

COLOSSIANS

COLOSSIANS — INTRODUCTION

Colosse was an important city of Phrygia in Asia Minor, east of Ephesus. It is not definitely known that Paul visited it, and yet it is assumed he did so on his third journey. The epistle was written while he was a prisoner at Rome (4:8) and sent by Tychicus (4:7-8).

Colossians bears a somewhat similar relationship to Ephesians as that of Romans to Galatians. That is, it makes a pair with that epistle, the two being written almost simultaneously. It was sent by the same messenger also (compare ^{<402>}Ephesians 6:21-22) and contains some of the same expressions (compare 1:4 with ^{<4015>}Ephesians 1:15, and 1:14 with ^{<4007>}Ephesians 1:7). See also the prayers in the two epistles and the references to the Body of Christ.

The central theme of Colossians is Christ, while that of Ephesians is the church. In the former we have the head of the church, and in the latter the body of the church, and both are seen exalted on high (^{<5018>}Colossians 1:18; ^{<4016>}Ephesians 2:6). Perhaps it would be well to designate the theme of the epistle as, The Believers' Union or Identification with Christ.

DEFINITION OF GNOSTICISM

It was occasioned by the fact that the spiritual life of the church was threatened by false doctrine, a mixture of Judaism (2:16) and Oriental mystic speculation (2:18). That there were Jews in large numbers in that region is certain, and that there was a Jewish sect precisely answering to the false doctrine condemned in this epistle is certain. The sect was the Essenes, who, unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, do not appear in the Gospel narratives, because their principles withdrew them from the daily life of the Jewish people and immured them in convents. They were essentially a Gnostic sect, and Gnosticism, under whatever variety, was characterized by three features:

1. An Exclusive Spirit. The word means one who claims preeminent

knowledge. It was an intellectual caste, with a process and oaths of initiation.

2. Speculative Tenets on Creation, Evil, Emanations, Angels. Creation was not by the Supreme God, according to them, since He could have nothing to do with matter which is inherently evil, but must have been by one or more of angelic emanations from him. Those emanations or angels are to be worshipped.

3. Ethical Practice. Either a rigid asceticism, because of matter being the abode of evil, or unrestrained licentiousness, on the principles of not condescending to care at all about a thing so inherently evil as matter.

Paul assails the exclusive spirit of intellectual caste (1:28), and as in his other epistles, insists upon the free offer of the Gospel to all men, but now from a different point of view. Here it is as opposing intellectual exclusiveness, and not, as in Galatians, national exclusiveness. "Perfection" was a great Gnostic word, and that word the apostle here appropriates to the position in Christ of every believer. He also attacks the speculative tenets of angelology and the idolatrous practice of angelolatry (1:15-19; 2:18), opposing to them both the true ideas of Christ in His Person and His mediation. And he utters his condemnation of a very peculiar ethical practice (⁵¹²¹⁶Colossians 2:16, 23), protesting not alone against "holy days, new moons, and Sabbaths" (strictly Jewish observances), but against the asceticism with regard to "drinks," and the "neglecting of the body" (which was wholly of Gnostic origin): and opposing to both of these Jewish and Gnostic practices the believers' life in Christ.

It has been well said that the Colossian heresy was no vulgar falsehood. At the bottom of it there was an earnest, unsatisfied desire of the soul; a sense of need unrequited; an aching void the world had never filled. In its doctrine of the mediation of angels and the consequent removal of God from contact with the inherent evil of matter, it claimed to honor the supreme majesty of the Deity, and at the same time to show forth its own humility, as shrinking amid the evils of human nature, from any direct converse with God while yet in its asceticism it honored itself and ministered to the pride and vanity of self-righteousness. It was human nature as essentially displayed everywhere and in all ages; the circumstances and the particular tenets ever changing, but the affectation of humility and the proud, self-righteous spirit ever remaining the same. And thus it is that the Colossian heresy was an anticipation of the errors of

today, and that the apostles' confutation of it supplies the needed instruction for ourselves.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you examined the map for Colosse?
2. Define the relationship of this epistle to Ephesians.
3. How does its theme differ from Ephesians?
4. What two forms of false doctrine is here touched upon?
5. Describe the Essenes.
6. What three features characterized Gnosticism?
7. What makes this epistle of practical value today?

COLOSSIANS 1 — THE DOCTRINAL PART

The chapter divides itself into a salutation (vv. 1-2); a thanksgiving (vv. 3-8); a prayer (vv. 9-14), and a threefold declaration concerning Jesus Christ (vv. 15-29). This declaration sets forth his Godhead (vv. 15-17); His reconciling work (vv. 18-23), and the mystery of His indwelling in the believer, and hence in the church which is his body.

The salutation is scarcely distinguishable from those considered in the preceding epistles.

The thanksgiving is for the faith of the church, their love to the saints, and the hope laid up for them in heaven (vv. 4-5). "In all the world," (v. 6), does not mean literally in every place, but is used simply as expressing the proper area of the preached Gospel, in which sense it was the whole world. The reference to Epaphras (v. 7) leads some to think that he, rather than Paul, had planted this church, but if so, he was doubtless a fruit of Paul's labors at Ephesus.

The prayer is a single petition, but it has a great scope, "that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 9). This knowledge of God's will as revealed in His Word, applied to them by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, would enable them to "walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing" (v. 10). And this walk would show itself in four ways: fruitfulness, growth, patience and

thankfulness (vv. 10-12). The thankfulness would be expressed for their share of "the inheritance of the saints in light." They were sufficiently assured of it to give thanks for it because they had been delivered "from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of His dear Son" (v. 13). This was something that they knew, and they were not walking well-pleasing unto the Lord, if they did not know it, and were not continually praising Him for it.

THE GODHEAD OF CHRIST

This reference to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, leads to the thought of His Person and Glory. "The image of the invisible God" (v. 15) means more than a likeness. Two men are alike but one is not the image of the other. On the other hand, the head on a coin is not only a likeness of the sovereign but his image — a copy of him derived from and representing him. So Christ is the representation of His Father because derived from Him (^{2:6}Philippians 2:6; ^{1:3}Hebrews 1:3). There are then three teachings in this phrase, Christ is the Son of God, He is the Eternal Son of God, He is God. His eternal Sonship is seen in that He is not called the Son merely by reason of His incarnation, but as the image of God "prior to all creation," as the next phrase may be rendered. It was not the incarnation which made Him the image of God, but being His image, the incarnation brought Him, so to speak, within our grasp. Moreover, a corroboration that He was "before all creation," is set before us in the next two verses.

This declaration concerning His Godhead is followed by one concerning his reconciling work (vv. 18-23). He is not only the head of the universe as God, but the Head of the church as the God-man. And He is the Head of the church, because He is the beginning of the church. And He is the beginning of the church because He is the firstborn from among the dead (v. 18), for the church is made up of raised ones like Himself. Now are they raised in a spiritual sense by faith, but when He comes again they will be raised in the bodily sense and glorified with Him. Being thus Head of the universe and Head of the church, the first in creation and the first in grace, in all things He has the preeminence, "for it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell" (v. 19), i.e., the whole fulness of the Godhead (see 2:9).

The Gnostics taught that a fragment of the Deity was given to the various divine emanations or angels, who, according to their false philosophy, were

generated from the Supreme Deity. The fragment became less and less, in proportion as any one of these emanations was removed from Deity, but still each had a fragment. A smaller fragment was found in man also. The Greek word for fulness was *pleroma*. Paul wrests this word from their perversion of it, and appropriates it to Christ in the utmost extent of its significance. Inasmuch as in Him all the fulness of the Godhead dwelt, therefore it was possible "by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself" (v. 20), to bring them out of the deranged condition in which they were on account of sin into harmony with Himself.

RECONCILIATION THROUGH CHRIST

"Reconciliation" is that effect of the death of Christ on the believer, which, through Divine power, works in Him a thorough change toward God from enmity and aversion to love and trust. It is never said that God is reconciled. God is propitiated (~~4125~~Romans 3:25) but the sinner is reconciled (~~4058~~2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

This reconciliation is true not of all things absolutely, but of "all The things," or to give the exact order in the Greek, "The all things," which it pleased God thus to reconcile. These things are those of earth and heaven, we perceive, but to hell (compare ~~4126~~Matthew 25:46; ~~4310~~Revelation 20:10). Among these especially, are men who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (~~4166~~Mark 16:16). They were once alienated from God and enemies to Him, but now are they reconciled by him (v. 21), through the sacrifice of Christ, and presented "unblameable and unreprouvable to His sight" (v. 22). This means that such is the position of the believer now, on the earth, the moment he believes on Christ (see our comment on ~~4004~~Ephesians 1:4). The proof of it is that he is continuing in the faith (v. 23), "Preached to every creature under heaven," means among all mankind, in all countries, in contrast to Judaism, for example, which was limited to one nation.

CHRIST DWELLING IN US

We now come to the still deeper mystery of Christ's indwelling in the believer (vv. 24-29). Paul had spoken of his ministry (v. 23), which caused his suffering (v. 24). This suffering had been endured on their account, but he rejoiced in it nevertheless. "The afflictions of Christ in my flesh," means probably his own afflictions, and yet also Christ's, on the principle that the Head suffers in the sufferings of His members (~~4404~~Acts 9:4-5; ~~4150~~Matthew

25:40, 45; ~~422~~ 1 Corinthians 12:12; ~~405~~ 2 Corinthians 1:5). "He was going on to endure whatever remained of the afflictions which God had appointed for him to endure," in the exercise of his ministry for them. His was a special ministry, a dispensation of God had been given him "to fully preach the Word of God." This included the revelation of the mystery expressed in the words, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (v. 27). This mystery is something more than the gospel of our salvation, for that had not been "hid" in the Old Testament. It is an altogether unique blessing, belonging only to the church of this dispensation, and is the indwelling of Christ. And note that this indwelling itself is not the "glory" spoken of but the hope of the glory. The glory includes our resurrection bodies; our new hearts in "unhindered development of Christly life"; our coming back with Christ again to earth, and sharing in the triumphs of His reappearing; our sitting with Him on His throne as He has sat down with His Father on His throne; and finally the glory which shall endure "to all the generations of the age of the ages" (~~408~~ Ephesians 3:4), for when at length the millennial church shall have been transferred to her place among the glorified, then shall there be "a new heaven and a new earth." Oh, the glory of being a Christian!

QUESTIONS

1. What title do we give to this chapter?
2. Divide the chapter into three main parts.
3. What threefold declaration about Christ does it contain?
4. What is the meaning of the phrase "in all the world"?
5. What is the single petition of Paul's prayer?
6. In what way are Christians to "walk worthy of the Lord"?
7. For what should the thankfulness of Christians be ever expressed?
8. What is the difference between a likeness and an image?
9. Why may we speak of Christ as the Eternal Son of God?
10. How did Christ come to be the head of the church as well as the universe?
11. What was the teaching of the Gnostics about the nature of the Deity?
12. Define reconciliation.

13. To what is this Divine reconciliation limited?
14. What is meant by the "afflictions of Christ in my flesh"?
15. Describe in a phrase the ministry Paul was commissioned to reveal.
16. What are some of the things which the promised glory includes?

COLOSSIANS 2 — THE POLEMIC PART

The Apostle spoke (1:24, 28-29) about the suffering entailed by his ministry, and the labor endured to present "every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Of course, he means every Christian, and by "perfect in Christ Jesus," so far as the present life is concerned, he means, not perfect in the sense of faultless or sinless, but perfectly justified, and sanctified, and perfectly made meet for glory in Him. The word "perfect" is here borrowed from the heathen mysteries and appropriated to the Gospel in condemnation of them. Perfection such as that of which he speaks is not found in them, but in Christ.

The word "every" used three times in 1:28, is important — warning, teaching, presenting every man. It harmonizes with the word "all" before "wisdom" in the same verse, and strikes at the Gnostic exclusiveness to which reference has been made. In the wisdom of God in Christ there are no restrictions as to persons or subjects, the whole Christ is preached to every man, and every man has the same opportunity to possess "the riches of the glory." The subject of the apostle's suffering and toil is carried over into chapter 2, the first three verses of which really belong to chapter 1. The latter part of verse 2 reads in the Revised Version: "That they may know the mystery of God, even Christ, in whom are" etc. In other words, Christ Himself is the mystery of God, "as incarnating the fulness of the Godhead all the divine wisdom and knowledge for the redemption and reconciliation of man." Now the reason of Paul's conflict on behalf of these Colossian Christians is that they may not be enticed away from this precious truth by the false (Gnostic) teachers (vv. 4-7), nor enslaved by their empty philosophy (vv. 8-15), nor judged in their Christian liberty (vv. 16-17), nor robbed of their reward (vv. 18-23).

"LEST ANY MAN SHOULD BEGUILE YOU WITH ENTICING WORDS"

or beguile you by false reasoning in persuasive discourse. The only safeguard against this is stated in verse 6. They had "received Christ Jesus," and now they are to "walk" in Him, to put forth all their energies as consciously in Him. And to encourage them to do this the apostle calls attention to the good that is among them for their comfort (v. 5).

"BEWARE LEST ANY MAN SPOIL YOU THROUGH PHILOSOPHY AND VAIN DECEIT"

i.e., enslave, lead you away as his prey. Paul does not characterize all philosophy in these terms but only the philosophy which is empty deceit, i.e., the philosophy of these Gnostics, somewhat like that of modern times standing under the names of Spinoza, Herbert Spencer and others. It is according to the tradition of men and has no support from revelation. Such teaching is after the world and not "after Christ." In Christ we are "complete," and need nothing more since Christ is God (vv. 9-10). We are "complete" or "filled full" in Him in the sense that his merits, His righteousness, His preciousness, His life, His sonship, His heirship, His glory, have all been made over to us by Divine grace through faith (~~8180~~ Romans 8:10-18, 28-39). In detail, we are circumcised in Him (v. 11), i.e., in a spiritual sense, and need not the ritual circumcision as the false teachers claimed. Christians possess all that was symbolized by that rite, i.e., the putting off of our fallen and corrupt nature. This took place when we died in Christ and were "buried with Him in the baptism" (v. 12), i.e., the baptism of the Holy Spirit (~~8123~~ 1 Corinthians 12:13; Rom 6:4). And having thus died and been buried with Him, we are risen again in Him, and are walking before God "in newness of life" (~~8104~~ Romans 6:4). What then do we require of man-made philosophies? Think what God does, in and through Christ, for the soul He saves:

- (1) He quickens, i.e., makes us alive in a spiritual sense;
- (2) He forgives all our transgressions;
- (3) He blots out "the handwriting of ordinances that was against us." These "ordinances" are His decrees written on the tables of stone in the ceremonial law of Moses, and in our moral nature. In them we find our own handwriting that is "against us," for we assent to the fact that the

law is good, and that it is our obligation to obey it. Nevertheless, God blots this out, cancels the bond, erases the signature, pays the debt; and

(4) He gets a victory for us over all our spiritual enemies (v. 15). The principalities and powers of darkness seized upon the human nature of Christ our substitute, as if to prevent Him from going to the cross and dying for our redemption. But He overcame them, "made a show of them openly," by rising from the dead, and in His triumph we triumph.

"LET NO MAN THEREFORE JUDGE YOU"

The apostle is here striking at the practical error of the false teachers as expressed in their excessive ritualism and vigorous asceticism. Eating and drinking were referred to in the Mosaic law, but the Gnostic went far beyond that (~~54D~~Romans 14:2; ~~54D~~1 Timothy 4:2-3). "The Sabbath" (v. 16) is referred to from the Jewish point of view. "The rest of one day in seven as expressive of the law of creation, and as supplying the principle which underlies the fourth commandment, he does not here include." He does not merely forbid the observance of these things but going further, forbids Christians to let any one "judge" them, or take them to task concerning them. These things are not a basis of judgment concerning our standing in Christ; on the contrary, so far as they are part of the levitical system, they are only the shadow cast in advance of the work of Christ. "The body" the substance, "is of Christ" (~~30E~~Hebrews 10:1). The ancient Jew took the shadow as foretelling the body, but the modern ritualist takes the shadow instead of the body."

"LET NO MAN BEGUILÉ [ROB] YOU OF YOUR REWARD"

In verses 18-23 we have a description of one whose views of the truth are diametrically opposed to those taught by the apostle in verses 9-10:

1. He takes delight in "humility and worshipping of angels." This is the mock humility such as we see in the Roman Catholic church, as though Christ were too high for these false teachers and they must have lower beings for mediators.
2. He "dwells" or takes his stand upon "those things which he hath seen" (v. 18 RV). In other words, he does not walk by faith but judges by his natural experiences. For instance, an unimportant man cannot enter the presence of a human king except as some one introduces him,

so Christ, although a Godman, is in the judgment of this false teacher, too high for human fellowship except through lower mediation. And yet there is a slightly different interpretation suggested by Sir William Ramsey. He thinks the force of "intruding into" is gotten only when regarded as a quoted word, and a sarcastic reference to an act by which, once upon a time, the false teacher had symbolically expressed his choice of a so-called "New Life" in the heathen "Mysteries." These were the things he had "seen," and he was not taking his stand upon them, urging them as needful in the Christian life. If the Christians at Colosse aspired to be "perfect" they must enter upon a higher course of asceticism, self-denial and humiliation after these heathen mysteries.

3. This false teacher is "vainly puffed up by his fleshy mind," by the mind of his fallen and corrupt nature.

4. He does not hold the "Head," i.e., he has no clear and definite views concerning Christ as the Head of the church which is His body. In other words, he may be a professing Christian, but he is not a member of the true church of Christ.

The practical inference or conclusion follows in verses 20-23, which it will be more convenient to deal with in the succeeding lesson.

QUESTIONS

- 1.** Why is this lesson called the polemic part of the epistle?
- 2.** What is the meaning of "perfect in Christ Jesus"?
- 3.** In what sense is Christ "the mystery of God"?
- 4.** What fourfold reason is given for Paul's conflict?
- 5.** How are we "complete" in Christ?
- 6.** What was symbolized by circumcision?
- 7.** If we are true Christians when was our fallen and corrupt nature put off?
- 8.** Explain "blotting out the handwriting."
- 9.** Explain verse 15.
- 10.** What is meant by "judge you" in verse 18?
- 11.** How would you explain "intruding" in verse 19?
- 12.** What is the practical conclusion in verses 20-23?

COLOSSIANS 2:20-4:18 — THE HORTATORY PART

The Christian being "dead with Christ," is dead "from the rudiments of the world"; in other words, worldly methods of obtaining "perfection" are something with which he has nothing to do. Why then should he act to the contrary, "after the commandments and doctrines of men" (vv. 20, 22)? Why should he ascribe salvation or any part of it, to things which "perish with the using"? Why should he come under a law which says "touch not, taste not, handle not," as though it possessed sanctifying grace? As one who is saved, there are many things he will not touch, nor taste, nor handle, as the next chapter indicates, but this is different from attaching a meritorious value to such things, as these false teachers did. Such things have "a show of wisdom" in men's eyes perhaps, but are of the nature of "will worship," self-imposed ordinances, and nothing more. No neglect of the body, no asceticism of this kind can extirpate evil appetites or get rid of sin (v. 23).

On the other hand, the Christian having "risen with Christ" as we have seen, let him seek, i.e., set his mind on things above (3:1-2). For these things, compare [◀403▶](#) Matthew 6:33 and [◀510▶](#) Philippians 3:20. To seek them means to inquire about and ask for them, as they are revealed in Holy Scripture. The encouragement to do this is found in verses 3-4 (compare [◀401▶](#) 1 John 3:1-3).

The Christian who does this will soon be exhibiting the fruit of it in a life of real holiness as distinguished from the counterfeit recommended by the Gnostics. This holiness will show itself in two ways, by a putting off (vv. 5-11) and a putting on (vv. 12-17). The true Christian realizing his risen life with Christ will "mortify" put to death the members of his body, in the sense that he will eschew the things named in verses 5-9. He will do this through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within him, and by whom he is "renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created Him." Verse 11 means that this "new man" is not depending on the distinctions therein indicted, all of which are obliterated in Christ. But the true believer will not only put to death the things named, but clothe himself with a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, long-suffering, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness.

We have said that this would be done through the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer, but the instrument He uses is the "Word of Christ" (v. 16), i.e., the Holy Scriptures. The believer in whose heart that dwells richly, will ever be acting on the principle of verse 17.

The apostle now applies all this to the three classes of the social order (3:18-4:1), as he did in Ephesians, to which lesson the student will turn.

The conclusion of the epistle is an appeal for prayer (4:2-4); apostolic counsel in conduct toward the world (vv. 5-6); personal matters including commendations of and salutations from fellow workers (vv. 7-15); directions concerning the epistle (v. 16); a charge to one of the elders (v. 17), and the benediction (v. 18).

Note how aptly the subject of prayer is introduced, following as it does the opening up of the whole subject of practical holiness. How shall we obtain the power to practice such holiness without prayer for the Holy Spirit's aid? Note that while the brotherhood of Christ is a world in itself, yet the Christian has responsibilities toward others (v. 5). To "walk in wisdom" with reference to the unconverted means Gospel knowledge applied in common sense. It means the "conscious blessedness of the life of the Christian as a visible fact," but no "stage effects" no self-conceit and no more oddities. The Christian should evince a true sympathy with all genuine human interests while yet in earnest for the salvation of souls. He should "redeem the time," or "buy up the opportunity," in the sense of knowing just when and how to act in such cases with reference to the world around him. Speech "always with grace, seasoned with salt" (v. 6) means the right adaptation and point in our remarks in addressing the unsaved, as indicated in the last clause of the verse. The allusion to Laodicea (vv. 13, 15-16) brings to mind that of 2:1, and gives occasion to say that it, and Hierapolis and Colosse lay very near each other. It is interesting to note that an epistle had been sent there as well as to Colosse, though we have no further record to it. Moreover, the circumstance that the epistles were to be interchanged is a hint as to the way in which the church of the first century determined the canon of the New Testament. There was in other words, a circulation of the inspired teachings, and a searching into them by all the Christians in every place.

QUESTIONS

1. Interpret in your own words verses 20-23.

2. In what two ways is true holiness exhibited?
3. What does verse 11 mean?
4. What connection in thought is there between verses 16 and 17?
5. What does "walk in wisdom" mean?
6. What is meant by speech "seasoned with salt"?
7. What hint have we here as to the determination of the canon of the New Testament?