

“To the Saints and Faithful Brothers in Christ at Colossae”

The First in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

Texts: Colossians 1:1-14; Genesis 1:26-2:3

If Paul’s letter to the Colossians has a single theme, it is the Lordship of Jesus over all of creation. In this letter Paul makes his case that Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God, and secures salvation for all of his people through his work of new creation which even now Jesus is ushering in through his death, resurrection, and ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s focus upon the person and work of Jesus throughout this epistle will help us (hopefully) prepare for the Advent season and Christmas when we celebrate the birth of that Savior about whom Paul so eloquently writes in Colossians. Christmas (I mean the biblical and Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus—which should not be confused with the secular holiday celebrated by our contemporaries at the exact same time)—is a wonderful time for Christians and gives us a great opportunity to reflect upon who Jesus is and what he has done for us when he secured our peace with God through the blood of the cross.

Whenever we begin a new study of any book of the Bible it is important to consider three questions: 1). Who wrote this book? 2). When it was written? and 3). Why was it written? If we do not take the time to do this, we risk missing the main point(s) of the book and open ourselves to error by looking at things out of context or without regard to what this book meant to those to whom it was originally sent. The reason why this exercise in what is known as New Testament Introduction is so important is that letters like Colossians were written by the Apostle Paul to first century churches facing a number of trials and difficulties. Sometimes these trials virtually mirror situations we face today. But sometimes they do not (at least specifically). The goal in taking the time to ask and answer these three questions is to present the material covered in each book in such a way as to understand the original historical situation and so that we can then draw appropriate application to our situation in light of our unique circumstances. But we cannot do this properly without answers to the “who,” “when,” and “why” questions—so we will spend our time answering these three questions before turning to the opening verses.

We start with “who wrote Colossians? The Apostle Paul. In this case, the “when” question is closely connected to the “who” question, so we will tackle them together. Colossians is one of the so-called “prison epistles,” which was likely written while the apostle was under house arrest in Rome.¹ We spent a significant amount of time discussing the impact of Paul’s imprisonment in our just completed series on Philippians, so I will not repeat that discussion here. The so-called “prison epistles” of Paul also include Paul’s letters to Ephesians (which we covered back in 2009) and the short letter of Philemon. These four epistles all come from the same point in Paul’s ministry (during his imprisonment in Rome after his third missionary journey) and can be dated about the same time—the early 60’s of the first century.

It is impossible to tell which of these letters was written first (Philippians, or Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon), but Paul’s mention of Epaphroditus and the gift he brought from the Philippian church is a good indication that Philippians was written on a separate occasion in close proximity to the time he

¹ Helpful discussions of the Paul’s location (Rome or Ephesus) when writing this epistle can be found in: Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 334-337; and Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 41-46.

composed the other three prison letters. The specific situation for Paul's writing and sending Philippians is Epaphroditus' return to Philippi after he recovered his health.

When it comes to the authorship of Colossians, unlike Paul's letter to the Philippians which is rarely challenged, critical scholars insist that this epistle (and also Ephesians) was not written by Paul, despite the fact that Paul is named as the author in the opening verse with Timothy as the co-sender. The critical assumption is that Colossians contains a number of *hapax legomena*—words and phrases used but once and unique to this letter—which supposedly marks it off from the other known letters of Paul. Since World War Two, the majority of biblical scholars—without much evidence and by completely ignoring the traditional case for Pauline authorship—argue that one of Paul's followers wrote this letter in his name because supposedly, “it doesn't sound like Paul.” Too many unique words and phrases, they say.

But as WSC New Testament professor Steve Baugh has argued in his recent commentary on Ephesians, despite the contention of critical scholars that it was a common Christian practice for disciples of noted teachers (say, a devoted student of Paul) to write their own letters in the name of their teacher—this was never the case. Yet many critical scholars continue to argue (without proof or evidence) that a student of Paul wrote this letter in Paul's name, and the church to which it was sent (Colossae) accepted it as coming from Paul despite knowing that Paul did not write it—one of his students did.

As Baugh points out, “recent research has shown that there is reason to believe that the early church opposed this practice and would have been ready to reject Ephesians [and Colossians] if it were suspicious.”² The differences in language and word usage between Paul's earlier letters (Galatians, Romans and the Corinthians letters) may be explained by the simple fact that a number of Paul's letters have co-senders: i.e., Sosthenes, Silus and Timothy. Romans was dictated by Paul to a man named Tertius. Given the difficulties in composing letters on expensive parchment or velum, and given Paul's trying circumstances when writing many of these letters, it may well be the case that these co-senders helped him in the actual composition of these letters which may explain in part some of these differences.³ The historical circumstances described in Colossians are tied to those in the short epistle of Philemon. Colossians is also very similar in its style and content to Ephesians, which probably indicates that these three prison epistles were composed about the same time. Timothy is named as the co-sender in this letter and the messengers taking this particular letter to the church in Colossae are Tychius and the slave mentioned in Philemon named Onesimus.

As for the “why the letter was written?” question, the answer is to be found by observing where the epistle was sent. Unlike Philippians, a thriving city in Greece, the church at Colossae was not founded by Paul. Paul makes this clear in 2:1 when he writes, “*for I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face.*” The Colossians had never met Paul, but the founder of the church, Epaphras, had. According to Acts 19:10, during Paul's third missionary journey a number of people living in the area around Colossae heard the gospel, and this likely included Epaphras, who then became the church's founder and pastor. Paul singles him out for high praise. In Colossians 1:7-8, we read of him, “*just as you learned [the truth of the gospel] from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*” Paul, of course, could get to only so many places in

² S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*, (Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 5-7.

³ Baugh, *Ephesians*, 5-7.

person—but the work of the Spirit was not confined only to the apostles. God used other faithful men to preach the gospel and establish churches in places like Colosse and Laodicea (the latter is mentioned here and also in the Book of Revelation).

Paul does not directly state his purpose in writing this letter, but he does make clear that the reason why he writes this letter is the spread of false doctrine about which Paul warns his readers (2:4). *“I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.”* He also warns them in verse 8, *“see to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”* He speaks of those who self-righteously judge others and then try to disqualify the Colossian Christians from receiving their inheritance in Christ Jesus (2:18).⁴ This raises the question of just who exactly were these false teachers and what was the source and the nature of their false teaching.

The answer is found, in part, by looking at the history of Colossae, which was located in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor (Turkey) about 120 miles due east of Ephesus. In Paul’s day, Colossae was a small agricultural town but had long history of being known for its textiles and wool. In the third century BC a new trade route was established west of the city going through the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis which both soon surpassed Colossae in wealth and importance, leaving Colossae as a kind of backwater village by the time of Paul.⁵ The false teaching which arose is possibly some sort of local heresy which denied the supremacy of Jesus. Paul calls it both a philosophy as well as “false teaching.” We do not know the specific source of this heresy or its specific tenants, but we can tell from what Paul says in his response that it denies the Lordship of Jesus over all things.

With a mostly Gentile population and isolated from mainstream Greco-Roman influences found in large cities, we do know that there was a synagogue in Colossae. Accordingly, some have tied the Colossian heresy to the work of Judaizers (Jewish Christians who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God, but who denied that we are justified before God by faith alone). It is unlikely that Judaizers would waste resources on a place like Colossae, which was hardly strategic and where the church was not founded by Paul. It is quite possible that this false teaching originated within the synagogue located there (as a sort of Jewish heresy) because in chapter 2 Paul mentions “festivals,” “new moons,” and Sabbaths—things closely associated with Judaism. Paul mentions matters of food and drink (the avoidance of certain things—a Kosher diet perhaps), but the worship of angels, and reliance upon visions associated with a devotion to sensuality are not typical of orthodox Judaism.

The combination of these things seems to imply syncretistic religion—perhaps a mix of Judaism, mysticism, and local folk/pagan religion—in other words, a local religion which flourished in the Lycus Valley. It is also possible that there may have been a local teacher/priest/shaman or other such leading figure residing in the area whose teaching was influencing both the church and the synagogue. It may even have been some sort of a proto-Gnosticism. But again, we do not know for sure.⁶

We can be sure from Paul’s direct statements in response to this teaching, the person and work of Jesus

⁴ Moo, Colossians, 46-47.

⁵ John D. Barry et al., eds., The Lexham Bible Dictionary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), s.v. Colossae.

⁶ See the helpful discussion in Moo, Colossians, 46-60.

was dismissed or distorted. Paul repeatedly contends for the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ in rebuttal. He cites another Christ hymn, illustrating the supremacy of Jesus seen in the creation of all things, as well as Jesus' role in the new creation in which he redeems sinners from the consequences of the curse, which came upon the world which Jesus had created. In Colossians 1:15-20, Paul quotes (or composes) the following hymn (material set out in stanzas):

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

While we may not know the specific nature of the heresy which had seeped into the Colossian church, Paul's solution to it is to affirm the supremacy of Jesus over all things. Christianity, Paul says, is not grounded in mysteries and mysticism, but in the public and visible work of a Creator/Redeemer who is the revelation of God's mystery, formerly hidden, but now brought out into the open for all to see and hear proclaimed. Paul addresses this in the opening of chapter 2 (vv. 1-4).

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

Jesus is the firstborn over all creation—that is, he is preeminent in all things. In him both God's wisdom and knowledge are made plain. Since Jesus is Lord over all things and the Savior of his people, and the revelation of God's purposes in creation and redemption, what could false teachers possibly offer the Colossians that could be even remotely better than which Christians possessed in Jesus? But then, Christianity is not terribly satisfying to those who seek spirituality and esoterica—hidden mysteries, secret knowledge, and special ceremonies which make the practitioners feel as though they can master the invisible forces of the universe. Christianity is directly tied to real shed blood, actual historical events and words and sentences in which God communicates his truth to us (Scripture). No secrets here . . .

With the who, when, and why questions answered, let us turn to the opening verses of Colossians and take up Paul's opening greeting. "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*" Paul identifies himself as the author of what follows—and as we have seen, there is simply no reason not to accept that he is the author of this epistle.

A reductio ad absurdum (an argument which exposes the ridiculous nature of an assertion) works well here to show why, in the view of critical scholars, their arguments against Pauline authorship cannot be sustained. If the critical scholars are correct, the opening sentence should be understood as follows; "a student of Paul, writing in his name and pretending to be the apostle, (even though you know it really isn't Paul who is writing), an apostle (actually just a student Paul pretending to be Paul and claiming his apostolic authority for himself), by the will of God (actually, the student took it upon himself to pretend to be Paul and send this letter)." This is patently ridiculous. But this is what critical scholars affirm.

The historical situation is clear enough. Paul is in Rome, under house arrest, awaiting his appearance before Caesar. Timothy is with him, and Epaphras, had come to Rome to seek Paul's counsel so as to deal with the doctrinal issues which had arisen in the church in Colossae. Paul responds, perhaps using some of the material from circular letter he was sending to Ephesus (the Book of Ephesians).

It is important for Paul to establish from the beginning in letters such as this one that his calling was not something grounded in anything other than the personal and specific call of Jesus Christ to him (Paul) to the office of apostle. This tells the reader that this letter is coming with full apostolic authority—a point completely lost if this letter is not from Paul the Apostle. The letter is sent by Paul and Timothy to the “saints” and faithful Christians in Colossae. Again, it is remarkable that Paul can call Christians whom he has never met “saints.” This grows out of Paul's doctrine of justification in which the guilt of sinful people's sins has been washed away from them by the blood of Jesus, and Jesus' own perfect obedience is reckoned to them through faith, so that the letter's recipients are regarded as “saints”—holy. They are a people, like Paul, called to faith in Jesus and now set apart (the primary meaning of “holy”—the root word for “saint”) for God's purposes and for his glory.

Paul says to them, “we [Paul and Timothy] *always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.*” Paul is thankful that God has formed a congregation of believers in the city of Colossae in the heart of the pagan Lycus Valley. He is very intentional when he reminds the Colossians that God is the Father of Jesus, who is the creator of all things and the redeemer of each and every Colossian Christian. In most of Paul's greetings, Paul speaks of God as Father of all believers, but here the focus falls upon the Father's relation to Jesus, so that from the beginning Paul is making the point that Jesus' work as Creator/Redeemer is tied directly to the work of the Father.⁷

The reason Paul extends thanks is spelled out in verses 4-5a. “*We heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*” Paul learned of this through the visit of Epaphras, but there may have been other Christians who have visited Paul in Rome and who told Paul the same thing. In any case, the Colossian church was doing well and manifesting the three great Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope.⁸ Much as Paul reminded the Philippians, he tells the Colossians that faith is a gift from God, who grants us faith through the preaching of the gospel. Christian love is grounded in and manifested to us in God's love for this lost and fallen world through the saving work of Jesus, especially his suffering and dying on the cross as a payment for our sins. Christian hope is focused upon Christ's resurrection, ascension to the Father's right hand, and his promise to return on the last day, when all of God's promises to his people will be fully realized. From Paul's assertion, there is every reason to believe that the church in Colossae is doing well and despite whatever issues these Christians are facing, they are persevering and thriving.

In the second half of verse 5-verse 7, Paul also reminds them of God is chosen means by which these things have come to pass. “*Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.*” According to Paul, their faith, love, and hope were only possible because

⁷ Moo, Colossians, 82-83.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 41.

the gospel had been preached to them first by Epaphras, who in turn heard it from Paul when he preached it in the region around Colossae. When Paul writes this epistle in the early 60's of the first century, the gospel was spreading rapidly, people were coming to faith in Jesus (including members of the church in Colossae) and bearing the fruit of the Spirit. The Colossians are privileged to be participants in this remarkable work of God—which is in a profound sense a work of new creation.

We will return to this theme next time, Lord willing, but we ought see from the very beginning of our time in his book, that Paul's assertion of the supremacy of Jesus is grounded in repeated loud and profound echos from the Old Testament. Here, specifically in the creation account—Genesis 1:26, 28, (part of our Old Testament lesson) in verses 6, 10 of Colossians 1. As Adam was called to “increase, be fruitful, and multiply,” and fill “all the earth,” so too when Jesus begins his work of new creation in his resurrection from the dead, the gospel goes out to all the earth, increasing (multiplying) and bearing fruit. The point is quite profound and reinforces Paul's point that Christ's work extends to the creation of all things, as well as his work of new creation, granting his people faith, love, and hope (fruits of the Spirit).

In the creation account (Genesis 1-2:4), Adam is the divine image bearer who is commanded to be fruitful, multiply, and then fill the earth with divine image-bearers who will worship and serve YHWH. But after Adam fell into sin and failed to fulfill the creation mandate to rule and subdue the earth, God must raise up a second Adam who will undo the curse as well as fulfill all righteousness. We see this theme throughout the course of redemptive history. Upon Adam's sin, God promised a redeemer (Genesis 3:15—the first promise of the gospel coming immediately upon the “original sin”). We see in God's gracious covenant with Abraham (the covenant of grace) the further unfolding of God's promise to save his people, and fill the earth with the knowledge of God. After the coming of Jesus, it becomes clear to us that God fulfills this promise through the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit, who, upon regenerating sinners, also restores the divine image, defaced by the fall of our race into sin and death.⁹ All of this proves Paul's point that Jesus' supremacy can be seen in many ways, including allusion to the fact that Jesus is the second Adam, who accomplishes what Adam failed to accomplish.

The creation account is, no doubt, in Paul's mind when he speaks of the word of the gospel (in light of the great commission, given by Jesus) spreading throughout the world, the truth increasing and bearing the fruit of the Spirit—including faith, love, and hope, all of which flow out of the work of the Holy Spirit in restoring the divine image in us. God's creation is subject to the curse, but in Jesus the new creation is now fully underway. What sin has corrupted, Jesus redeems and renews.

What, then, do we say by way of application? To start with the more we know the Old Testament, the easier we find these echoes from the Old Testament and are able to trace out Paul's connections between the person and work of Jesus and what is promised of Israel's Messiah. Paul's arguments against those who deny the supremacy of Jesus come from a mind saturated with the Books of Moses, the prophets (especially Isaiah), and the Psalter—which Paul had likely memorized. To be good students of Paul, we need to know our Old Testaments. To understand and trust Jesus more fully, we need to know our Old Testaments.

The other thing we ought to consider is that one man—a faithful pastor named Epaphras—took the gospel

⁹ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic; 2007), 842-846.

to a very pagan part of the world and God used his preaching of the gospel to establish a church. We do not need to dumb down the gospel, to adopt marketing techniques and sales pitches, to embrace entertainment models of worship to see people come to Christ. It is really quite simple. We need to know the gospel, be confident that Christ's supremacy over all things is found within that gospel, and that if only we preach, teach, and share that gospel, God will save his people. In other words, our confidence ought to be in power of Christ and in the work of the Holy Spirit, so that we might push back the darkness of unbelief in Anaheim, Orange County, and Southern California, an area every bit as pagan as the Lycus Valley.

Yes, there is much for us to learn from a letter Paul once wrote "to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ as Colossae." And we are just getting started.