God by saying that it merely rested on Him for a short time.

In fact, later Gnostics claimed this very thing.

[Explain about the Spirit of Christ resting on “Jesus” at the baptism then departing right before the arrest in the Garden.]

Paul anticipates this counter, and says, “No, the fullness was permanently in Him.”

20and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

Again, Paul confronts the error of gnosticism which said physical matter was inherently evil and beyond redemption.

Paul reveals that Jesus’ mission was to affect reconciliation for ALL creation.

Both the earth and the heavens, or, more literally, the universe and the spiritual realm;

All of it can be reconciled to God through the blood of the Cross

RECONCILIATION – what a wonderful word!

I could give you an elaborate theological definition of what reconciliation is but let me try to make it simpler and I believe much more powerful.

[Bring two people up and have them be mad at each other. Then stand with a

hand on each, and cause them to hug me, then step out of the way.]
That is what Jesus did at the cross.

But the scope is all creation, both material and immaterial.

One day, the curse of sin will be removed from the universe and it will be completely renewed. [elaborate]

21And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled

22in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—

23if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Chief in God's plan to be reconciled are you and me!

At one time, we were God's enemies – going our own way, doing our own thing.

But now, we've been reconciled to God so that we might become all that we were created to be – holy, without blame, and with no ground for any accusation.

But notice – Reconciliation exists IF we continue in the faith.

There is a condition.

Here we enter the debate over the perseverance of the saints.

Can a person lose their salvation or is it, once saved, always saved?

Let me give you the Biblical answer to that thorny debate and issue.

YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY SECURE, if you are in Christ.

Take a look for yourself – study the Bible – security is in Christ.

Are you in Christ? Then you are secure.

If you aren't, regardless of what you may have done or known in the past, then you aren't secure.

24I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church,

25of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God,

26the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.

Paul's words here bother some people because it appears that he is saying his suffering has completed the ministry of Christ.

That only comes across in our English translations – the Greek is clear.

Paul is merely saying that as we live for Christ in this fallen world, we will experience the same kind of hostility and opposition He endured.

Jesus Himself said this would be the case.

And until He comes again, this world will oppose Him and His followers.

What is lacking is not what's needed to effect salvation, but what is needed in taking the MESSAGE of salvation to the entire world.

The Gnostics delighted in claiming they possessed secrets only the properly initiated could attain.

Paul says the mystery of God in Christ is no longer secret but has been brought to light through the gospel, and it is now the sworn duty of every believer to broadcast it far and wide.

²⁷To them [the saint] God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The Gnostics would never allow the idea of God dwelling within flesh and blood men and women, that was utter sacrilege to them.

But Paul says that is the essence of the gospel – that is the hope of salvation – that man becomes the dwelling place of God!

That God does not sit atop some infinite ladder but that He comes down and takes up residence right inside.

²⁸Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

²⁹To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

The gospel is for all – not just for those who can afford it, like the Gnostics taught.

God is no respecter of persons – He loves all, and the salvation Christ made possible, is open to all who will believe.

[1] Wiersbe, Warren –*Be Complete*

[2] *ibid.*