

10/14/2021 – Colossians, The Faithful Disciple

Unit III: Lesson 1, A Faithful Disciple's Hymn to Christ

Reading: Colossians 1:15-23

SUMMARY

The Gnostic heresy troubling the Colossians was based on a fundamental proposition that **MATTER IS EVIL AND ONLY SPIRIT IS GOOD**. This ancient idea is known as **DUALISM**. God could not possibly have created the world. An emanation from God far distant from Him served as the agent of creation, an emanation that was both ignorant of God and hostile to Him.

Jesus is only one of the emanations. He was a spiritual phantom in bodily form. Man's real task is to find his way back to God. To do that he needed the elaborate knowledge and secret passwords which Gnosticism alone could give. Furthermore, this movement back to God was fundamentally an intellectual process. Since the common man cannot grasp intellectual matters, salvation through knowledge was only for the intellectual.

Paul's major contention throughout this section is that everything in the universe is *created* and cannot be compared in dignity or any other way with Christ. Christ is *divine, pre-existent*, and the *creative agency of God*. Through the word "image" he asserts that **JESUS IS THE PERFECT MANIFESTATION OF GOD**. By the use of various titles and prepositional phrases, Paul maintains the *pre-eminence* of Christ over all things, His superior honor and dignity, and the fact that **ALL OF CREATION IS MOVING BACK TOWARD HIM AS ITS GOAL. ALL THINGS CAME FROM CHRIST AND ARE RETURNING TO HIM.**

As practical consequences of these insights, Paul shows that the unity and order of the universe are not accidental or mechanical. **THEY DERIVE FROM THEIR VITAL RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST. HERE, AS NOWHERE ELSE, THE CREATED ORDER AND THE WORK OF REDEMPTION ARE TIED TOGETHER IN AN INDISSOLUABLE BOND!**

There is, however, much more to be said. **CHRIST IS ALSO HEAD, BEGINNING, AND FIRST-BORN OF A WHOLE NEW REDEEMED HUMANITY THAT HAS COSMIC SIGNIFICANCE. THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS THE NUCLEUS OF A REDEEMED UNIVERSE!** It is by His resurrection from the dead that Christ becomes **BOTH THE FIRST-BORN OF ALL CREATION AND THE FIRST-BORN OF THE DEAD!** The reconciliation that Christ affects is universal as God reclaims both the created order which is His and the human race. Thus, *peace* is once again reintroduced into a badly alienated universe. The blood of His cross brings all this about.

The Colossians are finally reminded that **THE REAL TEST OF A FAITHFUL DISCIPLE IS STEADFASTNESS IN THE FACE OF DISTORTIONS**. Our reconciliation is complete. Christ presents us to God as a living sacrifice holy, blameless, and without guilt. The Gospel that Paul and Epaphras have preached to them is **THE ONLY REAL GOSPEL THERE IS.**

A CLOSER LOOK

GNOSTICISM: To understand this beautiful Christological section, it is necessary to understand some of the basic tenets of the religious/philosophical system Paul is combatting. As bizarre as this thought system seems to us today, it had many adherents during the first two centuries in which the New Testament manuscripts were written.

As you perhaps recall, *gnosis* in Greek means knowledge. The Gnostics attempted to turn what they considered to be a rudely simplistic Christianity into a refined *intellectual* scheme. They began with the basic assumption that MATTER IS EVIL AND SPIRIT IS GOOD. THIS IS KNOWN AS *DUALISM*. Matter was considered eternal. Out of this *evil* matter the world was created.

God was spirit and good. It follows, therefore, that God would have nothing to do with matter and could not be the Agent of creation. The Gnostics believed that God put forth a series of emanations from Himself, each a little further from Himself. As the emanations became more distant, they became more and more ignorant of God and hostile to Him. The emanation that created the world was most distant and most hostile. It is this kind of thinking Paul is battling.

The conclusions the Gnostics drew were:

1. An emanation hostile to God created the world. The world is not God's world but belongs to a power hostile to Him.
2. Jesus is not unique, but simply one of the emanations from God.
3. Since matter is evil, Jesus could not have been a real human in bodily, material form. He was a spiritual phantom in bodily form.
4. The task of man is to find his way back to God. To do that, he needed the elaborate knowledge and secret passwords which Gnosticism alone could give. This was an *intellectual* process.
5. If salvation depended on this elaborate knowledge, it was not for the common man but for the intellectual!

ST. PAUL'S BASIC CONTENTION, THEN, IN THIS ENTIRE SECTION IS THAT EVERYTHING ELSE IN THE UNIVERSE IS CREATED AND CANNOT BE COMPARED IN DIGNITY OR ANY OTHER WAY WITH CHRIST WHO IS THE CREATOR. PAUL SPEAKS OF CHRIST'S DIVINE ESSENCE, HIS PRE-EXISTENCE, AND HIS CREATIVE AGENCY. THE ENTIRE SECTION IS IN THE FORM OF A HYMN AND SUGGESTS A PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN CONFESSION OF CHRIST (compare John 1:1 ff., Hebrews 1:1-4, and I Peter 2:22-24, 3:22).

Verse 15:

"image of the invisible God" – The Greek word for "image" is *eikon*. THIS IS A TITLE OF *SOVEREIGNTY*. JESUS IS THE *PERFECT* MANIFESTATION OF GOD. The Old Testament

background is first of all Genesis 1, the creation story. To man, created in the *image* of God, was given *dominion*. Proverbs 8:22 ff. is also in mind. There Divine Wisdom, personified, is with the Almighty at the beginning and serves as the agent of His creating. WE HAVE HERE THE ASSOCIATION OF *CREATION*, *SOVEREIGNTY*, AND THE *DIVINE IMAGE*, ALL OF WHICH ST. PAUL ASSERTS ABOUT CHRIST.

"first-born of all creation" – This is another title of dignity and function and has nothing to do with *time*. THE IDEA HERE IS OF THE *PRIMACY* OF THE FIRST-BORN (Ex. 4:22, Jer. 31:9) AND OF THE SOVEREIGNTY AND ROYALTY OF THE CHRIST (cf. Ps. 89:27, the royal Psalm: "I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth"). CHRIST HAS THE HIGHEST PLACE OF *HONOR* IN THE CREATED UNIVERSE. HE IS NOT A LOWLY EMANATION FROM GOD NOR GOD'S ENEMY.

Verse 16:

"In Him all things were created" – This suggests spiritual *locality*. The created universe, with all its physical and spiritual existences which it contains, is an unfolding of the mind of God in Christ. AS THE FIRSTBORN, CHRIST IS *PRIOR TO* ALL CREATION AND *HEIR TO* IT ALL. FOR A PERSON REDEEMED BY CHRIST, THE UNIVERSE HAS NO ULTIMATE TERRORS. OUR REDEEMER IS ALSO THE CREATOR, RULER AND GOAL OF IT ALL!

"all things" – This is a rejection of the philosophical notion that God is part of everything (pantheism). WHAT PAUL IS SAYING IS THAT EVERYTHING IS DEPENDENT ON CHRIST FOR LIFE, ORDER AND MOTION.

"thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities" – This reflects the Gnostic idea of emanations or angelic beings. ST. PAUL PLACES ALL OF THEM SQUARELY UNDER CHRIST AS SUBJECT TO HIM!

"created through Him and for Him" – The prepositional phrases here say it all. Paul has already asserted in verse 15 that all things were created *in* Christ. Now he adds that CHRIST IS THE AGENT *THROUGH WHOM* ALL THINGS WERE CREATED AND THAT CHRIST IS THE GOAL TOWARD WHICH ALL THINGS ARE MOVING. THIS VERSE IS THE BEST NEW TESTAMENT REFUTATION OF THE NOTION THAT *MATTER* IS EVIL. THE CREATED ORDER IS *GOD'S WORLD!* Paul is not arguing with the Gnostics about the spiritual existences they propose to exist. He simply asserts that everything in the created world and the spiritual world is SUBJECT TO CHRIST. CHRIST IS THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MAN (Eph. 2:18, I Thess. 5:9)! "For Him" says that CHRIST IS NOT ONLY THE ALPHA (the beginning), HE IS ALSO THE OMEGA (the end). THE WORLD WAS MADE FOR CHRIST. WE ARE *HIS*. THAT IS THE ULTIMATE MEANING OF DISCIPLESHIP!

Verse 17:

"before all things" – Christ precedes all things and has the highest position of dignity.

"hold together" – The verb here is in the *perfect tense*. This expresses the *present existing condition* of the universe as an ordered system. THE UNITY AND ORDER OF THE UNIVERSE ARE NOT ACCIDENTAL OR MECHANICAL; THEY DERIVE FROM THEIR VITAL RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST! CREATION AND REDEMPTION ARE HELD TOGETHER IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST! Verses 15-17 tell us what Christ is *in creation*.

Verse 18:

"He is" – This is an absolute statement of pre-existence, like the great "I am" statements of the Gospel of John and God's revelation of Himself to Moses (Ex. 3:14). Verses 18-20 tell us what Christ is *in the Church*. WHAT PAUL IS DOING HERE IS MOVING FROM CHRIST AS THE MAKER AND MEDIATOR OF THE CREATED UNIVERSE AND ALL ITS MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL INHABITANTS TO THE *NEW CREATION* - THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH!

NOTE: THE IDEA THAT THE COMING OF CHRIST IS AN ETERNAL EVENT FRAUGHT WITH ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES FOR CREATION AND REDEMPTION IS EVERYWHERE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. CHRIST NOT ONLY DEALT WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN, HE INTRODUCED THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE FOR ALL THINGS!

"head, beginning, first-born" – All three of these terms in verse 18 have *cosmic* significance. HERE, HOWEVER, THEY ARE USED IN RELATION TO CHRIST AND HIS *CHURCH*. THAT MEANS THAT THE CHURCH ALSO HAS COSMIC SIGNIFICANCE! THE CHURCH IS THE NUCLEUS OF A REDEEMED UNIVERSE!

"head of the body" – Paul elsewhere uses the language of the body to describe the Church (1 Cor. 12:12 ff., Rom. 12:5). In those passages, however, the point is the interdependence of the *members*. HERE THE POINT IS THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CHRIST. Here the organism as a whole DERIVES ITS LIFE AND VITAL POWERS FROM THE HEAD! CHRIST IS THE UNIFYING PRINCIPLE, THE SOURCE OF LIFE, AND THE GOVERNING FORCE OF THE BODY.

"the beginning" – In Hebrew and other Semitic languages, "head" and "beginning" are the same root word. The thought is that Christ's headship follows naturally from the fact that He initiates the redemptive process.

"first-born from the dead" – IT IS BY HIS RESURRECTION THAT CHRIST BEGINS THE NEW CREATION. THIS CREATION IS NOT LIKE THE OLD. IT IS NOT SUBJECT TO DEATH AND DECAY. HERE CREATION AND REDEMPTION ARE TIED TOGETHER IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST. HE IS NOT ONLY THE "FIRST-BORN OF ALL *CREATION*," HE IS ALSO THE "FIRST-BORN OF THE *DEAD*!" See I Corinthians 15:20.

"might be pre-eminent" – The translation here misses something. There is a change in the tense of the verb. A better translation would be, "might *show* Himself pre-eminent." IT IS THE VERY FACT OF THE RESURRECTION THAT SHOWS THAT CHRIST IS PRE-EMINENT "IN EVERYTHING" (Cf. Rom. I :4). IN CREATION AND REDEMPTION CHRIST IS PRE-EMINENT. THERE IS NO ROOM FOR THE "ELEMENTAL SPIRITS OF THE UNIVERSE" AND THEIR MEDIATION BETWEEN GOD AND MAN. CHRIST IS EVERYTHING!

Verse 19:

"fullness of God" – The totality of things dwells in Christ. PAUL HERE REJECTS THE NOTION THAT THE POWERS OF DIVINITY ARE *DISTRIBUTED* AMONG A THROG OF MEDIATING SPIRITS. Note the word "*all* the fullness . . ." ALL THE DIVINE PLEROMA ABIDES IN CHR IST!

"dwell" – In the Old and New Testaments "to dwell" means that God enters into a PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE AND TRUST. WHERE GOD DWELLS HE MANIFESTS HIMSELF AS GOD, BRINGING SALVATION. IN CHRIST EVERYTHING THAT GOD IS AS CREATOR, REDEEMER, ETC., IS PRESENT. Cf. John 14:9!

Verse 20:

"reconcile to himself all things" – CHRIST IS PRE-EMINENT ALSO IN RECONCILIATION AND REDEMPTION. The Greek verb for "reconcile" - *apokatallassein* - indicates a good relationship that has been lost. WHEN GOD RECONCILES ALL THINGS TO HIMSELF IN CHRIST, HE IS RECLAIMING SOMETHING THAT IS HIS OWN. MATTER AND THE CREATED ORDER ARE NOT EVIL IN THEMSELVES. Note also that this peace is *cosmic*. CHRIST'S RECONCILIATION RESTORES AN ALIENATED CREATION AS WELL AS AN ALIENATED HUMANITY.

"whether on earth or in heaven" – The idea here seems to be that the angels were reconciled to men, having been angered originally by what men had done to God and His world. EVERYTHING, LITERALLY EVERYTHING, IS RECONCILED BY CHRIST.

"making peace" – It is the *blood* of Christ that brings about peace and reconciliation. This introduces the idea of *sacrifice*. The idea here is not so much ransom as the Day of Atonement and the blood as the seal of the *covenant of peace*. In sin, the whole universe is alienated from God. By His blood, Christ makes peace possible also *within* the cosmos.

NOTE: Some have suggested that this section of Colossians suggests *universal* salvation for all things and all people. That is not the point. The peace effected by the death of Christ may be freely accepted or it may be *compulsorily imposed*. Reconciliation by Christ of all things is a *pacification* process. Thus, in Colossians 2: 15, we see the principalities and powers subjected to Christ against their will. EVERYTHING IN THE UNIVERSE MUST SUBSERVE HIS PURPOSE, WHETHER IT WANTS TO OR NOT. The same idea is present in Philippians 2:11.

"hold together . . . reconcile, making peace" – The *verbs* in verses 17 and 20 show the real purpose of Christ's work. IN CHRIST THE ONENESS OF ALL THINGS AS GOD DESIGNED THEM IS RESTORED. The great tragedy of sin is the division it affects between God and man, between man and his fellowman, and between man and the created order (Cf. Gen. 3). IN CHRIST THE ONENESS IS RESTORED!

Verses 21-23:

This section is the most obvious example of the difference between Christian and pagan doctrines of reconciliation and redemption. THE PAGAN CONCEPTION IS THAT MAN IS SAVED *FROM* THE CREATED ORDER. IN CHRISTIAN THINKING MAN IS SAVED *WITH* THE CREATED ORDER. ALL THINGS PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL COME FROM GOD THROUGH CHRIST AND RETURN TO GOD THROUGH CHRIST. The redemption and reconciliation of man becomes the key to the reconciliation and redemption of the cosmos (compare Rom. 8:20 ff.). Creation shares the same bondage and grief as the human race and awaits the same liberation as "the children of God."

Verse 21:

"estranged, hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" – This pictures the Colossians prior to Christ in their lives as taking part in the alienation from God that is true of the entire cosmos. Furthermore, they have a personal responsibility for this ("doing evil deeds"), since they, too, were hostile to God.

Verse 22:

"now reconciled" – The tense of the verb suggests that this reconciliation is *already accomplished*.

"in his body of death, by his flesh" – The prepositions indicate the *sphere* and the *means* of the reconciliation. IT IS IN HIS INCARNATED *BODY* AS PART OF THIS PHYSICAL WORLD OF MATTER THAT THE RECONCILIATION TOOK PLACE, NOT BY PASSING THROUGH THE SPHERES OF KNOWLEDGE AND ANGELIC BEINGS.

"in order to present you" – The verb here defines the *nature* and *effect* of this reconciliation rather than the purpose. We might translate, "The result of this was that"

"holy, and blameless, and irreproachable" – We no longer are unholy, blemished with sin, or under the judgment of our own guilt. Compare I Corinthians 6:11. THIS IS THE LANGUAGE OF *SACRIFICE*. CHRIST PRESENTS US BEFORE GOD AS A WORTHY AND ACCEPTABLE OFFERING. COMPARE PAUL'S WAY OF SAYING THIS IN ROMANS 12:1!

Verse 23:

"continue . . . stable and steadfast, not shifting" – These are all warnings about the seductive nature of the false teaching being spread in Colossae. **STEADFASTNESS IS THE TEST OF REAL FAITH.**

"gospel which you heard" – Once again Paul affirms Epaphras and his preaching of the true Gospel.

"preached to every creature under heaven" – What is meant here is that **THE SAME GOSPEL PAUL AND EPAPHRAS PREACH IS THE *UNIVERSAL* GOSPEL PROCLAIMED EVERYWHERE.**

"minister" – Here this is a purely functional term that is applicable to all preachers of the Gospel. Paul is here paving the way for his next section – the account of his own ministry.

Questions for Discussion

1. Dualism proposes that matter is evil and only spirit is good. What are the tragic consequences of this notion as you observe them?
2. How does the cosmic redemption in Christ change our view of the universe, space exploration, the work of science, etc.?
3. In what way is the Church a “new creation”? What does this say about denominations and the actual lack of visible oneness in the Church?
4. Is the “Colossian heresy” dead? What do you know about Christian Science and its teachings? About the tenets of many Eastern religions? What is the real issue?
5. How does real oneness, reconciliation, and peace come about in this world? What does this say about our efforts toward “world peace”?