



## THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST -- COLOSSIANS 1

### INTRODUCTION

Paul had an important message to convey to the Colossians. He needed to confirm and strengthen them in the truth of the gospel, reaffirming the preeminent power and glory of Jesus Christ and the total sufficiency of His cross. Paul spent little time with the formalities of introducing himself, although he had probably not met the little congregation at Colossae personally. After a brief greeting and prayer, he persuasively set forth his great declaration of the preeminence of Christ. This is the most significant passage in all Scripture describing Christ's preeminence.

### OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS 1

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### I. Paul's Opening Statements - Colossians 1:1-12

Before getting to the heart of his message, Paul opens his letter with a customary greeting, a thankful encouragement to his readers, and an inspiring prayer.

#### A. Greeting - Colossians 1:1-2

1. From an apostle - 1:1

Paul introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, designating that he was a man with a mission for which he had both authority and responsibility. In verse 25, he clarifies this mission as being a minister of the word of God. Paul's authority came from God Himself, since he was an apostle by the will of God. Timothy, a brother and co-laborer in Christ, joined Paul in sending the letter.

2. *To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ* at Colossae - 1:2

This greeting confirms the Colossians as being believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. "Saint" is literally "holy," and refers to those who have been consecrated to God.

*Faithful brethren* would refer to their being trustworthy, steadfast, and committed to Christ.

#### B. Thanksgiving - Colossians 1:3-8

1. For evidence of true belief - 1:3-5

Paul says that every time he and Timothy (*we* in verses 3 and 4) pray, they give thanks to God for the faithful Colossian Christians. The thankfulness springs from the encouraging reports they have heard of the faith and love which was evident in the lives of the Colossian believers.

##### a. Faith - 1:4

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as, *the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. Faith is therefore basic to the essential nature of Christianity and every Christian. Furthermore, faith is the outward sign that what a Christian believes is real. Faith is not merely an inner conviction, it is an outward practice! Paul is thankful that the Colossians are demonstrating outwardly the reality of their inner convictions. How is your faith shown by your actions?

##### b. Love - 1:4

The Colossians were also demonstrating love for one another and for all the saints. Jesus had commanded His disciples to *love one another; as I have loved you* (John 13:34). Love was to be the evidence to all the world that they were His followers. The apostle John, in his first epistle, calls all believers to love one another because love is from God and is a sign that one is born of God (1 John 4:7). Epaphras had told Paul and Timothy about the Colossian's *love in the Spirit* (Colossians 1:8), and this was truly a reason for thankfulness. Their love demonstrated the reality of their belief and their obedience to Christ's command. Who may be thankful for the love which you demonstrate?

##### c. Hope - 1:5

The Colossians' demonstration of faith and love were a result of their being grounded in the word of truth, the gospel, which stimulated them to look to the hope which was laid up for them in heaven. Thus, the reason for their faith and love was their foundation of hope. This hope is both present and future. It is *living hope* (1 Peter 1:3) which dwells within each believer (1 Peter 3:15), a hope in God (1 Peter 1:21) and His gift of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:8), a hope to which every

believer has *fled for refuge* (Hebrews 6:18). It is *the hope of eternal life* (Titus 3:7) — a life which believers enjoy now, in Christ (1 John 5:11), and will continue to enjoy for eternity (Hebrews 5:9 and 2 Peter 3:18). The writer of Hebrews says our hope is an *anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, which enters into heaven itself* (Hebrews 6:19)! This hope is revealed and embraced through the word of truth, the gospel message.

## 2. For the work of the Gospel - 1:6-8

### a. A universal, living, growing Gospel - 1:6

The gospel was proclaiming its truth through the lives of the Colossian believers, just as it had been doing in all the world. Paul portrays the gospel as a universal, living, and growing thing. It is the Good News for the whole world, not just a select ethnic or cultural group. The gospel is alive. Paul describes how the inner working of the gospel in the lives of those who had heard and understood had resulted in fruit and growth.

### b. A Gospel of grace - 1:6b-8

The gospel Paul preached is the gospel of God's grace (Colossians 1:6 and Acts 20:24). It had been taught to the Colossians by Epaphras, ministering as a channel of God's grace. Have you heard the gospel of God's grace? Have you understood it, and has it taken root in your heart so that faith, love, and fruit are evident in your life? To whom can you minister as a channel of God's grace? Later in this chapter, Paul will further explain the gospel of grace.

## C. Prayer - Colossians 1:9-14

Paul's thankfulness for the Colossians' faith and love resulted in his praying for them at every opportunity. His prayer in these verses expresses the dual purpose of his letter to them. He prays that they (1) would be filled with the knowledge of God's will so they (2) might walk worthy of the Lord.

### 1. Be filled with the knowledge of God's will - 1:9

The Greek word for *filled* ("pleroma") means to be completely filled or to be totally under the control of something or someone. The word *knowledge* is literally "full knowledge." Paul's desire is that his readers be totally controlled by their full knowledge of God's will. This controlling knowledge is to be characterized by wisdom and spiritual understanding. In the Greek, the word *spiritual* is placed at the end of the sentence for emphasis. It is probable that Paul was contrasting the vain understanding of the worldly philosophies so prevalent in Colossae with true understanding which comes from God. It is essential that Christians learn to

discern between God's true wisdom and understanding and worldly wisdom and understanding which can be attractive but lacks power and substance. (See 1 Corinthians 1:20; 2:5-6; 3:19.)

### 2. Walk worthy of the Lord - 1:10-14

The knowledge for which Paul prayed in verse 9 is never an end unto itself. It must lead to a walk (a way of life) which is worthy of the Lord. Such a walk is pleasing to God. A person who lives in this manner is *fruitful in every good work, constantly increasing in the knowledge of God*, and strong in God's might and *glorious power*. God's *glorious power* is an observable power. It is the majesty of the goodness of God made manifest to men (Romans 6:4; 1 Peter 1:21; 2 Peter 1:17.) Paul's prayer is that God's *glorious power*, which is His own limitless power, would strengthen his readers so they might demonstrate joy as they practice patience and longsuffering in the trials of life. (See also James 1:1-4.)

A worthy walk includes thankfulness to God for the *inheritance* which He has given us. *Inheritance* is literally, "the portion of the lot," an allusion to the partitioning and distribution of the inheritance of the Israelites in the land of Canaan. Just as each Israelite received an inheritance in the land, each believer has received an inheritance in Christ (Ephesians 1:11). It is an inheritance believers enjoy in part now, in this life (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:6-7), but will possess fully in the future and for eternity (1 Peter 1:3-4; Revelation 21:1-7). The realm of the believer's inheritance is the light. It could be no other way because *God is light and in Him is no darkness at all* (1 John 1:5), and *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning* (James 1:17). Paul further clarifies the realm of the inheritance to be *the kingdom of the Son of His love* (Colossians 1:13), which is the kingdom of Jesus Christ, God's own beloved Son. It is a kingdom for those who have been redeemed through His own precious blood which provided forgiveness of sins. It is an eternal kingdom.

Paul's prayer for the fullness of the knowledge of God's will and a worthy walk is one that could be prayed for every believer. For whom will you pray Paul's prayer? Will you also pray it for yourself?

## II. Preeminence of Christ - Colossians 1:15-29

Paul now turns to the heart of his message — the presentation of the preeminent Christ, the One in whose kingdom believers have their inheritance (Colossians 1:12). Paul shows that Christ is supreme in all the universe and confirms the mystery of Christ's indwelling power.

## A. Christ's Supremacy - Colossians 1:15-23

For the Christian, this passage is incomparably important for understanding the depth of our riches in Christ Jesus. In his commentary on Colossians, John MacArthur states, "Of all the Bible's teaching about Jesus Christ, none is more significant than Colossians 1:15-19. This dramatic and powerful passage removes any needless doubt or confusion over Jesus' true identity. It is vital to a proper understanding of the Christian faith."

In his argument to counteract the false religious philosophies in Colossae, Paul presents Christ as the preeminent One, the fullness of deity, the peacemaker with God.

## 1. Preeminent in the universe - 1:15-17

## a. Christ is the image of the invisible God - 1:15

Christ alone is the true image of God. Although the Bible speaks of man as being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), since Adam's fall, man's image has been blemished by sin. Jesus Christ is the perfect image of the invisible God. He is God in human flesh; the visible representation of the unseen God. Jesus' own testimony concerning this is found in John 8:58 and 10:30-33. The writer of Hebrews testifies that Christ is *the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His person* (Hebrews 1:3).

b. Christ is the *firstborn over all creation* - 1:15

Christ as *firstborn* (Greek "prototokos") *over all creation* shows His relationship to created things. He is over everything that is created. He is not a part of creation but over all creation. If He were the first-created, the Greek word "protoktisis" (which means first-created) would have been used. This verse implies Christ's preexistence and superiority over all that was created.

c. *By Him all things were created* - 1:16

This statement further reinforces Christ's superiority over all things, for He is the one who created them. He created everything in heaven and on earth, both things which can be seen and those which cannot. Thrones, dominions, principalities and powers may refer to visible, earthly, created beings, but they probably denote orders of the invisible angelic hierarchy. *All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made* (John 1:3). Paul adds that all things were also created for Him. "Christ is the instrumental cause and the final cause of all things" (Norman L. Geisler, "Colossians", The Bible Knowledge Commentary).

d. *He is before all things* - 1:17

He existed prior to the universe. In speaking of Christ, the apostle John wrote, *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of Life* (1 John 1:1). John's Gospel begins with the words, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God* (John 1:1-2).

e. *In Him all things consist* - 1:17

He is the sustainer of all things. He is gravity. He is nuclear force. He holds the planets in place and controls the rotation of the earth on its axis and in its rotation around the sun. He controls the composition of our atmosphere so we can breathe the air. *He upholds all things by the word of His power* (Hebrews 1:3b).

## 2. Preeminent in the church - 1:18

The creator and sustainer of the universe is also preeminent in the church as its head, its originator, and the *firstborn from the dead*. "As head of the church, He is the inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining, sustaining power, the mainspring of its activity, the center of its unity, and the seat of its life" (J.B. Lightfoot, Colossians). The apostle Paul describes Christ's position as head of the church in 1 Corinthians 12:12-20.

Christ is the originator of the church through His death and resurrection. He was the first to rise from the dead in an immortal body, making Him the firstborn from the dead. His own resurrection is a guarantee of the resurrection of each member of His body, the church. (See Romans 8:29 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-22.)

## 3. Full Deity - 1:19

It pleased God that all the fullness should dwell in Him. Again, fullness is the Greek "pleroma," referring to the totality of the essential and divine nature of God. The worldly philosophies taught that the "pleroma" was dispersed among several spiritual emanations from God. Paul refutes that by stating that the "pleroma" dwells, or has its permanent abode, in Christ. The entirety of God's power and attributes exist in Him in all completeness.

## B. Christ's Work of Reconciliation - Colossians 1:20-29

Paul's argument reaches its high point in these verses where he presents the gospel of grace. Mankind's fall into sin through Adam resulted in the moral corruption of the creation (Romans 5:12 and 8:20) and man's

separation from God (Colossians 1:21). *But it pleased God that through Christ's blood shed on the cross, all things on earth and in heaven might be completely reconciled (restored from their fallen state) to Himself.* In Romans 5:10, Paul expresses it this way, *While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son.* The shedding of His blood represented His life being given as a sacrifice. *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul (Leviticus 17:11).*

The motivation of this reconciliation is *to present you holy, blameless, and above reproach (Colossians 1: 22)* in the sight of God. *Holy* refers to being separated from sin and set apart for God. *Blameless* refers to having a character without blemish. See Ephesians 1:4 (without blame); Ephesians 5:27 (without blemish); Philippians 2:15 (blameless); and Jude 24 (faultless), all of which use the same Greek word "anamous." *Above reproach* means that no accusation may be brought against those who have been reconciled. Revelation 12:10 states that the accuser (satan) accuses believers before God day and night. But none of those charges can be made to stick. (See Romans 8: 33-34.)

The means of this reconciliation is faith. (See notes on verse 4, faith.) Saving faith endures and perseveres, anchored in the hope of the Gospel. (See notes on verse 5.) Therefore, the object of faith is Jesus Christ, the preeminent One, the reconciler from God, who is Himself the "pleroma" fullness of God. Have you placed your faith in Him? Is your faith grounded and steadfast, not swayed by every wind of doctrine and worldly philosophy? Will you memorize Colossians 1:15-19 to store away within your mind and heart the truth of the glory and fullness of Christ so that precious knowledge might never be lost to you?

### C. Paul's Message Concerning Christ - Colossians 1: 24-29

#### 1. A message which meant suffering -1:24-25

All that Paul has written up to this point reaches its climax in this section. The preeminent Christ, who is the fullness of God, indwells all believers, Gentiles as well as Jews. This is the message Paul took to the world because he was a faithful steward of God, fulfilling his calling to be a minister. He did this even though it meant suffering in his own body because of the gospel of Christ. In fact, Paul rejoiced in his suffering. He knew that the persecution and present imprisonment he was experiencing were not directed at himself personally but at Christ. In this sense, his sufferings were Christ's sufferings.

Some of Paul's other letters speak of all Christians as being called to suffer for Christ. See 2 Corinthians 1:5; 4:7-11; 1 Thessalonians 3:2-4. How much are you willing to suffer for Christ?

#### 2. A message which was a mystery - 1:26-27

This message which Paul taught had been a mystery in the past but was now revealed. There may be a bit of irony in Paul's words here because the pagan religions had their "mysteries" which were revealed only to the elite few. The ordinary person could never be initiated into the pagan mysteries. God's mystery, on the other hand, is openly revealed to all who believe (the saints). The mystery is *Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27)*. Every believer is indwelt by Christ. This is our present assurance. Our future hope is that we can look forward to sharing the fullness of His glory for eternity.

#### 3. A message preached to every man - 1:28

Paul preached a message of warning and instruction to everyone, so that everyone might possess spiritual wisdom. His goal was that every believer reach maturity in Christ. The pagan religious philosophies reserved higher knowledge and wisdom for the select few. Paul offered the fullness of wisdom to all.

#### 4. A message preached through the power of Christ -1:29

Paul's ministry of preaching, proclaiming the mystery, and cultivating maturity in believers was hard work. He says he labored at it. He agonized over it. The Greek word translated as striving is "agonizomai." It is the word from which our English word "agonize" is derived. But all of Paul's labor and striving was in accordance with the mighty power of Jesus Christ at work in Him. (See also Ephesians 3:7.) Paul was a living example of God's grace — a living example of what Christ's indwelling power and might could do.

### Applications

1. Paul has shared the glorious message of the preeminence of Christ, His reconciling work, and His indwelling power. What a great gift God has given in His Son! Has Christ's reconciling work been done in you? Is Christ in you, the hope of glory?
2. In what mighty ways is God's power working through you in ministry? Will you give Him all your energy in order that He might increase it and channel it for His glory as He did in the life of Paul?