

## CHAPTER 3

### COLOSSIANS—THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST

#### The person and work of Christ, 1:3-23

Paul immediately broaches the subject. The “Colossian heresy” apparently tended to reduce the importance of Jesus Christ both objectively in his person, and subjectively as the center of the Christian’s faith. Paul begins by expressing how central Jesus is in all creation and in the church.

#### 1. *Thanksgiving for news of the Colossians’ faith (1:3-8)*

##### v. 3, We give thanks to God

Gk. letters often begin after the greeting with thanks for the person addressed (cf. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 179-80). The prayer of Paul here includes thanksgiving (vv. 3-8) and petition (vv. 9-14).

God, God the Father

Plural indicates joint authorship with Timothy

##### The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

Full title appropriate for context

##### Always

May go with “give thanks,” or “praying”; probably with “praying”; but L. prefers with “give thanks”

##### Praying concerning you

Modal participle, explaining how thanks is given

##### v. 4, Having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus

B., famous triad: faith, love, hope (cf. 1 Cor 13:13; Rom 5:1-5; Gal 5:5-6; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8); Hendriksen good for Jesus’ teaching on these three, pp. 47-48

Implies no earlier visit

Aor. pt., occasion of giving thanks; Eph 1:15

Christ Jesus (normal Pauline word order), object of faith; or “living environment” of faith (Bruce)

And the love which you have unto all the saints

Most important virtue, cf. 1 Cor 13

v. 5, On account of the hope which is laid away for you in the heavens

The hope, the object of hope, as in Gal 5:5; Titus 2:13; inheritance in Col 1:12

Laid away, L. “stored up”; cf. Matt 5:20; Rom 8:18; 1 Pet 1:4

Which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel

Heard probably indirectly from Paul, from Epaphras (v. 7)

Emphasizes the truth, true content, as in Eph 1:13; Gal 2:5, 14; important when “knowledge” is sought

v. 6, which came to you

pres. pt. takes time of context

Hend., “made its entrance felt among you”; see Oepke on *pareimi*

Even as also it is in all the world

Glover: 500,000 Christians by A.D. 100

Opposes exclusive nature of heresy

Cf. Acts 19:10, 20; 1 Thess 1:8-9; Phil 1:12-13

Hyperbole, cf. Rom 1:8; 2 Cor 2:14

“Heresies are ethnic, truth is catholic.”

Bearing fruit and growing

Cf. parable of sower

Even as also among you, from which day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth

Their lives bear evidence of God's grace and sufficiency

No need for extra knowledge other than what they received from Epaphras, v. 23

"You knew," *epegnote*; note play on words with *ginosko* and *epiginosko* by Paul in Rom 1:21, 28; 1 Cor 13:12

Grace of God, substantive for the gospel; cf. v. 5; as in Acts 20:24; not *dogmata*, 2:14; not of men or the world, 2:8, 20, 22

In truth, emphasis on truth, as in v. 5

v. 7, Even as you learned from Epaphras our beloved fellow-servant,

Epaphras was probably a convert of Paul's who evangelized the Lycus Valley cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae. As their pastor he visited Paul in prison in Rome, and either voluntarily or involuntarily became a "prisoner" with him; he is named also in Col 4:12 and Phlm 23.

B.: His name is a shortened form of Epaphroditus; not same man as Philippian Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25; 4:18).

Fellow-servant, note Paul's fondness for *sun* compounds (B. p. 43, n. 18; fondness of sharing with others)

Who is a faithful minister of Christ in your behalf,

Faithful, quality admired in the Colossians, v. 2

Minister, root of "deacon," idea of selfless service

In *your* behalf, textual variant

Many of the best texts read "in *our* behalf," referring to Epaphras's ministry in Colossae as a representative of Paul; B. favors this reading (p. 40, n. 7). Yet the UBS favors "in "*your* behalf," with a [B] rating; this would refer to Epaphras's service to Paul in Rome, as a representative of the Colossian church. The UBS committee noted the widespread use of *humon* in the versions and patristic literature, and the tendency to change it to *hemon* based on the first person plural pronouns before and after it (Metzger, *TCGNT* 552-53).

Although Epaphras was serving Paul, Paul considered it serving Christ, "minister of Christ," objective genitive.

v. 8, Who also has shown to us your love in the Spirit.

As well as the problems in Colossae, Epaphras reported to Paul the people's love for God and for Paul. His service for Paul was a confirmation of that love.

In the Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the source of this love (Rom 5:5)

B.: This is the only reference to the Holy Spirit in Col. The emphasis of the book is more on the person of Christ, compared to the other Pauline epistles. This fact fits with the special problem in Colossae, where the people sought special mystical knowledge.

**2. Prayer for the Colossians' spiritual welfare (1:9-14)**

This prayer, like those of Ephesians 1 and 3, combines the doctrine which Paul wants to impress upon the people, and the desire he has for them to excel in Christ, especially in areas they are now lacking, minimizing, or misunderstanding.

v. 9, On account of this we also, from the day which we heard, do not cease to pray and make request concerning you

Their faith, love, and hope, in response to the preaching of Epaphras, leads Paul and Timothy to pray more earnestly for them. Epaphras' report about them brings them to mind, and shows the missionaries how they may better pray for the Colossians.

"That you might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding

For "filled with" used with the accusative, see the accusative used in Phil 1:11; 2 Thess 1:11

"Knowledge," penetrating insight; *epignosis* often synonymous with *gnosis*; see use discussed in L. 138; Hend. 57

"Of his will," God's plan for salvation; cf. 2:23; subjective or objective genitive? Pably. objective

"Wisdom and spiritual understanding,"

2 terms combined in Exod 31:3; Isa 10:13; 11:2

"Wisdom," ability to use human means to divine goals

"Understanding," intelligence; replaced by *phronesis* in Eph 1:8

"Spiritual," position at end = emphatic. Indirect reference to Holy Spirit.

In this prayer Paul desires for them not esoteric knowledge, but knowledge based on the knowledge of Christ, and leading to upright behavior. This knowledge is given through the Holy Spirit, not through humanly-devised means.

v. 10, To walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing

Ethical use of “walk” is related to Hebrew *halak*, the *Halakah*, practical laws

“Worthily of the Lord,” related to pagan ethics (see B. 47); Christian ethics should be better than pagan ethics; especially since Christ is superior to their gods.

“Unto all pleasing,” pleasing Christ far better than pleasing oneself or other men; cf. Rom 12:1, we are a sacrifice to God

In every good work bearing fruit

This and the following participles describe the manner in which we are to please God.

The gospel has inherent power; believers do not in themselves. In v. 6 “bearing fruit and growing” refers to the gospel in itself; here in v. 10 “bearing fruit and growing” is the active work of the gospel in the heart of the believers.

Fruit = fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)

And growing in the knowledge of God

Again, this knowledge is experiential and practical; dative of reference (some say instrumental dative, “growing by means of the knowledge of God”)

v. 11, With all power being empowered according to the might of his glory

God’s great power results not in spectacular miracles or unattainable knowledge, but in obedient lives; cf. Eph 1:20

“The might of his glory” = “his glorious might”; (characteristic genitive; reflects Heb. use)

Unto all patience and longsuffering

Almost an oxymoron: might and power enabling one to suffer

“Patience and longsuffering,” B. notes the similarity and yet the contrast with Stoicism. The Stoics found strength to endure life through self-discipline; Christians find it through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Christian also is patient because he looks forward to heavenly reward, and because he wishes to unite with the Lord Jesus in his sufferings. Stoics based patience on self-dignity and resignation.

### With joy (v. 12) giving thanks to the Father

“With joy” could go with the preceding “patience and longsuffering,” but this seems better, as in this context the modifiers more frequently precede the participles.

Here the Colossians are to give thanks (P. and T. in v. 3); gratitude is natural for the Christian.

Notice the large number of variations on the phrase “to the Father” among the MSS.

### Who has made you worthy

“You” UBS [B]; many MSS read “us”; their worth is in Christ, and has already been granted; no self-glory is appropriate.

### Unto the portion of the inheritance of the saints in light:

“Portion of the inheritance,” gen. of apposition; their portion is their inheritance.

“Saints,” may refer to angels, “holy ones”; arguments from some Pauline usage (1 Thess 3:13), and DSS usage; but probably refers to saints in glory (other Pauline usage; e.g., Col 1:1, 4; Acts 20:32; 26:18). See discussion in O’B. 26-27, B. 49-50.

“In light,” cf. 2 Cor 4:16; the inheritance of the Christian is heavenly, not just the land of Canaan as known now.

### v. 13, Who has delivered us out of the authority of darkness

The antecedent in gender and number is “the Father” in v. 12.

Aorist “has delivered,” at conversion; “rescue,” cf. 2:15.

“Authority (dominion)”;

not always delegated as in Luke 20:2; but arbitrary power, tyranny (Luke 22:53).

“Of darkness”; frequently used figure for Satan’s realm of power. Not necessarily referring to one cult or to Qumran usage; very widespread (B. 51). See Luke 22:53; Eph 6:10. Unsaved under the power of Satan, need divine power to come to spiritual life (Eph 2:1-10).

### And has removed (us) into the kingdom of the Son of his love

“Has removed,” used for forced migration of nations (Josephus, *Antiquities*).

“Kingdom,” present aspect of Christian’s citizenship and loyalty, based on God’s divine work in us; does not deny future manifestation of Davidic kingship; for Paul’s verbal clues as to which kingdom, see B. 52.

Not “of angels” but “of the Son”; cf. Heb 1 - 2:8.

“Of his love,” gen. used as adjective, “the Son whom he loves”; added glory for Christ.

v. 14, In whom we have the redemption,

“In whom,” in the Son, closest antecedent; Pauline doctrine of union with Christ.

“We have,” present possession, although not entirely yet fulfilled.

“The redemption” (*apolutrosis*, deliverance, setting free), presently: forgiveness of sins; in future: glorification and a part in the glorious kingdom (Luke 21:28; Rom 8:23; Eph 4:30).

The forgiveness of sins:

*Aphesis*, from *aphiemi*, etym. “send away”; cf. OT scapegoat.

In apposition to “redemption,” freedom from guilt of sin; a promise of the new covenant; cf. Acts 2:38-39.

Perhaps words of common confession, since in Paul only here and Eph 1:7.

### **3. Hymn in honor of Christ, 1:15-20**

The following passage appears to be an early Christian hymn which Paul has incorporated into his epistle. The vocabulary used and the rhythm of the lines supports this idea; the original authorship of the words is debated, but the doctrine and form are clearly Pauline (cf. O'B. 32-42).

The hymn exalts Jesus Christ as more than all-sufficient for the Christian: he is the one who created all, who is the head of all, and who has reconciled all to the Father.

#### **a. Christ the agent in creation, 1:15-16**

##### v. 15, Who is the image of the invisible God,

“Who is,” antecedent is still the Son.

“Image,” *eikon*, implies a prototype, not accidental resemblance; Matt 22:20, coin; Rev 13:14, mark of beast. Derived likeness in case of man, 1 Cor 11:7, “made”; here, by nature in case of the Son, “is.” Similar idea to Heb 1:3.

“Invisible God,” the Father; John 1:18.

##### The firstborn of all creation,

“Firstborn,” *prototokos*:

- 1) Temporal priority, Luke 2:7, Mary’s firstborn son; first in time.
- 2) Positional priority; OT, had double portion of inheritance, even if not first in time (Jacob; Exod 4:22); no relation to time; examples:
  - Job 18:13, firstborn of death
  - Isa 14:30, firstborn of the poor

Means “chief, best representative”; used in Ps 89:27 as a title for Messiah, “I will make him my firstborn.”

“Of all creation,” i.e., “before all creation,” genitive of comparison (cf. John 1:15, “He was first of me.”); note discussion of preexistence of Christ in B. 59-61.

“Creation,” could refer to act of creating (Rom 1:20), to all created things (Mark 13:19), or to a certain created thing (Rom 8:39).

##### v. 16, Because by him were all things created in heaven and upon the earth, the seen and the unseen

Verses 16-17 explain why Jesus is considered the firstborn—more prominent than all the creation: he created all things, and maintains them.

“By him,” *en* with the dative, instrumental use; B. prefers “in him,” Christ is “the ‘sphere’ within which the work of creation takes place.” But here the context seems to point to Christ as the actual creator, the Word of John 1. In v. 16b he is the agent, “through him.”

“All things . . . in heaven and upon the earth,” includes all spiritual powers, such as those admired by the Colossians.

#### Whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities:

These seem to be grades or levels of angels; the NT recognizes these four, plus *dunamis*, “powers” (Rom 8:38); summarized in two groups in Col 2:10, 15.

#### All things through him and unto him are created

“Through him,” the means of creation.

“Unto him,” the goal of creation; the glory and pleasure of Christ.

“Are created,” pf. tense; cf. aorist in v. 16a.

#### **b. Lord of the universe and head of the church (1:17-18a)**

This segment provides a transition between the two main strophes of the hymn. It summarizes the role of Christ as the creator, and introduces his role as our Redeemer.

#### v. 17, And he is before all things, and all things in him hold together.

“He is,” *he* emphasized by the pronoun + verb.

“Before all things,” Gen 1:1, all things created; John 1:1, the Word already existed.

“Hold together,” cohere; divine providence applied to the Son; L. He makes it a cosmos, not chaos.

#### v. 18, And he is the head of the body, the church;

Here Paul emphasizes his distinctive figure of the church as the body of Christ. It provides the transition from creation to redemption.

“Head of the body,”

The body is the church, 1 Cor 12:12-27; Rom 12:4-5.

Christ the head, here & Eph 4:15; 5:23.

Note the article on the church in O'B, 57-61.

This doctrinal picture is the natural outgrowth of our solidarity with Christ as our federal head (cf. Rom 5). The head directs the body; and, in this illustration, gives life to the body.

### **c. Christ the agent in reconciliation, 1:18b-20**

If the Jewish mysticism which was encroaching in the Colossian church sought to reach an intimate knowledge of God, it was seeking this privilege apart from Christ. The Christian sees in his Savior all he needs in order to be one with God. Jesus is our way of reconciliation. We need no further way. Actually, all other ways would lead away from fellowship with God.

#### Who is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead,

Here the terms are applied to Christ in his risen state as our Redeemer.

“Beginning,” cf. Heb 12:2; Rev 3:14, “beginning of the creation of God.”

“Firstborn of the dead”; also Rom 8:29; Rev 1:5; cf. “firstfruits of the dead” in 1 Cor 15:20, 23.

His resurrection guarantees ours, John 14:4.

#### That he might be in all things having the preeminence,

“In all things,” in the creation and in the church.

“He might be having the preeminence,” *he* emphasized by pronoun; periphrastic construction of aor. subj. with pres. pt.

Clearly, there is no room for any special knowledge of God or of God’s ways that is outside of Christ, whether it would involve angels or any other intermediaries.

#### v. 19, Because in him he was pleased for all the fullness to dwell

The subject, the Father (context of v. 20; see NIV).

“All the fullness” is acc. case (same as nom. because neuter), subject of infinitive. Some take “fullness” as the subject, comparing to Col 2:9 (see O'B. 51; see p. 52 for OT usage).

“The fullness” is the glory of God; later Gnostics took it to include all the divine attributes.

v. 20, And through him to reconcile all things unto him,

“Through him”; through Christ, the Father being the subject.

“To reconcile,” *apokatallasso*, restore from being enemy to being in harmony.

Used here and Eph 2:16; intensive form of *katallasso*.

“All things,” the elect, and the cosmos.

“Unto him,” could be “unto himself” with the rough breathing (B.74, n. 165).

Having made peace through the blood of his cross,

Modal participle, explains how God reconciled us through Christ; “having made peace” = “reconcile unto himself.”

“The blood of his cross,” figure of Christ’s atoning death; cf. Eph 2:13, 16, where it brings about reconciliation between Jew and Gentile.

Rather than being a source of shame, Paul views the cross as being the center of Christ’s glory. The angels did not die on the cross. Christ is superior for doing so.

[Through him] whether the things upon earth or the things in heaven.

Textual variant: “through him” in brackets in UBS {D} (remember, B D G not a strong combination in Pauline epistles).

Reconciliation of the universe: includes elect people, eternal kingdom; includes also his sovereign disposition of his enemies, including evil angels (B. 76, “pacification”); Phil 2:10-11; includes the restitution of all creation (Job 15:15; 25:5, heavens defiled by sin).

#### 4. Sinners reconciled to God, 1:21-23

After praising Christ in this great hymn, Paul comes back to the Colossians themselves. They should be grateful to Christ for how he has saved them. Jesus' reconciling work was not just theoretical, but it has changed their lives and their destiny.

##### v. 21, And you, once being estranged and enemies in (your) mind in evil works,

“And you,” emphasized by the pronoun; narrows down the focus from the universal reconciliation spoken of in v. 20.

“Once,” *pote*, sets up contrast of this section: “*once . . . but now.*”

“Being estranged,” present participle with pf. participle, speaks of present condition based on past action (probably, on fall of man in Adam); it does not imply that once the Colossians were not estranged.

“Enemies,” note hostility of the unsaved to God.

“In mind,” dative of reference; *dianoia* the equivalent of Hebrew *lebh*, often translated “heart.”

“In (or by) evil works,” O’B. notes similar Pauline expressions: “works of darkness,” “works of the flesh,” “dead works”; these sinful works reveal a heart hostile to God; and the Colossians knew from experience that their former lives fit with this truth.

##### v. 22, But now he has reconciled (you)

“But now,” *nuni de*, the contrast with the past.

“He has reconciled,” textual variant:

UBS {C}, *apokatellaksen*, “he has reconciled.”

Several early texts, *apokatellagete* or similar forms, “you have been reconciled”; supplies the missing term “you”; arguments are strong for both sides.

With the UBS reading, the subject would be either God or Christ.

##### By the body of his flesh through death

*En* can be here instrumental, “by means of” the crucifixion.

Marcion omits from the text “of his flesh,” since he was Gnostic; later orthodox theologians emphasized the phrase in arguments against the Docetists; the phrase is used to distinguish the physical body of Christ from his mystical body, referred to in v. 18.

To present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him,

The infinitive “to present,” infinitive of purpose, why Jesus died.

“Holy and blameless and irreproachable,” synonyms for emphasis; objective justification pronounced at the day of judgment (“before him”); note B. 79, n. 184, use of verb “present,” *paristemi*, in eschatological contexts, Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 4:14; 11:2; Eph 5:27.

v. 23, If indeed you remain founded and steadfast in the faith,

The *ei* with pres. ind. indicates an assumption that the Colossians will remain faithful (cf. Gal. 3:4). But the ultimate test of the genuineness of faith is perseverance. Apparently Paul sensed a possibility that this heresy would come in and reveal that their faith was not genuine, hence this warning (for a more optimistic assessment, see O’B. 69). Cf. the warnings of Hebrews.

And not being moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard,

Their present obedience to and satisfaction with the gospel they heard from Epaphras will reveal whether or not they will be able to stand before God in the judgment. The heretics told them how to approach God mystically; Paul tells them how to stand before God in the only possible way, in Christ.

Which has been preached in all the creation under heaven,

Figure of speech, hyperbole.

Importance of catholicity for orthodoxy (cf. 1:6).

Of which I Paul am a minister.

Asserts his own place as God’s apostle to them. Uses the singular (not with Timothy) for this statement to increase his authority and the importance of his ministry in God’s plan for the Gentiles.