

## 9/30/2021 – Colossians, The Faithful Disciple

### Unit II: Lesson 1, Salutation and Thanksgiving for Faithful Disciples

#### Reading: Colossians 1:1-8

Paul reminds the Colossians, whom he has never met, of his authority as one specifically commissioned by Jesus Christ. He passes immediately on to remind them that they are God's chosen people who have been incorporated into Christ Jesus. Just as he, Epaphras, and Timothy are brothers in the faith, so their salvation is a matter of *common* concern, not an individual matter. His further greeting of grace and peace reminds them that Christ has joined all humanity into Himself, a humanity as different as Jew and Gentile.

In his thanksgiving for them and his prayers, patterned after the normal Greek usage, Paul reminds them with the word "lord" that **ALLEGIANCE TO JESUS IS A CHALLENGE TO EVERY OTHER ALLEGIANCE THERE IS!** He also reminds the Colossians that they have shown the great fruits of faith and love by that very same allegiance. That is true, Paul contends, because their allegiance to Christ has tied their little piece of time back into God's eternity, an eternity that is certain in Christ.

Paul begins to combat the heresy in Colossae in earnest by reminding them of the universal nature of the Gospel. The saving truth is the same everywhere. When someone must tear down what went before to establish "new" and "deeper" insights into the faith, that is the mark of error. In Christ and the Gospel that Epaphras brought them, they have all there is already! Paul therefore endorses the ministry of Epaphras without qualification as a dear brother who has labored together with him in the Gospel. **SERVICE TO CHRIST UNITES BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN A BOND THAT CAN BE DESCRIBED AS "SLAVERY" - BUT IT IS A WILLING BONDAGE!** Epaphras has been faithful and trustworthy with the Gospel just as the Colossians have been in following his preaching.

Paul really enumerates for the Colossians, then, *five key points* that show the genuine Gospel at work. The Gospel is *good news from God*, that is *found to be true*, that is *universally the same*, *produces God's results*, and is *humanly transmitted*. How different that is from the "new teaching" going on at Colossae will become readily apparent as Paul continues!

#### Verse 1:

The salutation is characteristic of Paul. "Apostle" reminds his readers, with whom he is unacquainted, that divine appointment has conferred teaching authority upon him. Paul has been *sent* by God and Christ Jesus. He is not a self-appointed authority like those promoting the false teaching in Colossae.

"by the will of God" – Paul has not earned his office. It is *grace* that has given him his office. A man is what God has made him, no more and no less.

"Timothy our brother" – Timothy was born of a Greek father and a Jewish mother in Lystra (Asia Minor). With the word "brother" Paul expresses unreserved warmth and personal regard for his companion (cf. Phil. 2: 19-23). **BROTHERLINESS IS THE**

FUNDAMENTAL PREREQUISITE FOR CHRISTIAN OFFICE AND SERVICE. The aloof can never really be a servant of Jesus Christ!

**Verse 2:**

"to the saints" – In his early letters Paul addresses *congregations*. In his later letters (Rom., Col., Phil., Eph.) he addresses dedicated *people*. GROWTH IN CHRIST HELPS US REALIZE THAT *PEOPLE ARE THE MAIN THING IN LIFE!*

"saints" – The basic idea is *dedication* to the service of God, a *setting apart*, a holy and chosen people of God.

"faithful brethren" – "Faithful" implies both that they have faith and that they are true to the Master in whom they have placed their faith. TRUSTWORTHINESS IS A KEY MARK OF THE DISCIPLE. "Brethren" furthermore indicates that FAITH IN CHRIST IS NOT AN INDIVIDUAL MATTER OF MERE *PERSONAL SALVATION* (as the Colossian heresy would suggest). FAITHFULNESS TO GOD BINDS ONE TO THE FAMILY OF GOD, TO THE BROTHERHOOD IN COMMON RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER.

"in Christ at Colossae" Here for the first time Paul alludes to the basic idea of *incorporation into Christ*. "In Christ" human beings experience the new relationship to God which transcends all other relationships. But these Christians are also "at Colossae." THE CHRISTIAN LIVES IN TWO DIMENSIONS. They are "at Colossae" but "in Christ." Time and eternity lie end to end in the life of the Christian. His personal peace and joy are not dependent on this world (another slap at the heresy). Christ sets the tone of our living.

"grace . . . . peace . . . ." Paul's common greeting pulls Jew and Gentile together. "Grace" is a play on the common Gentile greeting, and "peace" is the Semitic greeting. THERE IS ONENESS IN CHRIST AS THE FATHER POURS HIS OWN POWER AND LOVE INTO HIS PEOPLE (grace), AND GIVES THEM THE PEACE THE WORLD CANNOT GIVE.

**Verse 3:**

"thank God" – Ancient Greek letters always began with a prayer or thanksgiving for the good health of the person addressed. The reason was superstition - to begin each letter with a good omen. Paul follows this practice, but for an entirely different reason, as verse 4 makes obvious. Paul often assures the people to whom he writes of his *prayers* for them as well.

"Lord Jesus Christ" – The term "Christ" meant much to the Jew as the word for the Anointed One of God. To the Gentile, it quickly became a proper name. The key word here is "*LORD*." This title was used in pagan cults, especially when the god was approached as healer and savior of men. It was applied to Zeus, Serapis, and Asclepius as well as other deities. The Roman emperor also received this title. TO CALL CHRIST

"LORD" CHALLENGED EVERY OTHER RELIGIOUS ALLEGIANCE OF THE TIME! Paul repeatedly affirms that to call Jesus by this title leads to salvation (Rom. 10:9, I Cor. 12:3, I Cor. 8:5-6).

#### **Verses 4-5:**

Paul enumerates his reasons for thanksgiving and prayer in behalf of the Colossians. A familiar triad appears here: *faith, hope, and love* (I Cor. 13:13). The relationship between these three key words is worked out more thoroughly here, however.

"faith . . . love" – The two key qualities in this life are present in the life of the Colossians. FAITH IN CHRIST ALWAYS SHOWS ITSELF IN LOVE FOR OTHERS.

"hope laid up for you " – Faith and love are possible because THE CHRISTIAN LIVES FOR THE ETERNAL. They are not dependent on mutual interest, hope for advantage, or personal gain as so much of what the world describes as "love" is. IT IS QUITE PROBABLE THAT THE TEACHER OF NEW DOCTRINE IN COLOSSAE HAD PERSONAL GAIN OF SOME SORT IN MIND. "Laid up for you" is a common business term. The Greek verb is *apokeimai* and is commonly used for storage receipts of grain, books in a library, or treasures kept in a temple. THE POINT IS THAT THEIR ETERNAL LIFE IS SECURE IN GOD'S HEAVENLY TREASURE HOUSE.

"faith in Christ Jesus" – "Christ Jesus" here is not so much the *object* of their faith as the *living environment* in which their faith is exercised. Again the incorporation into Christ of the believer is in view.

"you have heard before" – Paul reminds his readers that they had ALL THE TREASURES OF THE GOSPEL BEFORE THIS "NEW" TEACHING WAS INTRODUCED. The false teaching of the Gnostic teachers binds them to *earthly* aspirations and robs them of their heavenly hope.

#### **Verse 6:**

"in the whole world" – The point here is not how far the Gospel has spread but its *uniformity*. The same Gospel is preached everywhere. The new teaching at Colossae is condemned because it is not taught by Christ's apostles anywhere else. HERE IS ONE OF THE SIGNS OF "HERESY" – IT ALWAYS OFFERS SOMETHING "NEW" THAT NO ONE ELSE HAS!

"bearing fruit and growing" – A pragmatic test is added – the Gospel is *effective* in bringing forth fruit and extending its influence. There is a good chance that Paul is borrowing Gnostic terminology here from a Gnostic interpretation of the parable of the Sower (Mark 4:8). The Gnostic meant that bearing fruit and growing was to grow up through the levels of angelic beings through secret knowledge. As Paul will demonstrate in verses 13 and 14, real growing and fruit bearing is to appropriate the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins!

"heard and understood the grace of God" – To "hear" the grace of God is to understand the *message* of the Gospel. To "understand" the grace of God is to know the divine favor in which we stand as recipients of Christ and His blessings. Paul is telling the Colossians that in Christ THEY HAVE EVERYTHING THERE IS FROM GOD ALREADY!

**Verses 7-8:**

"Epaphras" – In Philemon Epaphras is mentioned as Paul's "fellow prisoner." Here Paul endorses the ministry of Epaphras without qualification. THIS IS PAUL'S WAY OF SAYING TO THE COLOSSIANS THAT THE GOSPEL EPAPHRAS BROUGHT THEM WAS THE GENUINE GOSPEL. MOST FALSE TEACHERS FIND IT NECESSARY TO TEAR DOWN WHAT WENT BEFORE THEM IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH THE "TRUTH" OF THEIR NEW TEACHING!

"fellow servant" – Literally, the Greek says "fellow.. slave." There is a voluntary bondage to Christ which brings joy, true freedom, and love. Epaphras is "beloved" by Paul. Those who have labored in the Gospel together understand this. Could it be that so much of the lovelessness in Christian congregations comes from the fact that so few labor in the Gospel and its work together?

"faithful" – The same Greek word is used of Epaphras here as of the Colossians in verse 2. FAITHFUL PASTORS REPRODUCE THEMSELVES.

"made known to us your love in the Spirit" – There is some debate about this translation. If the Holy Spirit is meant, this is the *only place* in the entire letter that the Holy Spirit is referred to. The work of the Spirit, however, is mentioned repeatedly. The point St. Paul wishes to make is that Epaphras did not bring a bad report about the Colossians to him. On the contrary, the report was most favorable. PAUL'S QUARREL IS WITH THE FALSE TEACHER(S), NOT WITH THE COLOSSIANS.

**By way of summary, verse 6-8 dwell on *five insights*:**

1. The Gospel is *good news from God*.
2. The Gospel is *truth*.
3. The Gospel is *universal*.
4. The Gospel is *productive*.
5. The Gospel is *humanly transmitted*.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Could you give a “summary” of how one distinguishes the “true” teacher of the Gospel from the “false”?
2. What are some of the key marks of a person who is maturing in Christ and in faithfulness suggested by this section? Share some of your own experiences with these insights.
3. How is a Christian “incorporated into Christ”? What significance does this have for the way he/she lives “in the Body of Christ”?
4. What significance does the term “Lord” have when applied to Jesus Christ?
5. What are five of the key insight into real Gospel proclamation? Can you elaborate on these?