

Jesus Christ

The Image
of the
Invisible God

An Exegesis of the Epistle to the Colossians

Study 2 The Pre-Eminence of Christ (Colossians 1.3-14)

Look at Colossians 1.3-4

The first thing to note is that 1.3-8 is one long sentence in the original Greek text, indicating a unity of thought in this pericope.

Definition:

Pericope: a set of verses that forms one coherent unit or thought, suitable for public reading from a text, usually of sacred scripture.

It is important to our understanding that in the context of the issues at Colosse the Apostle uses the word *kurios* (Lord) as a title in referring to Jesus - the Lord Jesus Christ! The dominant thought behind the Greek word *kurios* is supremacy and authority. Given the false teachers troubling the Colossian church, Paul first asserts his authority as an Apostle and then uses the title Lord Jesus Christ, again asserting the supremacy and authority of Christ.

“..... since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus” is phraseology used very deliberately by Paul in this context. Christ (Greek *Christos*) means the anointed one, referring to Jesus as the Messiah. It is the Greek parallel of the Hebrew Adonai implying sovereignty, master, owner

Summary Statement

Paul employs language in 1.1-4 that establishes sovereignty, supremacy and authority right from the outset. What he has to say to this church will be grounded in that Messianic and Apostolic authority

Whenever Paul and Timothy prayed for the Colossians, they gave "thanks to God" for them. Note the many references to thanksgiving in this letter (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 16, 17; 4:2).

Specifically, Paul and Timothy rejoiced over the continuing demonstration of their trust ("faith") in Christ, as contrasted with their initial acceptance of Him as their Saviour. This is clear from the Greek preposition *en*, translated "in" (*iesince we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus*) Furthermore, the Colossians manifested self-sacrificing love for other Christians.

Faith is the root of the Christian life and love is the fruit

(Harrison EF. 1971 *Colossians. Everyman's Bible Commentary series*)

Look at Colossians 1.5-6

In this opening declaration of thanksgiving, Paul acknowledges all three Persons of the Trinity: the Father (1.3), the Son Jesus Christ (1.3, 4 & 7) and the Holy Spirit (1.8). This divine mystery, three in one, undergirds and informs the Christian life and worship. Paul's reference to Jesus as Lord foreshadows a key theme in this letter; the supremacy of Christ.

(Jeremiah, D. 2013 *The Jeremiah Study Bible*)

Paul gave thanks for "the hope" of blessings ahead that his readers possessed but had not yet experienced.

Faith rests on the past; love works in the present; hope looks to the future. They may be regarded as the efficient, material, and final causes respectively of the spiritual life.

Paul reminded his readers that the gospel had not come to them exclusively but was spreading throughout the whole "world." Reference to "the whole world" is probably hyperbole, though some take it literally. Paul may have intended this wording in order to contrast the universal gospel with the exclusive message that the false teachers in Colosse were trying to get the Christians to adopt. Paul further glorified the gospel message by referring to its dynamic power to change lives ("constantly bearing fruit and increasing"), and to its uniquely gracious content (v. 6).

(Constable, *TL Notes on Colossians*)

Faith, hope and love. This triad is found throughout the writings of the early church (Rom 5.1-5, I Cor 13.13, I Thess 1.3 & 5.8, Heb 10.22-24, I Peter 1 21-22). The hope that grounds the saints' faith and love carries a certain expectation: it is rooted in the promises of a faithful God, thus the truth of the gospel transforms lives and offers the certainty of Heaven. The heart of this gospel is the transcendent grace of God (Rom 4.16 & Gal 1.6).

(Jeremiah, D. 2013 *The Jeremiah Study Bible*)

Even at this early stage of the development of the church and the spread of the gospel, it had reached from Jerusalem to Syria, Greece, Italy, Macedonia, Asia Minor (Current day Turkey), Egypt and beyond. As it spread, so it was bearing fruit – people being saved and lives transformed

Summary Statement

Faith, hope and love provided by God the Father in Christ Jesus and generated in people by the Holy Spirit transforms sinners into Saints and results in fruitful lives for the gospel

Look at Colossians 1.7-8

Enter Epaphras, a man who was a giant in prayer

"Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, **always labouring fervently for you in prayers**, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God"
(Colossians 4.7)

So, who then is this guy?

He is a native of Colossae who travelled to Ephesus where he was converted to faith in Christ under the ministry of Paul. He was then sent back to Colossae by Paul where he started the Colossian church and later the churches at nearby Hierapolis and Laodicea, all located in the Lycus valley. As false teachers infiltrated the church at Colossae, Epaphras travelled to Rome where Paul was imprisoned for his faith to give him his report.

Paul variably referred to this faithful, committed man as his **fellow-servant, fellow bondservant, fellow prisoner** (in Christ Jesus and the gospel, not a Roman jail) and a **faithful minister of Christ**. He was also Paul's representative at Colossae where he had founded the church. He returned to

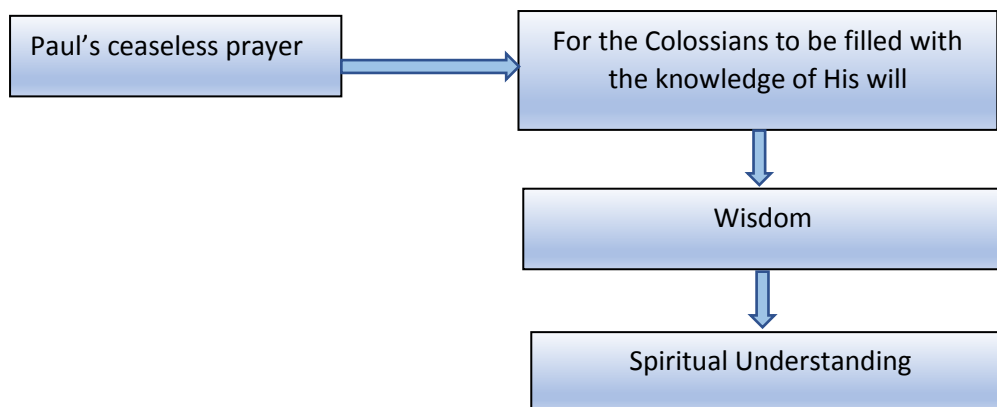
Colossae along with Onesimus and Tychicus and delivered Paul's letter to the Colossian church. By referring to Epaphras as a fellow-servant, Paul emphasizes that they both ministered under a greater authority (Phil 23).

Summary Statement

Epaphras was a faithful man, a willing servant of Christ Jesus who was known for his committed, fervent prayers for his church at Colossae

Look at Colossians 1.9

This verse is about prayer, Paul's ceaseless prayer for the Colossians. The content of this verse may be summed up as follows:



The **will of God** and the **wisdom of God** are inseparably linked with saturation in the **word of God** (Psalm 1.1-2). Godly wisdom is gained by studying His word; spiritual understanding is how His children discern His will. Both wisdom and understanding are gifts of the Spirit; they do not come from an unspiritual or fleshly mind (Col 2.18). Such spiritual knowledge provides insight into God's will. However, no-one can anticipate the will of a stranger.

Christians who long to discern the will of God discover it in their growing knowledge of who God is and what He wants (Eph 5.17 & II Peter 3.18).

(Jeremiah, D. 2013 *The Jeremiah Study Bible*)

The predominant erroneous doctrine being perpetrated by the false teachers was known as Gnosticism. This word is where we derive our English word knowledge. Arriving at a definition of Gnosticism is about as difficult as catching a leaf being blown about in a strong wind, but here are the basics of what Epaphras and Paul were up against in Colossae:

Basically, the Gnostic believes in acquiring special, mystical knowledge as the means for salvation. According to Gnostic beliefs, there is a Great God that is good and perfect, but impersonal and unknowable. The creator of the universe was actually a lesser deity—a cheap knock-off of the “true God”—who wanted to create a flawless material universe but botched the job. Instead of having a utopia, we ended up with a world infected with pain,

misery, intellectual and spiritual blindness; all matter is now corrupt and evil. However, when this lesser deity created man, he accidentally imbued humanity with a spark of the “true” God’s spirit, making man an inherently good soul trapped in the confines of an evil, material body.

Contrary to a message of salvation through Christ alone (Acts 4:12), the Gnostic Jesus brings a message of self-redemption. Man only needs to examine his inner “spark” to find the knowledge needed to free himself from his material body and reach God. This alleged purity of heart is the exact opposite of what is stated in Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

(gotquestions.org/gnostic-definition.html)

"The false teachers promised the Colossian believers that they would be 'in the know' if they accepted the new doctrines. Words like *knowledge*, *wisdom*, and *spiritual understanding* were a part of their religious vocabulary; so Paul used these words in his prayer."

(Wiersbe, W. The Bible Expository Commentary)

Summary Statement

Immunization against heresy in theology is always a result of a deeper and more intimate knowledge of the truth concerning Jesus Christ

Look at Colossians 1.10-12a

Paul’s prayer is that when the Colossians are filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, they will exhibit a “walk” that is worthy of the Lord.

Walking worthy of the Lord means being able to live one day at a time, in a manner that would glorify and please their Lord. The metaphor "walk" signifying conduct in the progress of life. The outcome of a Christian walking worthy of the Lord is that they will be living a life that is fully pleasing to Him; being fruitful in every good work; increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might; patient and longsuffering with joy, giving thanks to the Father.

When believers please the Lord constantly, that is their Christian **walk** (Eph 4.1, I Thess 2.12 & 4.1). When they produce fruit consistently, that is the Christian **work**. When they progress in knowledge continually, that is their Christian **wisdom**. When they persevere under stress cheerfully, that is their Christian **welfare** (II Cor 8.2). When they praise God correctly, that is their Christian **worship**.

Four characteristics (each a present participle) distinguish this *worthy walk* (an aorist infinitive in the Greek text, vv. 10-12).

What is meant by aorist infinitive?

It is a verb where the action is specified but not the time. (i.e. I am going to call you says what I am going to do but not when)

First, it includes continuously "bearing fruit" in character and conduct, in every type of "good work" (cf. Gal. 5:22-23). Second, it includes growing ("increasing"). Paul's idea was that the Christian can continue to grow in his knowledge of God's will revealed in Scripture. As he does so, he not only bears fruit, but grows in his ability to bear fruit, as a fruit tree does. What rain and sunshine are to the nurture of plants, the knowledge of God is to the growth and maturing of the spiritual life. Third, it includes gaining strength ("strengthened with all power"), manifested in "steadfastness" (endurance under trial, fear or intimidation, or despondency: "the capacity to see things through")

Fourth, a worthy walk also includes "patience" (longsuffering restraint in the face of wrath or revenge), and joy (cf. Phil. 4:13; 2 Tim. 2:1). Fifth and finally, it includes expressing gratitude to God ("giving thanks to the Father") consistently.

Look at Colossians 1.12b-13

First things first, the Apostle tells us that God has "qualified" the believer by His grace. It is of grace and grace alone because the Father is the agent by which we have been qualified to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints. He has made us heirs of an "inheritance" (cf. 1 Pet. 1:4). The qualification to receive an inheritance took place at conversion, though actual possession of most of it is future.

Secondly, He delivered ("rescued") us from Satan's "domain" (v. 13a). This, too, took place at conversion but will become more evident in the future.

Third, He "transferred us" to Christ's "kingdom" (v. 13b). The verb translated "transferred" (Gk *metestesen*) described the relocation of large groups of people, from one country or location to another (cf. Acts 26:18). The context here suggests that the action must be regarded as **positional** rather than **present reality** in the same way sanctification is positional but at the same time progressive as we live our lives moving toward its final reality in Heaven. Believers have been 'delivered from the power of darkness (positional),' the apostle declares. Yet in another place he warns that we must still wrestle (present reality) 'against the rulers of the darkness of this world' (Eph. 6:12). Our translation into the Kingdom of Christ, therefore, must be similar to that act of God when He 'raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:6).

"Although we are not yet seated in the heavenlies, the thing is so certain that God can speak of it as already done. In the same sense, we have been (aorist tense) transferred judicially into the Kingdom of our Lord even before its establishment". (McLain AJ. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*)

The apostle probably used these light-versus-darkness figures, because the false teachers in Colosse were apparently promoting a form of Gnosticism that became very influential in the second century. Gnosticism made much of the light-darkness contrast in its philosophic system. "Darkness" is also a prominent figure in biblical symbolism, where it represents ignorance, falsehood, and sin (cf. John 3:19; Rom. 13:12; et al).

(Constable, TL *Notes on Colossians*)

Summary Statement

God has rescued us from darkness, translated us into the Kingdom of His dear Son and empowered us to live godly lives pleasing to Him

Look at Colossians 1.14

Perhaps Paul explained "redemption" because the false teachers had redefined that term, too. Redemption is a benefit of union with Christ (v. 13b). The word emancipation probably best expresses this aspect of Christ's work on our behalf. A sound definition of emancipation is liberation the process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; the freeing of a person from slavery (English Oxford Dictionary)

Summary Statement

In Christ, we have been set free from a state of slavery to sin and darkness