

“He Has Delivered Us”

The Second in a series of Sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Colossians

Texts: Colossians 1:3-14; Exodus 35:30-36:1

One of the unique (and often overlooked) things about Paul’s letter to the Colossians is the large number of echoes from the Old Testament as the Apostle makes his case for the supremacy of Jesus over all things. Paul is responding to those in Colossae who were held captive to philosophy, human tradition, and a legalistic form of religion whose followers sought to disqualify the Colossians from their inheritance in Christ. Paul had never visited the church in Colossae, but he has heard from their founding pastor how this congregation was doing well, despite struggling with false teachers who were, apparently, making inroads into the church. Paul does not identify the specific nature of this false teaching—known as the Colossian heresy—but from his comments, we learn much about it. Paul’s response to this heresy is to contend for the supremacy of Jesus over all things, and is drawn largely from the Old Testament. Paul reminds us that Jesus is the creator of all things, but after Adam subjected God’s creation to the curse—sin and death—Jesus came as a second Adam who begins a work of new creation. All of God’s people participate in this work which comes about through the message of the gospel—the proclamation of Jesus’ death for our sins, and his resurrection from the dead. The second Adam will undo the curse and triumph over all those who seek to disrupt his church. Whatever the doctrinal details of the Colossian Heresy, Paul’s answer is to proclaim the supremacy of Jesus over all things.

We are returning to our series on Colossians. Last week we spent much of our time answering the three questions we need to ask and answer whenever we take up a new study of any book of the Bible. “Who wrote this book?” Paul. “When did he write it?” While imprisoned in Rome in the early 60’s of the first century. “Why was it written?” To respond to the issues in the Colossian church associated with the Colossian Heresy which was brought to Paul’s attention by their pastor Epaphras. The Letter to the Colossians is Paul’s response.

We spent much of our time last week on Paul’s introductory comments, noting that Paul is this epistle’s author—despite the claims to the contrary made by critical scholars—and that the co-sender was Paul’s close associate, the young pastor, Timothy. We also took notice of the fact that while at first glance the epistle opens with Paul’s standard greeting, it should be noted that Paul makes an unusual reference to God as Father of Jesus, when his usual manner is to refer to God as the Father of believers. This reflects Paul’s concern to highlight the Father’s relationship to Jesus in this epistle, which was written to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord over all things.

One of the surprising things about the Book of Colossians is the extensive number of echoes (allusions) from various Old Testament passages which prefigure, or otherwise can be brought to bear to help Paul make his case that Jesus, as creator of all things, possesses a superiority as well as an authority which no creature can. Although Paul never does specifically identify the Colossian Heresy (i.e., who was teaching it, or its specific doctrines), we can assume from Paul’s rebuttal that this group was at least, in part, indebted to Jewish teaching. Paul mentions a stress upon festivals, new moons, Sabbath observance, and dietary restrictions. This may be one reason why Paul, like the author to the Book of Hebrews, turns to the Old Testament to set forth his case for the supremacy of Jesus. But there are non-Jewish elements here as well—asceticism (rigorous self-denial of pleasurable things), the worship of

angels, a stress on visions, and a form of sensuality. Whatever the Colossian Heresy was—probably a local syncretistic religion taught by a local figure—it sounds much like the kind of religious stuff featured on PBS or Oprah (Joseph Campbell’s *Power of Myth*, Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle and Wayne Dyer).

Since Paul is setting forth and defending the supremacy of Jesus, as we saw last time, in verses 6 and 10 of Colossians 1, Paul’s statements echo (or restate) the creation account. This is an important if an unexpected place to begin. With the opening chapters of Genesis proclaiming that God created Adam in his own image and then commanded that Adam be fruitful and multiply so as to rule and subdue the earth, in verses 6 and 10 of Colossians 1, clearly Paul has the Genesis account in his mind as he makes his case regarding the work of Christ and the spread of the gospel. The Apostle writes: the gospel “*which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing* (v. 6),” and then in v. 10 he adds, “*walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*”

Several loud echoes from the creation account in Genesis 1-2 are found here. God commissioned Adam to be fruitful and multiply, only to have Adam fail to fulfill the “creation mandate,” because of Adam’s original sin and rebellion against God. So too, God sent Jesus as a second Adam, who establishes the facts underlying the gospel in his death, resurrection, and ascension, the knowledge of which is bearing fruit and increasing the knowledge of God (spreading into places like the Lycus Valley), and which bears the fruit of good works—the mark of a godly walk with the Lord. If that sounds a great deal like what God commanded of Adam, it should. Paul presents Jesus as a second Adam, who completes what Adam failed to do and extends his kingdom into all the earth—even to the Lycus Valley and the small city of Colossae. And that same kingdom extends even to Anaheim.

Now that we are alerted to look for these things in the opening chapter of Colossians—Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer for the Christians of the church in Colossae—we now turn to verses 3-14, our text. In verses 3-5, Paul expresses his thanks for those to whom he is writing. “*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since 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 has heard the good report from the founding pastor in Colossae, Epaphras, that there are many believers under his pastoral care. He thanks God for this—praise for Epaphras, the faithful pastor in Colossae, will come a bit later. Paul extends thanks in the name of God the Father and Jesus. As just mentioned, it is important that Paul establish the connection between YHWH (God the Father) and Jesus. Jesus is not merely a prophet, or a messianic figure, tied to Israel’s history. Jesus is identified with the Father, a point Paul will spell out in some detail in what follows—Jesus is creator of all things as well as the author of a new creation—the salvation of God’s people.

As mentioned last time, three key fruits of the Spirit are mentioned here by Paul: faith in Jesus, love for all the saints, and hope in the return of Jesus on the last day. These things are the fruit of faith in Jesus’ saving work and reveal that as Jesus is the creator of all things, so too, his work of new creation (established in Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension) is already underway and will culminate in our Lord’s return on the last day. As the second Adam, Jesus’ work of new creation (the new life given his people—regeneration) manifests itself as a fruitful increase in the lives of God’s people as the truth of the gospel and the knowledge of Jesus spread throughout the world—even to the backwater town of Colossae.

As Paul will put it later in this epistle (3:10)—“*put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator,*” and in Ephesians 4:24, “*put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness,*” what Jesus does when he gives us new life (regeneration) and

faith through the preaching of the gospel, is to restore what we lost in the Fall, including true righteousness, holiness, and the knowledge of God. The saints in Colossae (who are now “holy” and in whom God’s image is being restored) are the fruit of Jesus’ saving work of new creation, redeeming and renewing that which was fallen in Adam. The damage done by sin and the fall of our race is even now being undone by Jesus, through the preaching of the gospel as the fruit of new creation which that preaching brings forth. This is clearly an important point for Paul—Jesus is the second Adam who accomplishes what the first Adam failed to do. Jesus, the second Adam undoes the effects of the curse.

In verses 5b-6, Paul connects this new creation work of Jesus to the proclamation of the gospel, “*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.*” The gospel is here defined as the word of truth, much like Paul’s definition in 1 Corinthians 15:1-6:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

The gospel is grounded in those facts surrounding Jesus’ work as second Adam—the proclamation of his death for sinners and his victory over death and the grave. These are all historical events, which, because they actually occurred in human history, are described by Paul as “truth.” The Colossians were producing the fruit of the Spirit (increasing and multiplying) through the gospel preached to them by their faithful pastor Epaphras. Through the preaching of the gospel, Christ’s work of new creation was spreading throughout the world (increasing), bringing an understanding of God’s grace. The Colossians were believers in Jesus because God’s grace made them alive in Christ, Jesus is now restoring his image in them, and he has given them faith through which they demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus created all things. He is also recreating all things, and the Colossians are part of this glorious saving work.

In verses 7-8, Paul singles out Epaphras for his work in preaching the gospel to the saints in Colossae—Epaphras is the shorter version of Epaphroditus (the same name as Paul’s messenger from Philippi), but they are surely not the same person. When Epaphras is mentioned in Philemon, he is described as a “fellow captive” with Paul in prison (v. 23). Many take this to refer to Paul’s earlier imprisonment in Ephesus (not his current imprisonment in Rome) during his third missionary journey. In speaking of the gospel, Paul says, “*just as you learned it 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.*” There were a number of thriving churches located in the Lycus Valley, including Colossae, Laodicea and Heiropolis—perhaps a testimony to Epaphras’ faithful ministry in that region.¹ Paul certainly believes the Holy Spirit is at work in Epaphras’ ministry, not only in his preaching of the gospel, but in the fruit of the Spirit which was apparent to all in the love the Colossians had for Paul and his apostolic ministry.

Paul wants this far away congregation to know that both he and Timothy are praying for them. Paul

¹ Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 44.

states in verses 9-10, “*and so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*” Once again, there are loud echoes here from the Old Testament. The things for which Paul prays are mentioned several times in the Old Testament in connection with the building of the tabernacle, and then in the promise of the Messiah.

Paul’s phrase “*be filled with the knowledge of his [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” is clearly taken from Exodus 31:3 and 35:31-32a (which repeats Exodus 31:3). There is also an allusion here to Isaiah 11:2, which speaks prophetically of the coming Messiah. “*And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*”² In the Exodus passages, God filled certain people with the Holy Spirit so that they had the gifts necessary to build the tabernacle to offer sacrifices for sin and to point the people of God ahead to the true temple in heaven. According to Isaiah, the Messiah, when he comes, will be filled with the Holy Spirit (as the true temple of God), a reference to the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus at his baptism. As this phrase is used here by Paul, the Colossian Christians are filled (as are all Christians) with the Holy Spirit so they might live godly lives.³ Based upon what Paul says in verse 19 of Colossians 1, that in Jesus the fulness of the Godhead dwells, this may even be a reference to the fact that the Christians in Colossae are themselves being formed into a spiritual temple by Jesus who indwells them through the blessed Holy Spirit. In a profound sense, the gospel creates the spiritual temple of God (Christ’s church, the members of which are his body).

All of these things come about because all believers in Colossae have been given new life by Jesus (the second Adam), are united to him by faith, and in Jesus are found true wisdom and true spiritual understanding—now multiplying and increasing. It is through faith in Jesus and because of his work in new creation that these believers are now indwelt with God’s Spirit and are equipped to live godly lives enabling them to both resist the Colossian Heresy, and to live lives which bear witness to the truth that is found in Jesus. This stands in very sharp contrast to the Colossian Heresy which sought to find wisdom and knowledge in philosophy, human traditions, and legalistic self-denial, mysteries and secrets and therefore could never come close to the genuine article. If all of these treasures are found in Jesus, the Creator-Redeemer, why would anyone be attracted to this heresy?

Paul continues to unpack the various things for which he has been praying for the Colossians. He includes in his prayer that the Colossians are “*being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.*” The only way the Colossians might live in a godly way is not to be confident in their own strength, but come to know and realize the power of God through the work of the Holy Spirit as Jesus is revealed in the gospel. We are tempted to forget about that which one writer reminds us—“living a life worthy of the Lord is a high and difficult calling.” That same writer helpfully adds, “Paul reminds us that God gives what he demands.”⁴ Indeed, that is Paul’s point. God has delivered us from sin and its curse and that same power which accomplishes this, is at work in us, molding us and conforming us into the image of Jesus.

² Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 846-848.

³ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 846-848.

⁴ Moo, Colossians, 82-83.

As we know from what Paul has said in verse 8 of this same chapter—the Colossians’ love was in and through the work of the Holy Spirit, and from what he will yet say in 3:16 about spiritual songs (i.e., a heart filled with love by the Holy Spirit)—the power to live the Christian life in a worthy manner comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who “strengthens us with all power.” God works this power in us according to his glorious might—i.e., the same power by which he created all things and with which he raised Jesus from the dead. If God created all things with but a word, and if he can remove the guilt of sin and defeat death through the resurrection of his son, then surely if he calls us to live a holy life, he will enable us to do so. This is why the fruit of the Spirit (things like faith, love, and hope) are the tangible manifestation of Christ’s work of new creation.

In doing so, Paul “*gives thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*” Reflecting the sentiments of verse 3 when Paul opened this section of thanksgiving for God’s work and Paul’s prayer for the Colossians, in verses 11-14 Paul speaks of the Colossians “being qualified” for their inheritance and that this inheritance of God’s saints radiated with the brightness of the sun. This is because the Father “*has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” There are a number of important themes packed into these verses and we will spend some time unpacking them.

In verse 18 of chapter 2, Paul warns the Colossians about those are attempting to “*disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.*” The fact is, that God ensures that all of his saints (those called to faith in Jesus through the preaching of the gospel and who are now reckoned as righteous) have been qualified by none than God himself for the inheritance he has promised them. The gospel is the proclamation of the finished work of Christ—what God demands of us under the law, he freely gives to us in the person of Jesus. In believing this message, the Colossian Christians were absolutely qualified to receive everything God had promised them. To deny natural bodily needs (sleep, shelter, companionship, etc.) and to abstain from certain foods and drink, to worship angels, to seek God to reveal himself in private visions, are the fruit of a mind “puffed up,” for irrational reasons. Those telling the Colossians that by not practicing these mysteries they are disqualifying themselves, need to be reminded that it is God himself who has qualified the Colossians for their heavenly inheritance through the gospel. So why listen to such people?

That God does so in “the light” reminds us of two things. The first is the source of such false teaching—the domain of darkness. This same phrase appears in Luke’s gospel (22:53), where Jesus says to those about to arrest him, “*when I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.*” The words reveal a deeper spiritual conflict between the power of God and the activity of Satan. In Ephesians 6:12, written about the same time Paul pens this letter, he writes “*for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” The Colossian Heresy is a manifestation of the forces of darkness and following its religious practices is what will disqualify people any inheritance in Jesus Christ.

The second thing is that the metaphor (darkness) points to things done in secret. Practitioners of the Colossian Heresy were enamored with dietary restrictions and self-denial. But they were also seeking visions, esoteric teaching, and sensuality. These things all arise from within—not in public. Christianity, on the other hand is a very public religion, grounded in history (the things which God has done, especially in Jesus’ death and resurrection) and a gospel which recounts public and historical events. Through the gospel, Jesus renews the fallen creation and his people manifest this by living godly lives—also a very public practice grounded in love of neighbor. There is nothing secret here, and nothing

which gives the practioner the self-righteous sense, “I know something you don’t know.” We have been delivered from this domain of dankness by the light (truth) of the gospel.

The next thing Paul mentions is transference from darkness to “*the kingdom of his beloved son.*” Throughout the writings of Paul, the apostle refers to Adam and Christ in sharp contrast to one another. Adam stands at the head of the human race, while Jesus stands at the head of all of those who are elect and in the covenant of grace with Jesus as mediator. Paul expresses this in Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 5, Ephesians 1, as well as here. In Adam we are dead in sins and trespasses and can do nothing to save ourselves. When God calls us to faith in Jesus Christ, we are transferred from Adam to Christ and are placed under Christ’s headship, not Adam’s. As Paul puts it in Colossians 3:1-4, “*if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*” To be raised with Christ is to be transferred from Adam and the dominion of sin, to Christ and the things that are above. Even though we remain in this world of sin and death, we are already seated and raised with Jesus in heavenly places as members of Christ’s kingdom.

This transference from Adam’s headship to Christ’s can come about only through the grace of God and our redemption from sin. The metaphor of redemption made perfect sense to Paul’s original audience. The largest social caste in the Roman empire was that of slaves. Slavery in Rome was not race-based as in antebellum America, but included all those and their descendants on the losing side of battle with the Roman army (the practice of virtually every army of the ancient world), which saw prisoners of war as booty. Those not killed by the victors were taken captive (often times with their families, or the families of those killed in battle with Rome were taken) and then sold in slave markets. “To the victor go the spoils.” Slaves were bound to their new owners unless emancipated by the payment of a purchase price to the owner, or freed at the owner’s behest as a way of showing thanks to a particular slave for honorable service, notable skills, or significant accomplishments while enslaved. When such people were freed from slavery by purchase (manumission), they were said to be “redeemed.” Some were even adopted into the master’s family. Everyone in Paul’s audience was well familiar with the practice. Slaves made up the majority of the population and everyone probably knew freed slaves.

When used by Christians of the saving work of Jesus on the cross, the idea of redemption is that Jesus paid the purchase price to redeem all those for whom he is dying (the guilt of our sin). In purchasing his people through the price of his shed blood, Jesus sets us free from our slavery to sin and the darkness of this world (what we are in Adam). Now freed from sin and the curse, we are slaves of Jesus, whose yoke, Matthew tells us, is easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:29-30). As slaves of Jesus, we are adopted into his family and now full heirs in the inheritance he was gained for us. Those threatening the Colossians with disqualification because the Colossians don’t observe their list of rules are ironically the ones disqualified. As Paul put it, we are qualified for our inheritance because the Father has qualified us in and through the person of his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The last thing mentioned here by Paul is “*the forgiveness of sins.*” At the very heart of our redemption is being set free from the cruelest master of all—bondage to sin, especially sin’s guilt. When Jesus died on the cross, for us, and in our place, he was bearing in his own sinless body the guilt of our sins. His death, Jesus says in Matthew 26:28 when instituting the Lord’s Supper is for “the forgiveness of sin.” Similarly the promise of the forgiveness of sin was characteristic of apostolic preaching (i.e., Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). Paul’s point here is that while under Adam’s headship were are guilty for our sins. But in Christ, our sins have been forgive because we have been redeemed.

What then, do we say by way of application? Like the first century Christians in Colossae, the pagans around us would love nothing more than for us to disqualify ourselves from our inheritance in Christ. They tell us that truth is subjective (our feelings within, not in objective facts). They tell us that “truth” constantly changes (relativism). We hear this repeatedly when someone says to us, “I think truth is this, that, or the other.” Or when they tell us, “I feel that things ought to be a certain way,” but then they cannot tell us why. We hear this when people tell us to follow some teacher or guru who can teach us all the secrets to master the forces and laws of universe. We hear it when people tell us to deny ourselves, or, on the flip side, and much more common, when they urge us to indulge ourselves because “we deserve it.” We hear this when people tell us that there is no such thing as natural law—so each culture defines what is right and wrong for itself. It is thinking like this which gave us Hitler’s Germany and Western Civilization’s libertine sexual ethic—and the reckless quest for that moment of sexual pleasure and gratification which has now driven our culture over the cliff.

The Colossians heard these things. We hear them too. But Paul is telling us that in person of Jesus, God has delivered us from all these things. Because God qualifies us for our inheritance in Jesus, it cannot be taken from us. And if these treasures are ours in Jesus—including redemption from sin—why should we give any heed to those trying to disqualify us from the inheritance God has given us? He has delivered us from all the things the which the ancient Colossians and modern Americans mistakenly think will give them happiness. For we are members of the kingdom of his beloved son.