

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians I

Colossians 1:1-2

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September 1, 1996

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Colossians. Colossians, chapter 1. We begin with a series of expositions of this great epistle of the Apostle Paul. Hear now the word of God.

Colossians 1:1-2

Our Lord and our God, this is Your Word. We ask spiritual insight and we ask for a spiritual posture that we might obediently sit under the word allowing it to search us out, to see if there is any unclean thing in us, allowing the spirit to freely move within us to move us, to encourage us in our graces and to mortify those sins which remain in us. Open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from Your law and we'll give You all the praise and all the glory, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

The book of Colossians is about the incomparable Christ. It is about the soul-sufficient Christ, the sovereign Christ in whom is everything that we need, in whom is everything that we have as Christians. The gospel of Jesus Christ was not brought to the Colossians directly by Paul. Paul tells us in the passage we just read that Epaphras had come to the Colossians with the word of truth. It is very likely that Epaphras had been in Ephesus some hundred miles to the west of the Lycos Valley and he had heard the preaching of the Apostle Paul there and that faithful man and the Apostle Paul compliments him with that great accolade, that faithful man took back the gospel to the Colossians and they came to Christ and a church was formed in that city where Paul had never been. In this letter, Paul is responding both positively and negatively to the Colossians that Epaphras has now told him.

Epaphras has visited Paul and one of the things that he has told Paul is that there are apparently new teachers, false teachers in the congregation which are confusing young converts. They are teaching an add-mixture of Christian truths with Jewish ritual practices and even pagan beliefs and practices. They are not outrightly denying Christ, but they are mixing the gospel of Christ with truth and

error. It's a hodge-podge of things that they are teaching. Paul will outline for us in chapter 2 some of the distinctives of this teaching.

For instance in chapter 2:11, 16, and 17, the Apostle Paul tells us that these people were apparently requiring that Gentile Christians obey Jewish Old Testament ritual law.

In that same chapter, just a little bit further on, you will notice in verse 18 that apparently these people were teaching that we ought to worship angelic mediaries, the worship of angels apparently was part of their bag of tricks. And you may say now how in the world could a young Christian fall for that. But you could imagine a presentation like this. God is great and awesome and spiritual. We are small and weak and material. How can the material world have fellowship with the spiritual world? We need a mediator between us and God and even between us and Christ if we're really going to have a fullness of fellowship and so we should worship these mediaries. You can hear the logic going something like that and young Christian converts scratching their head and saying, 'well I guess that makes sense.' And certainly in the culture of their day that would have been a very compelling sort of argument.

Thirdly, in this same passage, chapter 2:20-23, you see that these teachers are also teaching sort of an asceticism, a bodily form of excessive self-denial which was apparently very significant in their teaching. All these teachings were being add-mixed with Christian truth and according to the Apostle Paul, not only changing the gospel but endangering the spiritual lives of the believers at Colossae because truth is unto godliness and untruth leads to destruction.

And so the Apostle Paul writes this letter to combat this error, to combat this error which offered a fullness of spiritual experience which had never been previously known by the Christians in Colossae, to combat this error which offered a new spiritual freedom for those who would follow it. To combat this error which claimed a particular insight into the powers of evil and the ability to protect the Colossians from those powers. To combat this error which offered a deeper knowledge of God and a greater experience of his power. To combat this error which inclines some to think of themselves as superior to other believers. To combat this error for its impressive self-denial and to combat this error which was divisive in the church in Colossians, the Apostle Paul presses home one truth applied in a multiple variety of ways over and over again in the book and that one truth is the sole sufficiency of Christ to this error. Paul's antidote is the unfolding of the cosmic implications of Christ's absolute pre-eminence and directing us to the sole sufficiency of his saving work. Paul's one answer to this erroneous teaching is the person and work of Christ. For the message of the book of Colossians is that believers are complete in Christ and that faith in him necessarily rules out reliance on anything outside of him, anything subsidiary or under him. For nothing in the universe is outside the scope of his sovereignty and so the Apostle Paul sets forth before them the sufficient Christ, the solely

sufficient Christ, the sovereign Christ and the incomparable Christ.

I. Christians receive Scripture as authoritative in all matters of faith and life.

This morning I would simply like to look with you at the first two verses. Please direct your attention there. “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God and Timothy our brother to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae. Grace to you and peace from God our Father.” The Apostle Paul in this brief greeting is doing just that. He is giving a salutation to the Church but it's not just a polite ritual. Paul has significant content in that greeting meant to minister to the souls and in fact we'll see in a few moments the content of his greeting actually undercut everything that the error that is being taught in Colossae purports to teach. Paul in this brief greeting sets forth a claim, a claim about himself. He gives a description of what believers are and then he gives a blessing to the believers at Colossae. I would simply like to look at this great salutation with you this morning and see if we can glean truths, truths from the word of God to be applied to our own hearts and our own situations.

Paul's claim begins first. You note the words. “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God.” You see that phrase is an assertion of Paul's authority. Paul has never been to this church before. There are new teachers at this church, visiting professors, if you will, coming to this church to teach them new and improved versions of Christianity. The Apostle meets this congregation by letter. He does not know them personally. They do not know him personally. He tells them who he is to begin with. I am an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. The Apostle is setting forth very clearly the fact that he is an authority. What he is about to say is not an opinion. He comes with decisive directions and truths.

The Apostle Paul is laying forth a foundation for the Colossians to receive the word which he is going to preach and teach and write to them and so he emphasizes that he is an apostle by the will of God. This reminds us of the importance of the authority of the scripture in our own experience. For Christians receive scripture as authoritative in all matters of faith and like. When the Scripture is read this morning it comes with no arguments to try and convince you that it is what it is, except itself. It is self-evidently true. It testifies to your heart when you read the Scripture that it is true because it describes what you are like inside. It unfolds the mystery of salvation. It is perfect in the scope of the plan of redemption. It reveals a plan that men nor angels could have invented for the plan of salvation. The scripture shows forth itself to be what it claims to be, the word of God. And it's our job to receive it.

Now I doubt that there are many here who would openly reject the scripture. If we did at least we wouldn't talk about it amongst fellow church members. Most of us struggle not in the area of openly rejecting the scripture but rather an apathy or an indifference about the Scripture. Perhaps we are not interested personally in

coming to be believers who know the word of God, who thirst for the word of God, who drink in the word of God day in and day out, in private, in family devotions as well as corporate study and worship. Perhaps our problem is not so much with an interest in the scripture. Perhaps our problem is with a practical denial of his authority in our lives. We accept that it's the word of God and yet we live in ways which contradict it. We say that it is the authority but we live as if it were not the authority in our lives.

But the mark of a Christian is a love for God's word. The mark of a Christian is a love for God's love. We not only desire to be under it for teaching, we desire to be under it for living. Calvin said a long time ago that "the Bible is the scepter by which the heavenly King rules His church." And so I ask you this day what is your attitude to Scripture? Do you have the proper attitude, the attitude which the Apostle Paul wanted the Colossians to have to his word? Do you come to the Scripture expectantly, bowing the knee, ready to be changed, ready to be corrected, ready to be encouraged, ready to be strengthened, ready to be directed? Is that your posture for its holy Scripture. Christians receive Scripture as authoritative. That is part of Paul's first claim. He is authoritative. The words that he is writing are Scripture and the Colossians are to receive it. And if you will look with me in verse 2 you'll see at least three components to this description that the Apostle Paul gives of these Christians.

II. Christians are chosen by God, set apart, dedicated to be His own people.

The first you'll see in the phrase "To the Saints at Colossae." To the Saints at Colossae. Here we see that Christians are chosen by God, set apart, dedicated to be His own people. When Paul says "To the Saints at Colossae," he doesn't mean to those extraordinarily holy people who are members of that congregation. He doesn't mean to that super spiritual set of Christians that are a part of a larger body, to those who are most involved in all the activities of the congregation. No, the Apostle Paul means to all the members of the congregation. Those whom God has chosen for Himself. Those who have been set apart by God for his own people. This relationship to God is underscored by the word *saints* just like the relationship that they have to one another is underscored by the word *brothers* or *brethren*. Saints, your relationship to God. Brothers, your relationship to one another. And that word *saint* is to bring to mind God's electing rights of the people of Israel in the Old Testament. He did not choose them because they were the greatest, for they were the least. He did not choose them for anything in them but because he loved them we are told in Deuteronomy 7. He chose them to be a peculiar people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and now the Apostle Paul says to these Gentiles in the Lycos Valley surrounded by the mystery religions who thirty years ago had never ever heard the Old Testament. They had never, ever heard the prophets preach. He tells them you are now saints.

My friends do you have any idea of the implications of that for our security? C. S.

Lewis said a long time ago “Amicable agnostics will talk cheerfully about man's search for God. For me they might as well talk about the mouse's search for the cat. God closed in on me.” You see this is the truth of our sainthood. This is the truth of God's electing love. He has sought us out. Before we came to Him, He came to us. The reason we came to Him is because He came to us. Oh, the implications for our security. And you think about these brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae in the midst of the mystery religions and the immorality of the Lycos Valley in their day. Laodicea is only a few miles away and you remember about Laodicea. This was not a place noted for its orthodoxy or its holiness and yet here are people who have been called out of darkness into light.

You are saints. Paul doesn't say explicitly in this greeting how one becomes a saint but he sure does give a hint doesn't he in that little phrase, verse 2, in Christ, *saints in Christ*. Those who are in Christ and those only are saints. To be in union with Christ, to be in fellowship with Christ, to be in relationship with Christ, this makes one a Saint. The Spirit unites us to Christ and the instrument of that bond of the Spirit is faith. So those who are in Christ trust in Him, they believe in Him, they rest on Him, they flee to Him. Faith is the invariable response to spiritual initiative and so this is the first thing that we see in the description. Christians are chosen by God. Saints. Notice again, he calls them faithful brethren at Colossae.

III. Christians, in response to God's initiative, are faithful or loyal to their calling.

And so we see a second thing. Faithful brethren at Colossae. Christians in response to God's initiative and response to God's love are faithful or loyal to their calling. This word from Paul is a stimulus, it's an encouragement to faithfulness, to obedience. We have been made to be the true Israel. We have been chosen by God and now as we have been dedicated by God we are to be loyal to God. Do we reflect that reality in our own experience? Is faithfulness something that we could say that we are characterized by. Are we loyal to God? Is He our priority.

A. W. Tozer said, “The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith.” The two are opposite sides of the same coin.

IV. Christians, in virtue of their relation to God, are now all brethren.

A third thing you notice as well, in verse 2, Christians in virtue of their relation to God are now brethren. They are not simply faithful, they are the faithful brethren, Paul tells us. Now you know that *brethren* is a common New Testament term for Christian. Paul has just used it for Timothy in the first verse. It is Paul the apostle

and our brother Timothy. But for Paul to repeat that greeting, brethren, so soon after he's just called Timothy his brother must bring to mind the unity which is established when we are brought into Christ. For you know how Paul felt about Timothy his son and you know how Timothy felt about his spiritual Father, Paul. And Paul uses that term brother to show their closeness, and when he calls the Colossians brethren it is as much as a call to the unity and community of believers. We are to be united in love, united in mutual love, united in ministry, united in mutual ministry, united in fellowship, and I don't mean the sentimental insipid definitions of fellowship which float around in the environment today. I mean shared life, real Christian fellowship, mutual commitment, mutual concern, mutual involvement in all our losses and crosses, in all our trials and our triumphs. That type of mutuality of what the Apostle Paul's application of the term brothers implies with regard to the way we relate to one another.

Do we reflect those realities in our experience? Can we look back and say, that's a description of me. I know what it means to be chosen, to be called out by God, to be saved from myself, to be saved from my sins, to be rescued and brought to Christ. I know what it is to love my brothers and I know what it is to respond in loyalty to God. Does that reflect our experience? That is the description that Paul gives of what a Christian is to these Colossians.

Let me just remind you that the Apostle Paul is not speaking from personal experience of these people apparently. He's never met them. The Apostle Paul is setting forth our status. He's saying this is what we are and think how often he does this. He says this is what you are, Christians, now be who you are. It's just like the land of Canaan. Joshua, that's your land, now take it. He says, Christian, this is who you are. Now be who you are. You have been chosen by God. Realize what that means. You have been made to be faithful, now be faithful. You are brothers and sisters in Christ, now act like it.

The Apostle Paul always places the indicative before the imperative. He says what you are before he tells you what he wants you to do. Here's who you are, believer. Now live in accordance with what God has made you to be. That leads us to the blessing. Again we look at verse 2.

V. Christians are recipients of God's unmerited favor.

Here Paul pronounces a blessing, a benediction, on the Colossian Christians. He says grace to you, grace to you. That grace, of course, refers to God's favor towards you. You probably know that the Hebrew term behind that word signifies the blessedness enjoyed by one from a superior, one who is favored by a superior. And so the grace spoken of speaks of the favor of God and the blessedness of life of those who are so favored by God. Paul takes the term and he reminds us that this grace, this favor is freely bestowed by God apart from our deserving, apart from our sin, apart from what we are at enmity with God. God's

grace is undeserved and it is despite our demerit. And the use of that word in this salutation, you see, is much more than a simple greeting, a politeness. It is a prayer that these Colossians might enjoy the blessing of God himself, that they might see the face of God and commune with him.

Thomas Manton, the Puritan, said many years ago "There is no chemistry like grace. Where grace is it reigns, and it is the dominant thing in that experience." Have you tasted that kind of grace? Do you know what it is to be favored by God, to be brought into fellowship with him, to know the sweetness of that fellowship? Is it the desire of your heart? The Apostle Paul's blessing calls you to examine yourself in that area.

VI. Christians, in virtue of God's grace, enjoy an inner peace with God.

And then the follow up, the subsequent to grace in the blessing, we see again in verse 2, grace and peace from God our Father. This peace speaks of spiritual prosperity. It is the healthy condition of life experience by the person who enjoys the favor of God. It is both objective and subjective. It's not just an inner peace, though it is that. It is a peace that first knows that I have been brought into right relationship to God by trusting in Jesus Christ and there is now nothing that can separate me from the love of God which is in Christ. And then, it is a peace which keeps the waters from overflowing us when we go through the trials of life because it is a peace not brought to us by circumstances but in spite of circumstances. For our peace is not based on an absence of adverse circumstances, it is based on the presence of Christ in our lives. He who is in us who is the hope of glory. It is the kind of peace that enabled a godly man named Job to survive the messengers who told him that his fields were lost and his animals were lost and his houses were lost and his children were lost. And to fall on his face and say. "blessed be the name of the Lord. Blessed be the name of the Lord who gives and who takes away." That is the kind of peace that comes from relationship with living God.

Do you know that peace? Have you ever once left your own strivings and your own attempts to be righteous, and your own attempts to hoist yourself into fellowship with God or to get relief from your conscious. Have you ever left them behind and simply come to Christ, fled to Christ and clung to Him? David Dixon the great Scottish minister said many years ago, "I have taken my good deeds and my bad deeds and thrown them together in a heap and fled from them both to Christ and in Him I have peace."

Have you been there? Have you fled to Him? Do you know what it is to have the benediction of God pronounced on your soul? Oh, my friends if you come this day and you have not tasted of that, I plead with you close with Christ. He awaits. He awaits with arms open to receive any who will come to him. And if you come as a Christian today, and you have forgotten some of these great truths, these

great varieties which uphold us in the midst of trial, I pray that the spirit would bring them again to forceful remembrance in your life that you might walk in the security and the holiness that we are called to by God. May the Lord bless his word. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Father this is Your word and we know it's meant for our encouragement and for our edification and so we ask, O God, that you would bless it to our spiritual nourishment. Help us to realize these things. O God, if there is even one who have not tasted of the peace which you hold in your breast enfold them now in the shelter of the shadow of the wings of the Almighty and we will give you the praise and the glory, for Christ's sake. Amen.

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