

The Book of Colossians in Light of the “Colossian Heresy” – A Study on True Christianity as Instructed by Paul:

Introduction to the “Colossian Heresy”-: FF.
Bruce The Letters of Paul, p. 242-243

Epaphras brought Paul news of a strange form of teaching which was attracting many of the Christians in Colossae. Basically the teaching was Jewish. This seems clear from the place which it gave to legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, the Sabbath, new moon and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar. To this extent it was very similar to the legalism which Paul had previously had to deal with in the churches of Galatia. But on that Jewish foundation there had been raised a philosophical superstructure which was non-Jewish in origin. In this part of Asia Minor the barriers between the Jews and their pagan neighbors had ceased to be very effective. Social intermingling led to religious fusion, and the “Colossian heresy” may be described as a Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism which had made room for some Christian elements in its system so as to attract the Christians in that region.

In this system the angelic or elemental powers through which the Jewish law was given were identified with the lords of the seven planetary spheres, “principalities and powers” who had some share in the fullness of the divine nature and controlled the lines of communication between God and men. Since they were in a position to cut men off from access to God, tribute had to be paid to them in the form of law-keeping. To break the law meant incurring their resentment, and then they had to be appeased by severe self-denial and penance. In so far as this system paid any attention to the work of Christ, it probably suggested that His descent to earth and return to heaven could have taken place only by permission of those powers; indeed the fact of His suffering and death was probably regarded as evidence of His inferiority to them.

Accordingly, allegiance to Christ was not

sufficient protection in a universe controlled by these mighty beings. That was clearly to be seen in the case of a man like Paul, one of the servants of Christ. The afflictions into which Paul was brought by his service to Christ showed that he had not attained that degree of control over the cosmic forces which would have enabled him to avoid all these afflictions.

This line of teaching appealed to a certain religious temperament, the more so as it claimed to be a form of advanced teaching for spiritually superior persons. Christians were invited to go in for this higher wisdom, to explore the hidden mysteries by a series of successive initiations until they reached perfection. Baptism was only a preliminary initiation; those who would pursue the path of truth farther must put off all material elements by means of a rigorous asceticism until they were liberated from the control of darkness and introduced into the domain of light.

CHAPTER ONE-

Objectives:

- 1) To see the relationship between understanding the grace of God and bearing fruit as a believer
- 2) To examine Paul's prayer for the Colossians for the keys to successful Christian living
- 3) To appreciate the preeminence of Christ in creation and our redemption

Summary:

Paul begins with his customary salutation followed by an expression of thanksgiving and prayer. Having heard from Epaphras a good testimony of the believers in Colosse, he is thankful for their faith, love, and hope (1-8). His prayer is that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will, walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, strengthened by God's glorious power, and ever thankful that the Father has qualified them to be partakers of the saints' inheritance. Paul is particularly thankful that they were delivered

from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's Son, where there is redemption and forgiveness of sins (9-14). Paul then announces the theme of this epistle, which is the preeminence and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Paul first proclaims the preeminence of Christ in creation, and then His preeminence in redemption (15-20). The Colossians' own conversion is offered as a case in point in reference to the latter, and with a warning for them to remain steadfast in their faith walk (21-23).

The chapter ends with Paul's description of his ministry, in which he gladly suffered on behalf of Christ and His church. He views himself as a steward entrusted with a wonderful "mystery", which is being made known after having been hidden for ages. This "mystery" pertains to the Gentiles, and how Christ would be in them (24-27). Paul therefore worked diligently to preach Christ, with the goal of presenting every man perfect in Him (28-29).

Read Chapter One every day for 5 days and answer the following questions.

Review Questions Chapter One:

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?
- 2) Who joins Paul in the salutation of this epistle? (1)
- 3) What three things had Paul heard about the Colossians, for which he gave thanks? (3-5)
- 4) How long had the gospel been bringing forth fruit in their lives? (6)
- 5) Who had informed Paul of their condition? (8)
- 6) List four things for which Paul prayed concerning the Colossians (9-11)
- 7) Into what have we been translated? (13)
- 8) What does one enjoy in Christ? (14)
- 9) List five things which illustrate Christ's preeminence in creation (15-17)
- 10) List four things which illustrate Christ's preeminence in redemption (18-20)
- 11) What was the former condition of the Colossians? How were they changed? (21-22)

12) Upon what condition would they be presented holy, blameless and irreproachable? (22-23)

13) What is said about the "mystery" which has been hidden? (26)

14) What is the glorious nature of this "mystery"? (27)

15) What was Paul's goal in preaching Christ? (28)

Thought Questions Chapter One:

1. vs 5 Describe how Christian faith and love spring up from hope.
2. vs 9-12 What effects does the knowledge of God have on a Christian's life?
3. Does the gospel you preach include the first part of vs 23?
4. How does this differ from performance-based salvation?
5. vs 13-22 In what ways is Jesus Savior and Lord?
6. vs 24 What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ?
7. vs 24-29 What kinds of things do you suppose Paul suffered in his ministry?
8. vs 29 To what end did Paul labor?
9. How would you counsel someone who says they are "struggling" to live the Christian life?

CHAPTER TWO

Objectives:

- 1) To see the relation between understanding the "mystery of God" and having a strong assurance of our salvation
- 2) To appreciate how baptism serves as our spiritual circumcision, and that it is a work of God which is performed, not a work of man
- 3) To understand how Christ brought an end to the Old Law by His death on the cross

Summary:

Paul reveals his great concern for those at Colosse and others he has not seen, expressing his desire that their hearts be knit together in love, and that they may have the assurance that comes from an understanding of the mystery of God as revealed through Christ. He rejoices in their good order and steadfastness, and encourages them to be firmly established in Christ, abounding in thanksgiving (1-7). The word "Beware" in verse eight summarizes the rest of the chapter, in which Paul warns them of the dangers of "The Colossian Heresy". These dangers include being cheated through philosophy and vain deceit, and defrauded of their reward by those who appeal to false humility, the worship of angels, false visions, and strict regulations according to the commandments and doctrines of men which really have no value against the indulgence of the flesh. In Christ they are made complete, having undergone a circumcision not made with hands, in which God made them alive together with Christ. Since Christ has also nailed to the cross the "handwriting of requirements" that was against them and taken it out of the way, none can judge them regarding religious observances that were only a shadow pointing to the true substance of Christ (8-23).

Read Chapter 2 for 5 days and answer the following:

Review Questions Chapter Two

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?
- 2) What was Paul's strong desire for those he had not seen? (1-2)
- 3) What is "hidden" in Christ? (3)
- 4) What had Paul seen in the Colossians that caused him to rejoice? (5)
- 5) How were the Colossians to walk in Christ? (6-7)

- 6) What three things might be used to "cheat" us? (8)
- 7) What is said about Jesus in relation to the Godhead? (9)
- 8) What is our condition in Christ? (10)
- 9) What sort of "circumcision" have we had in Christ? (11)
- 10) What takes place in baptism? Who is the one at work in baptism? (12-13)
- 11) What did Christ take out of the way, having nailed it to the cross? (14)
- 12) In what things should we not let others judge us? (16-17)
- 13) In what ways might people seek to defraud us? (18)
- 14) What sort of "basic principles of the world" might others try to regulate upon us? (21)
- 15) What is the truth about such traditions of men? (22-23)

Thought Questions Chapter Two:

1. vs 2 What riches come from understanding Christ?
2. 5 What in particular do you suppose that Paul was looking for when he says "I delight to see how orderly you are"? Orderly in what way? And how would he measure the firmness of their faith in Christ?
3. vs 6 How did you receive Christ? What assumptions did you have about what the Christian life would be like and were your expectations met?
4. vs 8 What were human philosophies at the time that threatened to take them captive? And what about today?
5. vs 9 What does it mean that the fullness of the Deity dwells in Christ?
6. vs 10-15 What fullness were we given in Christ?
7. vs 11,12 Is the burial spoken of here physical? Is this resurrection physical? Is the circumcision physical? So is the baptism physical?
8. vs 13,14 How much of your sins has God forgiven? What about future sins?

9. vs 16 How do Christians judge one another with respect to the treating of Sunday as a holy day?

10. vs 17 What "shadows" exist in practice of Christianity today that perhaps some treat too substantively in your opinion?

11. vs 18,19 Do you know of examples of such people as described by these verses?

12. vs 20-23 What value have you found in developing restrictions and personal rules and regulations in living your Christian life?

CHAPTER THREE

Objectives:

- 1) To see what Paul offers as the Christian solution in dealing with the problem of sin
- 2) To understand what our responsibilities are as "the elect of God, holy and beloved"

Summary:

Having warned the brethren of "the Colossian Heresy", and the need to be established in the faith of Jesus Christ, Paul now offers a detailed description of "the Christian Solution" to the problem of sin in their lives. Rather than being deceived or swayed by false alternatives, they need to seek those things above, where Christ is, to set their minds on things above and not on the earth. This is because they have been raised with Christ (cf. **Co 2:12**) and their life is now hidden in Christ, awaiting the day of His coming in which they will appear with Him in glory (**1-4**). With minds set on Christ, they need to "put to death" those sins in which their earthly members engaged, and upon which the wrath of God is coming. This is done by "putting off" the old man with his deeds, and "putting on" the new man who is being renewed in knowledge after the image of Christ. The deeds of the old man and the characteristics of the new man are defined by Paul, followed with exhortations to allow the "peace of God" to rule in their hearts

and to let the "word of Christ" dwell in them richly. He also charges them to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father (**5-17**).

As so much of their daily lives revolve around the home, Paul also addresses the responsibilities of various family members as they serve the Lord (**18-4:1**).

Review Questions Chapter Three:

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?
- 2) What twofold charge is given to those who have been raised with Christ? (1-2)
- 3) Where is our "life" at the present? When shall it appear? (3-4)
- 4) What sins are we to "put to death"? (5)
- 5) Why must we put them to death? (6)
- 6) What other sins must we "put off"? (8,9)
- 7) What have we "put off", and what have we "put on"? (9-10)
- 8) As God's elect (chosen), holy and beloved, what are we to "put on"? (12-14)
- 9) What must we allow the "peace of God" do? (15)
- 10) What must we allow the "word of Christ" do? (16)
- 11) How are we to teach and admonish one another? (16)
- 12) How are we to do all things, whether in word or deed? (17)
- 13) What is the duty of wives? (18)
- 14) What is the duty of husbands? (19)
- 15) What is the duty of children? (20)
- 16) What is the duty of fathers? (21)
- 17) What is the duty of servants? (22-23)
- 18) What positive motivation is there for a servant to so act? What negative motivation? (24-25)
- 19) What is the duty of masters? What motivation is offered to do this? (4:1)

Thought Questions Chapter Three:

1. vs 1,2 What things are above, which we should set our minds on?
2. vs 3 In what ways have you died?
3. vs 5-9 If we have died, then why must we still put to death our earthly nature?
4. What is distinct about the list in vs 8 compared with that in vs 5?
5. vs 9 Why do people lie to one another?
6. Why in vs 11 does he seem to say that there is no distinction between slave and free and yet in
7. vs 22 and 4:1 he makes a distinction between these two? What about gender differences?
7. vs 12 What if you simply don't feel these things? Should you just kind of fake it?
8. vs 13 In what ways may we be challenged to bear with other Christians?
9. vs 16 What is "the word of Christ? And how might you let it dwell in you richly?
10. vs 18-22 Compare the commands given to wives, children and slaves. What similarities do you see?
11. How do they differ from those give to husbands, fathers and masters (4:1)?
12. How would you categorize the roles between these two sets of people?
13. And how would you resolve the apparent contradiction with the idea of there being equality in Christ?
14. vs 23-25 How does Paul encourage those living under slavery?
15. How does Paul's concept of "working for the Lord" differ from that of popular institutional Christianity?
16. vs 24 How do you resolve the contradiction between "reward for services rendered" and salvation as a free gift?

CHAPTER FOUR

Objectives:

- 1) To consider the importance of prayer, and proper conduct toward those who are not Christians
- 2) To appreciate the value of God's "second string", those workers in the kingdom who assisted key players like Paul and contributed so much to the spread of the gospel

Summary:

Paul concludes his section on "the Christian Solution" as an alternative to the heresies being proposed at Colosse with exhortations to prayer and proper conduct. His desire is that they devote themselves to prayer with vigilance and thanksgiving. A special request for prayer in his behalf is made, that God might give him an open door for the word of God, and that he might make the mystery of Christ known.

Their own conduct is to be with wisdom toward outsiders, making good use of their time. This includes speaking with grace, knowing how one ought to answer others (1-6).

Paul then mentions several companions, starting with Tychicus and Onesimus who were evidently the bearers of this epistle, and who would inform them of Paul's circumstances. Special greetings are also sent from brethren with Paul. These included three Jewish brethren (Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus called Justus), a brother who was from Colosse (Epaphras), a beloved physician (Luke), and one we know from another epistle (Demas, cf. **2 Ti 4:9**) who later forsook Paul (**7-14**).

Finally, greetings are sent to those in Laodicea and the church meeting in the home of Nymphas, along with a charge to exchange epistles with the church in Laodicea. With a final exhortation for Archippus to fulfill his ministry, Paul signs off using his personal signature, asking that they

remember his chains, and praying on their behalf.

Review Questions Chapter Four:

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?
- 2) In calling them to earnest prayer, what four things does Paul ask of them? (2-4)
- 3) How were they to walk? (5)
- 4) How were they to speak? (6)
- 5) How is Tychicus described? Why was Paul sending him? (7-8)
- 6) How is Onesimus describe? What was Paul sending him? (9)
- 7) What three men were Paul's only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who were of the circumcision, i.e. Jews? (10-11)
- 8) What is said about Epaphras in relation to the churches in Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis? (12-13)
- 9) Who else sends greetings? (14)
- 10) To what two groups does Paul send greetings? (15)
- 11) What was to be done with the epistle after it had been read to the church? (16)
- 12) What was to be done with an epistle coming from Laodicea? (16)
- 13) What special charge does Paul tell them to give to Archippus? (17)
- 14) How does Paul confirm that this epistle was from him? (18)
- 15) What final request does Paul ask of the Colossians? (18)
- 16) What final prayer does Paul offer in behalf of the brethren? (18)

Thought Questions Chapter Four:

1. **vs 1** Is slavery sin?
2. **vs 2** How would you characterize the lifestyle of a person you would consider to be devoted to prayer?
3. **vs 3** Take time to pray for opportunities to evangelize, both for yourself and missionaries.
4. **vs 4** Can you give an example of a clear

presentation of the gospel?

5. **vs 6** What does it mean for a conversation to be seasoned with salt? (**Matt 5:13**)

6. **vs 7,8** What is it about your circumstances that you would like to share with others that will encourage their hearts?

7. **vs 12** Who was Epaphras wrestling against? How would you put in your own words the three categories of things that he prayed for the Colossians?