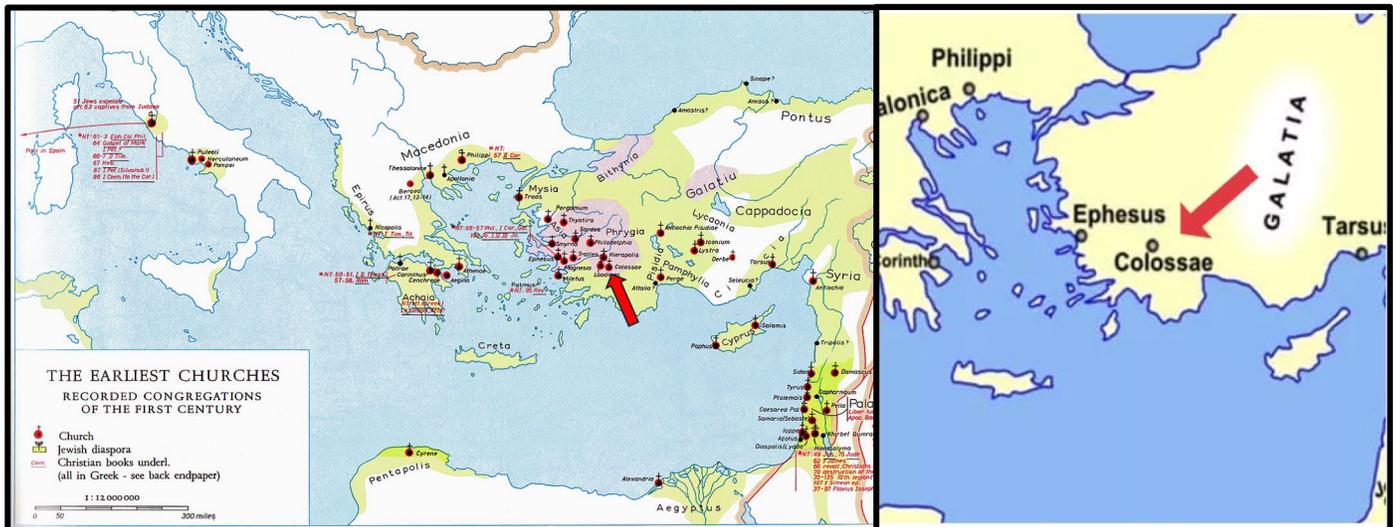


Studies in Colossians



Introduction:

1. Colossae, situated a hundred miles southeast of Ephesus, was not a city of prominence in the first century. It was not on a major trade route that traversed the empire though it was in a fertile valley, the Lycus.
2. It appears that the apostle was not personally acquainted (1:4, 2:1) with his audience having never met them. J.B. Lightfoot, the English scholar, rather curtly wrote, “Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul is addressed.”
3. The church at Colossae, as well as Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:17), appear to have been established under the labors of Epaphras. “You learned it from Epaphras” (1:7). From Paul’s letter we know that Epaphras was from the city of Colossae (4:12-13, “one of your number”). It seems further that Epaphras later co-labored with the apostle, as did Luke and Demas (4:14).
4. At the time of the writing, Epaphras was in Rome (4:12). It appears that Epaphras carried news that the Colossians were troubled by the he intrusion of false teachers. In his absence, Archippus appears to be leading the church (4:17, Phile 2).
5. Paul was imprisoned in Rome at the time of the writing (this and other letters written at this time are called “Prison Epistles”). “Remember my imprisonment (4:18).” “Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner... (4:10).” Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome was between February 60 and March 62 (it would likely not be in the latter part of his imprisonment because Demas is laboring with Paul and has not yet deserted (II Tim. 4:10).
6. The letter was carried by two of Paul’s co-workers, Tychius and Onesimus

(4:7-9). Further, Paul instructs the letter to be read in Laodicea, thus something of a circular letter like Ephesians.

7. Colossae was a Gentile city inhabited by Phrygians, Greeks, and Jews so that it was cosmopolitan culturally.
8. The occasion for Epaphras' concern, and Paul's reply, was the intrusion of false teachers into the assembly of saints. The error appears to be a blend of Greek rationalism (2:8), Jewish legalism (2:11, 16; 3:11), and asceticism (2:16, 21-23).
9. The theme of the letter is the all-encompassing beauty and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. The purpose was to prevent the Colossians from drifting into "self-made religion and self-abasement, and severe treatment of the body (2:23)."

Preliminary Thoughts:

1. Colossians has been chosen, at least in part, because of its remarkable description of the Lord Jesus. Some have denominated the theme of the letter as "The Preeminence of Christ." In a day of growing fear in the Christian community in North America, it seems correspondingly that we focus more on contemporary events than the eternal one.
2. Paul wrote the letter upon hearing the report of Epaphras that false teaching was intruding into the churches. Thus, the letter functions as an antidote to error. While Paul gives us glimpses of the error, he does not provide a lengthy rebuttal. Paul's tact in combatting false teachings was to show his readers the wonder of Christ. His assumption seems to have been that error is readily observed when the real is made clear. Error seems to have traffic when the centrality of Christ is neglected! Secondary issues can blind us to the real issue and the real solution.
3. Every error ever taught in the churches has emanated from misunderstanding and distorting the person and accomplishments of Jesus Christ.
4. The letter, typical of others written at the time by Paul, has two broad parts: issues of right doctrine and issues of right conduct. The order is important to recognize. Right behavior is a fruit of understanding the gospel!

Comment:

I. Introduction, 1:1-14

A. Salutation, vv. 1-2

1. The author and his companion, v. 1

The word “Paul” is intriguing; originally Saul prior to his conversion, but he took a Greek name meaning “small or little.” Some scholars suggest that the reference is to his stature, but it is more likely that he reminded himself that he once persecuted the church (“I am the least of the apostles... [I Cor 15:9], “the least of all the saints... [Eph. 3:8], “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’ – and I am the worst of them [I Tim. 1:15]).” His authority resided in his appointment as an apostle in God’s will (the concept of an apostle is one who has been officially sent, an ambassador). Paul was convinced that God had chosen him to be an apostle. This special sense of calling started at his Damascus Road conversion. Thus, the opening phrase emphasizes Paul's understanding of his God-given authority.

“Jesus” is the Hebrew equivalent of Jehovah or Joshua; it means deliverer or salvation (Matt. 1:21). “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of Messiah, the Anointed One (the God-appointed one to deliver us).

“Timothy” means “honored of God” or “one who honors God.” He had a Jewish mother, a Gentile father, and a godly grandmother (Lois). He was converted to the faith under Paul in Derbe on the first missionary journey. On Paul’s second missionary journey he joined the apostle and remained a constant companion throughout Paul’s life.

2. The recipients, v. 2a

The church of the Colossians is described in two ways: saints and faithful. “Saints” means holy but more particularly it means “to be set aside for divine purposes. The term always appears in the plural, not singular, indicating the community aspect of Christian faith. Faithful means trustworthy. Christianity is an initial, repentant/faith response followed by a lifestyle of faithfulness. Biblical faith is a series of human choices- repentance, faith, obedience, and perseverance, God's faithfulness being reproduced in His children.

3. The Greeting, v. 2b

Grace is the cause, peace the result. Grace is a gift, peace a consequence. Grace is external to us, peace internal.

That God is “our” father is a stunning miracle of divine mercy. The term “father” does not indicate sexuality or chronological sequence, but one of intimate family relationship. God is as a father to us, the greatest we shall ever know

B. Thanksgiving, vv. 3-8

These verses comprise a single sentence in the Greek. It is normally segmented to help the English reader.

1. The fact, v. 3

The nature of Paul and Timothy's thanksgiving was focused prayer (v. 3); they thanked God for the Colossian saints.

The object of their prayer was the Father of Jesus Christ (Paul uses Jesus' full name: Lord [sovereign], Jesus [deliverer, savior], and Christ [God's anointed or promised one]. Jesus was His name; Lord and Christ were titles originally). Here is a claim to Jesus' absolute deity; He is intimate with God.

The ground of their thankfulness is the report of the Colossians faith and love (v. 4). The object of their faith is the sovereign (Lord) savior (the Christ).

2. The evidence, vv. 4-6

The cause of their faith and love is hope (v. 5). Their hope is upon the gift of eternal life in the presence of God. This gift of life-giving hope is described in two ways: truth and the good news (the gospel). "Laid up" suggests divine surety and protection; heaven is the promise of God to all His children, and He will cause it to become a reality for all of us! The disturbance in the church cannot prevent it!

The hope possessed by the Colossians has placed them in a global community that is increasing in size and depth (v. 6).

3. The privilege of Epaphras, v.7

This hope, this gospel was brought to the Colossians through the faithfulness of Epaphras (v. 7). He is described as a bond servant; the term suggests voluntary servitude as opposed to involuntary servitude (a slave).

4. The report of Epaphras, v. 8

The spiritual depth of the Colossians Paul and Timothy learned through Epaphras (v. 8). It is interesting that this verse is the only reference to the Holy Spirit in the letter.

C. Prayer, vv. 9-14

Once more we encountered another of Paul's long sentences (vv. 9-20). What we have here is a second aspect of prayer. Prayer can be an expression of thankfulness, and it can be request.

1. The content of Paul and Timothy's prayer, vv. 9-12

a. The request that they be filled with knowledge, v. 9

A Descriptive Trilogy: Faith, Love, Hope

Faith: the cause

(Object: Jesus Christ)

Love: the outward effect

(Object: Saints)

Hope: the inward effect

(Object: Heaven)

The Prayer of Paul: A Model of Content, vv. 9-14

The request: Knowledge of God's will

The result of the request: A worthy
walk (moral)conduct

The elucidation of the request:
(fruit, growth, strengthening,
thankfulness)

The basis of the request: redemption

The main verb, filled or filled up, controls the paragraph. What follows explains the content of the filling. The verb is subjunctive in mood and passive in voice; it is something that we should ask of God because only He can provide what is asked. The content of the prayer is for discernment of the will of God meaning insight and knowledge (“in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” explains how we are to know God’s will).

- b. The purpose of the request that they be filled with knowledge, v. 10a

“So that” indicates the purpose for what has been stated; what follows elucidates its practical implication. God’s will is that we live our lives honoring our Lord.

- c. The further elucidation of the request to be filled with knowledge, vv. 10b-12

What it means to walk in a worthy manner, to live in the light of the will of God, the two being the same, is found even more specifically in the four participial phrases that follow.

“bearing fruit (v. 10b)” in one’s character and conduct.

“increasing in the knowledge of God (v. 10c)” The emphasis of the phrase is upon experiential knowledge, skillfulness in living for God.

“ [being] strengthened with all power (v. 11)” This is the action of God; it is always used of supernatural enablement. The goal of strengthening is spiritual maturity; here defined as stability and patience. “Joyously” can either describe the manner of what has immediately preceded or what follows.

“giving thanks (v. 12)”

- 1) Stated, v. 12a
- 2) Object, v. 12b

While the focus in the NT is upon fulfillment of promise in the Son, the purchase of the son, the proclamation of the Son, and the triumph of the Son, the Father is the focus of the Son. He came for the Father; He came to reveal the Father; He came to purchase us for the Father.

3) Reason, v. 12c

Salvation is of the Father through the Son. The Father's requited wrath is the basis of our family inheritance as Christ followers. "In light" seems to imply the ethical dimensions of the family; perhaps we could get the meaning by saying, "In truth."

2. The basis of Paul and Timothy's prayer, vv. 13-14

The basis of the prayer is the work of the Father. It is the Father that grants life, translating us from one realm to another, through the purchase (redemption) of Christ. The wrath of God has been swayed by the wrath bearing Christ.

The "for" that begins v. 13 suggests that an explanation is to follow. This verse tells us how it is that we have been granted a divine inheritance.

a. Deliverance from the kingdom of darkness, v. 13a

The sense of deliverance by the Father is that of rescued Darkness is a metaphor for life without God, life without forgiveness, life contrary to God and His character.

b. Transferred to Christ's kingdom, vv. 13b-14

1) Stated, v. 13b

We have been severed from the kingdom of darkness, the realm where evil rules, to the kingdom of Christ, the realm where Christ rules. "Beloved Son" is the title God gave to His Son at His baptism.

2) Explained, v. 14

This verse explains how our transference to Christ's kingdom was made possible. The justice of God has been requited. The tense of the verse, "we have" is present meaning that it is our possession today.

Redemption (*agorizo*) means to purchase or buy. The image is that of buying a slave in the slave market (the agora). Jesus purchased our freedom by giving Himself as the purchase price. The meaning of redemption spiritually is that God has forgiven

us! The word “forgiveness” means “to send away.” This should remind us of the scapegoat, the second goat, and the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first goat was killed as a blood covering; it symbolized the manner of forgiveness. The second goat was sent away symbolizing that our sin has been put away from us.

Application:

1. Paul speaks of thankfulness in our passage for two reasons: first, he is thankful to God for the work of redemption that has occurred among a people that he did not personally know. Second, he tells them that thankfulness is what it means to be filled with the knowledge of God.
2. Do you pray for the will of God for friends and loved ones? Do you know what it specifically means to do so? Is your prayer life mostly asking for health, safety, happiness, and success or is it deeper than that? Do you pray for your children and grandchildren that they would live to honor God?
3. I think that it is healthy for us to dwell on the wonder that God would be gracious to us. Thoughts of the cost of our redemption should fill us. Can you imagine that sinful people like us share in the life of God? Do you regularly pause to think of the grace of God made possible through the purchase of us from a spiritual slavery and the kingdom of darkness? Think of it, we are heirs in Christ! Today, you and I have the assurance that any roadblocks between us and a holy God have been removed.
4. Being a fruitful Christian is not about spiritual gifts, position in life, specific calling, or circumstances. It is not so much what we do that makes us fruitful; it is about the character we emulate. Our station in life is not the criteria of a life spent pleasing to God; it is about moral conduct and moral choices that honors God. Is that how you see fruitfulness or do you have a cultural, even churchy, definition of success?
5. If you are troubled about your assurance of salvation, this passage provides wonderful insight? Christ has purchased our forgiveness (v. 14), the Father has granted to everyone (vv. 5, 12) who believes in His Son (vv. 4, 14). Salvation is not through introspection; it is by trusting!