

## **Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians IV**

**Colossians 1:13-20**

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If you will kindly take your Bibles and turn with me to Colossians chapter 1, we will continue our study of this great book. We began our study by saying that the Apostle Paul was writing to the Colossians, who were being infested with new teachers who brought a new teaching. That teaching did not deny the supremacy of Christ, but by suggesting that one needed to move on from the gospel which Epaphras, Paul's faithful friend, and the man who first brought the gospel to the Colossians - by suggesting that we needed to move on from the gospel which he had first preached, called into the question the sufficiency of Christ in the gospel. They suggested that it was possible to attain a deeper, a more profound experience and knowledge and power apart from those initial teachings that they had received. So the Apostle Paul is writing to correct this misimpression on the part of the young Colossian believers. Today, we move to verse 13, which is really the beginning of the meat of the book itself.

We have been in the introduction, in which Paul has given a greeting, and in which he has offered up prayers of thanksgiving, and has given the Colossians an idea of how he intercedes for them. Now, he begins to address the issue straight on, and basically this is what Paul does: He says, 'you think you need Christ plus something else, this deeper Gnostic experience of God in His knowledge or power? Well, let me answer that by showing you who Christ is.'

The Apostle Paul's answer to the temptation on the part of these young believers in Colosse to believe this new teaching is to say, 'look, if you will understand who Christ is, that will take care of this false teaching. If you will just know who He is, you will recognize that you don't need this teaching and that this teaching is wrong. If you will simply recognize who Christ is, so much of your Christian life will fall in place.' With that, let's look at God's word, and we will begin in verse 13. Hear the word of the Lord:

### **Colossians 1:13-20**

Thus ends this reading of God's word, may He add His blessing to it. Let's look to Him in prayer:

*Our Father, this is Your word. It's intended for Your people's edification. It's intended to be an instrument in the hands of the Spirit to bring men and women to Christ. Send it out with power we pray. Make our hearts willing to receive its message. Cause us to be captivated by this description of our Lord and Savior, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Who do you think Christ is? What do you think of him? Jesus Himself asked that question of His disciples that day in Caesarea, Philippi, when He wanted to find out what they were hearing from the crowds. What the crowds saying about Me? And then he turned the question to them: 'Okay, I know what they are saying, what do you say? Who do you say that I am?' That is a question we all have to face. Who do you think He is? Do you think He is a great moral teacher? Do you think Christ is a great man, a great prophet? Paul says He is more, and Paul says the answer to the question, 'Who is Christ?' and 'What is He like?' will have a profound impact on our Christian experience. Perhaps we spend too little time thinking about that question. We are evangelicals, and we spend a lot of time telling people how to come to Christ. That is good, because that is an important thing to do, but, if we don't spend enough time thinking about 'Who' we are coming to, we may be robbed of much of the grace and power and blessing and benefit of Christian experience. If we don't know very well Who we are coming to, we may not be actually coming to the Christ who saves at all. In this passage, the Apostle Paul's description of Christ is so deep and so profound that we could never ever plumb the depths of it, if I preached a hundred sermons. I can't even handle what Paul says in brief outline in the text, so I am going to confine myself to four phrases that the apostle Paul has for us in verses thirteen through fifteen, and then we will just have to come back and pick up the rest the next time.

## **I. Christ is the Son of *His* Love**

I want you to see four phrases that he applies to Christ as he says to the Colossians, 'Colossians, look at Christ. Look at Him. And, if you will look at Him and apprehend who He is, you won't need this new teaching that these false teachers are believing and teaching. You won't need this new teaching to find fullness of grace, because in Him is everything that you need.' Let's look at it together today. The first phrase that I would like to direct your attention to, is this phrase in verse 13: "He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." We said last week, literally it reads, "the kingdom of the Son of His love." And so, here is the first phrase: Christ is the Son of His love. Now, that is interesting, because that phrase points you back to the Father, and it tells you something about the Father. He is the Son of His love. Some of our translations translate "the beloved Son." It is true, it does mean that, but it means more than that. This phrase means more than that Jesus Christ is the object of the Father's love. That in some senses is obvious. He is the only begotten Son. Of course, He is the object of the Father's love, but Paul

means more. Christ is not only the object of the Father's love, He is not only the One that the Father loves, Christ Himself is the embodiment and the manifestation of God's love for you. Christ is not only the One that God loves, Christ is a standing witness of God's love for His people because the fact that He is incarnate. It is a manifestation of God's saving love, His plan which He has set in motion to redeem the world from sin and destruction, and to make a people for Himself. You remember the first line of that hymn that we sing often at Christmas. It comes from the early fourth century. It was written by Prudentious, and it is called *Of the Father's Love Begotten*? I don't see far into the meaning of the great phrase, but that is what Paul's getting at here. It's not just that the Son is the object of the Father's love, it is because of the Father's love He was begotten for our sake. "Of the Father's Love Begotten," the hymn writer says. Now that teaches us a very important lesson about the love of God itself. It teaches us that the Father's love is the great love on which all other loves are modeled, from which all other love flows, and of which all other love is merely shadow, a reflection, a representation, because the Father's love for the Son is the archetypal love. It is the great love. It is the real love, and every other love in human and angelic experience is only a reflection of that love. Now, that is a lofty thought but I want to apply it very specifically.

It is vital for us not to fall into believing that the Father is unloving, and yet we each know in our own experiences the temptation to believe that the Father is less than perfect in His love. Sometimes things happen in our own experience which make us question whether He is loving. 'If He is sovereign, why is the Lord letting this happen to me?' Sometimes we are looking at other's experiences, friends experience and we say, "How in the world could a God that is almighty and loving let this happen?" And in those moments, we are tempted to question His love, and in those moments we must remember that our love is only a reflection of His love. When we call His love into question, what we are suggesting, though we may not know this explicitly, is that we are more loving than He is. We are saying, "If I were almighty, and I were all loving, I wouldn't let that happen. I would be better than God would be in this circumstance. I would be more loving in this circumstance." And that's a false start because all our love is merely a reflection of His greater love, and that love is manifested in the Son.

I remember a conversation that I had with a young lady in my youth group in St. Louis. We were going through the Apostle's Creed, and we had come to that place in the creed which speaks of the judgment of the quick and the dead, the living and the dead. We had discussed in that section the doctrine of hell. It is an awful doctrine, but it is a biblical doctrine. It means that it lasts. There will be some who are separated from God eternally. Banished from His presence. Never again tasting of the fullness of His fruits. At enmity with him for eternity, cast off, outside. It is a hard doctrine, but it is a biblical doctrine. Many people wince at that doctrine and they want to modify that doctrine and they want to say that doctrine is unloving, and a God who is loving couldn't do the things that the Bible says that He does.

This young lady in the youth group came to me in tears after that meeting and she said, "How could a loving God send anyone to hell?" And we had a long discussion about that reality, but as we talked I said, "Nancy, have you ever sinned?" "Yes." "Would you say that you sin frequently?" "Oh yes." "Are you unloving sometimes?" "Oh yes." "Do you do things wrong toward your parents?" "Oh yes." "Does God ever sin toward you?" "No." "Has God ever done anything wrong to you?" "No." "Has God ever been unloving to you?" "Oh no." "Well, let me see if I am getting what you are saying, Nancy. You who admit that you sin and you do things wrong and that you are unloving from time-to-time, you are worried that God might do something unloving? Do I get you right? You, who have admitted that you are an imperfect person, are concerned that the God who has never done wrong and of which the scripture say He never does wrong, you are concerned that He might do something wrong?" She said, "Yep, I guess that's what I'm saying. I guess that's kind of stupid." I said, "Well, it may not be stupid but it is a bit perverse." We must never question the love of God. He is maximally loving. He is the archetype of all love. Our love is only a reflection of His, and we if are tempted to think that we are more compassionate than He is, we must stop and remember that the compassion that resides in us, how ever great it is, is but a faint shadow of His love and His compassion. And so, Paul says, Christ is the son of is love.

He gives a picture in verse 13 of the activity of God the Father on our behalf. He uses the phrase rescuing and transferring. Rescuing us from the domain of darkness, transferring us into the kingdom of His Son, and the Apostle Paul stresses that it is the Father who does this. The Father rescues us from the domain of darkness. The Father brings us into the kingdom of His son through the work of Christ on the cross. It is not the Son doing this, it is the Father rescuing us. People in Paul's day would have been very familiar with transfer after conquest. Conquering kings would come in and they would transfer people from their own homeland into another homeland, but that was a transfer from freedom to slavery. This is a transfer from slavery to freedom, and it is done by the rescue of the Father and His transfer of His people into the kingdom of His Son by the redemption of His Son on the cross. We must never, ever think that what Christ is doing on the cross is trying to get the Father involved with His people, trying to get the Father to love His people. That is not what is happening on the cross at all. The cross is the expression, it is the instrument of the Father's love for His children. Christ wouldn't have been on the cross, if the Father had not had a prior love and plan for His children. The cross itself is the stratagem of the Father, which the Son willingly takes upon Himself, in order to unite His people to Him. Think of how the New Testament stresses the activity of God the Father "For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son." So often it is God the Father who is emphasized in the New Testament with regard to what is happening at the cross.

We must never forget that, because the cross is not about getting the Father to

love His children. The cross is the instrument by which God can be both loving and just, merciful and righteous, in His redemption of His people, and the cross happened precisely because the Father ordained it in His love. Read Ephesians one. We must never forget this. Christ is the Son of His love. That phrase teaches us something about the love of the Father.

## **II. Christ is our Redeemer**

The second phrase I would like to point you to is in verse 14. Christ is our Redeemer. In verse 14 we read, "In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Christ is not simply a revelation of the Father. There are many people who teach that Christ came to show us the Father's love. That is true, but that is not all of the truth. Christ came to do more than to reveal to us what God is like. He came to do more than to give us some sort of an apprehension of what God is like, to give us some sort of a veiled knowledge of God. Christ came to redeem us from sin, and if we say that Christ has revealed God, and we say nothing else, we are cutting out a very important part of Paul's gospel message. For, if we say a half truth, as if it were the whole truth, it is a whole lie. It is true that Christ came to reveal, but Paul stresses here that Christ is our Redeemer, not simply the One who has revealed God. Christ has delivered us from tyranny to sin. The metaphor is again commercial. In Paul's day, if you wanted to set a slave free, you paid a purchase price for that slave and you redeemed, you literally bought that slave, and set him to freedom. This is precisely what the Apostle says Christ has done for us at the cross. He has paid a costly price for us and set us free. He has redeemed us at enormous cost, and this has brought to us both forgiveness of sin. That is pardon from sin and deliverance from sin. Every single one of us struggles with two aspects in sin. We are guilty of sin and therefore we are due its penalty. We are enslaved to sin and therefore we are under its power. Christ, in His redemption, redeems us from both. Forgiveness of sins entails both pardon for sin's guilt and deliverance from sin's power.

Now, these Colossian's new teachers were coming to them and they had said, 'Yes, Christ has forgiven your sins, but if you want to be released from the powers of darkness, from angelic powers of evil forces, then you need to be initiated in these other rituals.' And the apostle Paul is saying, 'Christ redeemed you from the domain of darkness. To talk about going to someone else, or going somewhere else in order to be relieved from the dominion of darkness is ridiculous. You have been redeemed. When you were brought under the lordship of Christ, you were brought under His lordship and no one reigns where He reigns. You are no longer under the dominion of sin. You are no longer under the guilt of sin.' And this is so important for us. So often there is an attempt in the Christian life to divide forgiveness from deliverance and sin, and so people say, 'Well, I'm forgiven but I'm walking in a carnal way. I'm just sinning against the Lord all the time. I'm in the flesh.' As far as the Apostle Paul is concerned, when you are forgiven, you were delivered from the dominion of sin. It does not mean

you are sinless. It does not mean you are perfect, but you are no longer under the dominion of sin. Your life is no longer as a whole characterized by a bent toward wickedness. When you sin, you are frustrated by it. You are not only remorseful of it, you are repentant of it. It is not the norm in your experience. And even those pet sins, those habitual sins that we fight against, year after year after year and seem never to be able to put away - they are not the rule, they are the exception, and it is precisely because of they're the exception that it hurts so badly and they frustrate us so deeply. Because when Christ brings forgiveness, He brings release from dominion. Christ is our Redeemer.

### **III. Christ is the Image of God**

A third phrase that I would point you to in verse 15. He is the image of the invisible God. Now, that is a tricky phrase, because you know that in Genesis 2, and elsewhere in Paul's writings, he talks about man being the image of God. Is he suggesting that Jesus is something less than divine? Absolutely not! How do I know that? Two things. First of all, he is about to tell you that He is the One by whom the world is created, and every good Jew in the audience would have known that the Person who created the world was God. And he is going to stress, furthermore, that Christ didn't just create some of it, He created all of it, and that the whole world was created for Him. So the idea that Christ is not divine is not entering Paul's mind. Why then is he using the word image? It is found in the key little word, invisible. "He is the image of the invisible God." God is a Spirit. We can't see Him. He doesn't have a body like we do, but Christ is the image of the invisible God. He has manifested, He has represented to us what the invisible God is like. He is God in the flesh. He is deity incarnate. He has been enfleshed and made visible. If you remember the interaction between Philip and Jesus in John 14, Philip says, "Lord, show us the Father and it will be enough." And Jesus says, 'have you been with Me so long and you've still not seen?'

If you've seen Me you have seen the Father. If you've looked on My face you've seen what the Father is like. To reverse the message, the metaphor, just slightly, Archbishop Michael Ramsay once put it this way, "God is Christ-like and in Him there is no unChrist-likeness at all." You want to know what God the Father is like? Look at the Son. He is the perfect reflection of the Father. He is deity in flesh. He is the representation and manifestation of God. He is the image of the invisible God, not less than Him but equal to Him, and the visible representation of that spiritual reality which transcends our sight and our senses.

### **IV. Christ is the First-born of Creation**

The fourth thing I'd like to point to is this. Here in verse 15, "Christ is the first-born of creation." He is not only the Son of God's love. He is not only our Redeemer,

He is not only the image of God, He is the firstborn of creation. Now again, that phrase brings some questions into people's mind. If He was the first-born, was there a time when he didn't exist? Is Paul saying that Christ is the highest of all creatures? Absolutely not, because in the very next phrase, he is going to say, verse 16, "For in Him all things were created." Paul doesn't include Christ in the created order. Christ brought the creation into being. All of it. And Paul goes to pains to stress, and I don't just mean earthly realities, I mean heavenly realities. Look what he says, "in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities -- all things have been created by Him," and then here is the *coup d'etat*, "and for Him."

Christ is not only the Creator of creation, creation was created for Him. He is the beginning of creation, He is the source of creation, and He is the end of creation. He is God over all. God bless forever. But what in the world does Paul mean by first-born? He means the same thing here, as the author of Hebrews means in Hebrews chapter 1 verse 2, Christ is ... "the heir of all things." When you think of first-born in the context of a king, of a monarch, what do you think? You think of the heir. You think of the one who has primacy given to him. Paul is speaking of a primacy of power here, not a priority of time sequence. He is not saying that Christ was born first, and then everything else came. He is saying that Christ has a primacy over everything. He is the first-born. He is the Father's heir. He is the heir over all things. That is exactly what is meant in that Christmas hymn that we sing, "O come all ye faithful," in the second stanza. When we sing the beautiful line which actually comes from the Nicene Creed that goes, "Very God begotten not created." You see, Christ was the first begotten, the first-born, not the first created. You ask me, "Well Ligon, what does *first-born* mean?" What does born mean? What does begotten mean? I say to you it means not created. I'm not sure I can go much more than that, but to be begotten is not to be created. He sustains a relationship with the heavenly Father. He is the begotten, but He is not created, just like the hymn says. The Eternal Word stood in the same relation to the first creation, the original creation as Jesus Christ the Incarnate One stands in relation to the church. As Christ the Eternal Word brought the worlds into being, Christ the Incarnate One brought the Church into being at the cross. He is the Creator, He is the first-born of creation.

Now, the Apostle Paul goes on, but we are going to stop there. But let's look at what Paul has laid before us. He is the Son of God's love. He is the great and primary object, and the expression of God's love. He is our Redeemer. He has not only redeemed us from guilt, He has redeemed us from the powers of darkness. He is the very image of God. He is the One in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells in bodily form, and He is the Creator of everything. The Apostle Paul says to the Colossians, 'Where exactly else are you going to go, for deliverance from the world powers, for a deeper knowledge of God? You are going to go somewhere else other than Christ? This is the Christ who saved you. Where are you going to go? He has it all, it's all in his hands. The whole world is His. He brought it into being. It exists for Him. Why would you possibly need to

go somewhere else other than Christ?' Everything resides in him, my friends. Today, have you gone to Him? Is He where you are going for fullness? Is He where you are going for meaning, for fullness of meaning in life? Is He where you are going for redemption.

Bear with me as I apply this in perhaps some surprising ways. We have officer elections coming up here. If I read Ephesians 4 right, officers are gifts of this Christ, this incomparable Christ to his people. That puts a pretty heavy task on you, because that means in a few weeks when you vote, you are going to be saying, 'Lord, I see evidence in that man that he is one of your gifts to our people.' Now, what sort of evidences will you look for? Well, you will at least look for this. Is this a man totally in love with this incomparable Christ? Ready to obey His words to the death, to minister this word, this Christ to His people? Who cares for his family like this Christ has told him to care for his family? Who has the evidence of this Christ's blessing and beatitudes implanted in his breast? Will that be the kind of man you look for and expect to be a gift from this Christ to His Church? Perhaps another application: We are going into stewardship season in a few weeks, and God has given to us prodigiously, extravagantly in Christ. He has given beyond that which we would have asked or thought in Christ. Can you image Adam in the garden saying, 'O Lord, I have sinned. Why don't You give Your Son on my behalf?' And that's precisely what God did. Now if God has given that way, do our hearts reflect that same type of cheerful giving, extravagant giving spirit? You see, giving is basically a spiritual issue. If you know how much you have received, you will be like that dear woman who bathed our Lord's feet in expensive perfume. Be ready to give in great measure from a cheerful heart. Ultimately, giving is that type of a spiritual issue. It is not accomplished through our own campaigns or anything else. It is accomplished through the work of Spirit in our own hearts.

How about those of you have come today and you are still seeking for something else outside of Christ?

Perhaps you have been promised some sort of experience - you have Christ first, and then later on you get this deeper experience. Pray tell if Christ is all and all, and all things are His, where is it *elsewhere* that you go to get this experience apart from Him? And if you have been united to Him once, what is it that you are lacking if you are united to Him? Is there someone who is saying to you that 'you have not enough, that you need a fuller gospel?' My friends, if you are sitting there today and you have Christ, I am here on Apostolic authority telling you, 'you have it all.' And for those of you who come here not knowing this incomparable Christ, 'you are lost.' There is no hope outside of this cross, but if you will come to Him and you will trust Him; if you will receive Him, you will find in Him all your needs met and more, because He is the incomparable Christ and He brought the world into being and he holds it in His hand. May the lord bless these words. Let us pray



*Lord God, we cannot do justice to Your word, but O how we love it. Give us a taste of this Christ, help us to sing of this Christ, help us to walk with this Christ, and seek nothing apart from Him. Less would not satisfy and more is not desired. In His name we pray. Amen*

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