

Studies in Colossians

I. Introduction, 1:1-14

A. Salutation, vv. 1-2

B. Thanksgiving, vv. 3-8

C. Prayer, vv. 9-14

What we have is another of the long sentences that is often characteristic of Paul's literary style (vv. 9-20). Almost all translations segment the sentence though it is a single unit of thought, with several excurses. The NIV, for example, expresses Paul's single sentence in five.

An Expansion, vv. 15-20

1. The basis of Paul and Timothy's prayer, vv. 13-14
2. An Elaboration: The Preeminent Beauty of Christ, vv. 15-20

Having mentioned Jesus in vv. 13-14, His relationship to the Father and procurement of our salvation, these verses are an extension of his thoughts about the Lord Jesus. The problem that Paul addresses, as does all religious error, emanates from a misunderstanding of Christology, the person and work of Christ. Says F.F. Bruce, "The doctrine of Christ was the principal truth threatened by the false teaching at Colossae, and this is the doctrine Paul presents to his readers before dealing specifically with the false teaching."

The focus of this section is clearly on the person and preeminence of the Lord Jesus. Seven times the word "all" is found here (vv. 15, 16 [twice], 17 [twice], 18, 20). "All" things are from Him and for Him! Also, seven times the pronoun "Him" occurs with various prepositions ("in," vv. 16, 17, 19; "through," vv. 16, 20; and "unto," vv. 16, 20).

- a. Two declarations about Jesus, v. 15

The two descriptors of Jesus are “image” and “first-born.” The first denotes His ontological relationship to God the Father; the second denotes His exalted position over everything God created.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God; that is, all that God is has been revealed in Jesus. This is one of the central affirmations of our Christian Faith. Jesus is God, the revelation of the Father, revealed in human flesh. “I and my Father are one (John 10:30).”

Parenthesis: Because the early Christian Faith was seen as another form of polytheism (more than one God), some well meaning teachers advocated Modalism. Our God is one who appears in different forms, sometimes the Father and sometimes the Son (Patripassionism).

“First-born” does not suggest a temporal beginning of Jesus; Jesus was not the first creative act of God. The word can denote temporal priority or rank. If he were created, He would be a part of creation, meaning temporal. If He were temporal, He would not be eternal. If He were not eternal, He would not be all that God is. If He were not all that God is, He could not have paid the divine, infinite cost of our redemption. The emphasis is upon His exalted uniqueness! Further, and most importantly, the context of the passage is about creation; Christ existed before the creation of anything (“before all things [v. 17]”).

b. Four declarations about creation and Jesus, vv. 16-17

1) the originator of all creation, v. 16a

The phrase “by Him” occurs twice in this verse as does the word “created,” though in the latter case there is a tense change, but the mood of the verb remains the same (passive-creation was not self-induced but caused by something other than creation itself). Jesus was the creator in Genesis 1. He was the creator in the beginning (John 1:1)!

Paul elucidates further on the creative work of Christ by stating the spheres of His activity (visible and invisible) and gradations of authority in those spheres (angelic hosts, kings, governors, councilman).

2) the reason for all creation, v. 16b

In what sense was creation “for Him” since He is self-existent, possessing no deficiencies? It is for His exaltation! Read Rom 11:36, “To God be the glory.” Creation exists to mirror Jesus’ excellence!

3) the supreme over creation, v. 17a

This phrase helps us to understand “first born;” clearly in this context the issue is not temporality, but superiority or rank.

4) the sustainer of all creation, v. 17b

Not only did Jesus create all things, but He also sustains, maintains, and holds creation together. He is the glue that holds the atoms together. Science can explain what is seen; it cannot explain causes for what is seen since a self-caused cause cannot exist, a cause being an effect! This is the doctrine of divine providence; Jesus directs the events of this world. Said Barclay, “Every law of science and of nature is, in fact, an expression of the thought of God. It is by these laws, and therefore by the mind of God, that the universe hangs together, and does not disintegrate in chaos.”

c. Six declarations about the church and Jesus, vv. 18-20

1) the head of the church 18a

Christ is not only preeminent in creation; He is preeminent in His church.

2) the firstborn from the dead, v. 18b

The “beginning” has reference to origin or source; Jesus is the head or source of life of the new people of God. The reason is in what follows. He is the “first born from the dead.” In this instance, “first born” has a temporal connotation. By virtue of His resurrection, He is the living head of His people. He is our reason for existence, our power and vitality.

3) the preeminent one, v. 18c

This is a summary statement. It tells us that Jesus is preeminent both over creation and salvation, His community.

4) the fullness of God, v. 19

The reason for His preeminence in the church and creation is that He was God in human flesh, incarnated deity. The language that Paul uses tells us that Jesus was the complete revelation of himself to us. The word “dwell” means to reside permanently. He was not a man that became powerful in his lifetime; He was always deity!

5) the reconciler of all things, v. 20a

The disharmony and judgment brought on by our original parent’s disobedience resulted in the blighting of all facets of God’s creation (nature groans, mankind suffer and die, the sun has spots). Christ’s divine satisfaction has resulted in the beginnings of a restoration that will reach its fulfillment when Christ returns. The restoration of fellowship with God is captured in the biblical term “reconciliation.” Never in the Bible is it that God is reconciled to us; it is that we are reconciled to Him. We moved away, and God justly approved it, but through Christ we can now come back.

6) the maker of peace, v. 20b

Peace and harmony have replaced alienation; we await its final consummation.

The means of this restoration, the human side of redemption, is the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, Calvary!

3. An application: the Beauty of Christ and the Colossians, vv. 21-23

a. The past recounted, v. 21

The previous state of the Colossians is set forth in three descriptions: alienated (strangers, foreigners) from God, intellectually adverse to God, and morally contrary to God.

“In all creation” mostly likely means the Greco-Roman world composed of Jews and Gentiles. Perhaps Paul used the word creation instead of world because, in context, he speaks of the reconciliation of creation (“all creation under heaven,” v. 23).

b. The miracle stated, v. 22a

Between “formerly (v. 21)” and “now (v. 22)” is the great miracle of divine redemption and our reconciliation through Christ’s life and death.

c. The purpose announced, v. 22b

Someday we will stand before Him qualified for existence in the divine presence. This renewed, reconciled state is defined in a trilogy: holy, blameless, without accusation. These three adjectives are used as synonyms. They describe the purity of believers in Christ. They are not only forgiven; they are totally changed!

d. An encouragement added, v. 23

The “if” clause does not suggest the possibility that the Colossians might possibly discontinue in faith. The clause is a first-class condition in the Greek meaning that it is a fact. It can be translated, “If you continue and you will!” “Firmly established” is a passive verb in voice meaning that it is not something the believer must strive to do, but something God has done.

4. The ministry of Paul and the Beauty of Christ, vv. 24-29

Paul makes a shift from Christ, the center of the gospel, to his own labors in the gospel, most specifically for the Colossians.

a. Paul’s divine appointment, vv. 24-25

Though the apostle’s imprisonment must have been a discouragement to many believers. His point is to put his circumstance in perspective. His calling, his privilege, was also a calling to suffer. The notion of suffering relates to the extension of the church.

The most difficult phrase in the entire book is this; what does the apostle mean by “filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”

1) What is lacking in Christ’s afflictions is not related to His atoning sacrifice (Heb. 9:12, 24-26). The term “affliction (suffering)” used here is never used for Christ’s death for us on Calvary.

- 2) Whatever it means it has to do with Christ's afflictions, relating it somehow to the apostle (and us).
- 3) The afflictions that Christ now suffers are those He experiences through His children. When Saul persecuted the believers, he was asked, "Why are you persecuting me (Acts 9:4)?" When we suffer for the gospel, Christ who indwells us suffers also.
- 4) Another way to read the phrase is to emphasize the verb "fill up" or bring to completion. As Christ suffered to bring us the gospel, suffering is part of its extension. We cannot add to Christ's atoning work through suffering, but we can serve to bring its implications to completion. Thus, there is a sense that Christ suffered alone and another sense that He suffers with us in that we share in His life.

b. Paul's message, vv. 26-27

Here Paul tells us that he was commissioned (a duty or stewardship) with the solemn task of explaining the "mystery," to disclose a truth once shrouded in the shadowy nature of revelation through the Hebrew Scriptures but disclosed through the progressive nature of divine revelation. What is the sacred secret now disclosed? It is that Gentiles share in the Abrahamic Covenant equally, and as one new people, with the ancient people of God. This is more fully explained in Eph. 3:3-9 where Paul makes the point that the middle wall that separated Jews from Gentiles has been broken down and one new people has emerged ("fellow heirs, fellow members, fellow partakers of the promises of God" [v. 6]). While Gentiles came to faith in the Old Testament era, they came as proselytes, "God fearers." Now they have been grafted into the promises of God (Rom. 11:11-24). Paul tells the Ephesians that they were once "strangers to the covenants of promise (2:12)."

c. Paul's passion, vv. 28-29

The desire that Gentiles come to Christ was the apostle's passion. This accounts for his imprisonment and the measure that God used him in gospel-extension.

Thoughts:

1. Though Jesus was God revealed in the flesh, what does that mean since He is without shape or proportion? If no one has seen God at any time, and Jesus came that God could be seen, what was it that people saw? They saw

in Jesus' humanness the effects of the display of the character of God. They heard wisdom, they saw power and might, they experienced His compassion, and they were informed as never before. What is invisible is made visible by expression! When people observe you do they see something different? You and I are the manifestation of God through our flesh. Do people see God in you by your conduct and talk?

2. The point of this passage is the importance of Jesus Christ in all things. He is the centerpiece of all creation, the reason of all that was, is, and will be. Therefore, it makes sense that He should be the center of our lives. Do you live for Him or is your attachment to Him more related to what He does for you? Can you say with Job, "Though He slay me yet will I hope in Him (13:15)?" Do you have an unconditional love for Him? What does that look like for you?
3. When something is altogether meaningful and beautiful to us, we have a natural, intuitive desire to announce it. Paul realized this and that is why he pursued a lifestyle consistent with His calling by God. Do you share the same desire in what has called you to do for Him? Is your life your stage for declaring what is altogether meaningful and beautiful to you? How you prioritize your life is an indication of what is meaningful and beautiful to you.
4. This passage should cause us pause relative to our understanding of the great drama of redemption. Though God's covenants were made to the ancient sons of Abraham, they have extended to us, the new people of God. As you think about the divine plan of redemption, you must marvel at the wisdom and grace of God. God planned from eternity to include you and me to personify His grace and mercy by allowing us to know Him. Can you thank Him enough? The Bible is the story of God's progressive disclosure of His mercies! The shadows have been partially removed in the coming of Jesus and the Spirit. Are you glad? Does this bring a spring in your step?
5. Though we do not talk about it much, and when it comes, we tend to see it as negative (perhaps God is punishing us for something or He just likes us marginally happy), the truth is that suffering is part of being in the family of God. Some do not appreciate our excitement of being in a new family and, therefore, our convictions are not welcomed. While there are many reasons for affliction this one should be a source of assurance to us that we are part of the family. Do you reckon this type of affliction to be sharing in the sufferings accorded to your master?
6. I love flowers and beautiful landscaping because it is a shadow to me of heaven. God has placed all kinds of reminders about us that provide

glimpses of something far, far greater. When you see beautiful things does it make you think of heaven? Do you realize that the best things of this world are pointers to us of a greater world to come? Through Christ, God is reversing the effects of the fall that will be consummated when He returns for us! When you see a flower, a sunset, a vast landscape, do you pause to think of your savior? You should! God is faithful to surround us with evidence of His grace and mercy.

7. If Jesus is the first born from death and we are His children, you and I will not experience the death that He did. He died physically, that being the visible consequences of the fall, but we will not die spiritually because that is the judgment that Christ took upon Himself for us and triumphed over spiritual death. Physical death is the evidence that we have been separated from God; Christ has conquered spiritual death for us! He lives; He is the victor over death and hell, our last great enemies. He is the first born from the dead!