

GLORY OF CHRIST

Summary and Historical Background

The letter to the Colossians was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment to a church he had never visited. He may have led Epaphras to the Lord and he in turn appears to have been the founder of this church (1:7; 4:12-13).

Colosse had been a great trade center during the Persian Empire but its days of greatness were gone forever. It was a small town in New Testament times and the wealth and glory in that area had been shifted over to the neighboring city of Laodicea (Rev. 3:17 gives some idea of its wealth). Colosse's demise came as a result of a change in the road system. The new road by-passed Colosse.

Despite the small size of Colosse, this letter illustrates that even small churches in small towns should be helped when doctrinal problems come. The problem in Colosse was an incipient form of Gnosticism that would come to full bloom in the second century. Paul was concerned about this small church and gave it valuable counsel to help it overcome Satan's attack.

The faithfulness of Epaphras as a witness for Christ in Colosse was commended by Paul as a good example for those believers to follow. They needed this advice so that they would not follow the example of the false teachers in their town. They also needed to have a correct understanding of the nature and work of Jesus Christ to overcome this false doctrine. The first chapter is rich in the preeminence of Christ in creation, in providence, and in redemption. All of this sets the groundwork for the refutation of Gnosticism in chapter two.

STUDY NOTES

I. Prayers of Paul — 1:1-14

A. Greeting — 1:1-2

1:1 — "Apostle" - Paul was "one sent" as a commissioned ambassador for God.

1:2 — "Saints" - This does not have reference to the character of these people, but to their dedication as people set apart for the worship and work of Jesus Christ.

"Faithful" — This refers to their faith in Christ and possibly their loyalty to Him.

"Grace be unto you, and peace" — This was Paul's prayer for his readers. "Grace" referred to the well-being he desired for his readers through salvation in Jesus Christ, and "peace" according to Jewish thought did not mean the absence of hostilities, but rather the soundness of life as expressed in spiritual prosperity.

B. Thanksgiving — 1:3-8

1:3 — "Thanks to God" - Thanksgiving was a note struck often throughout the epistle (1:12; 2:7; 3:15, 17; 4:2). Paul prayed regularly for these believers and gave thanks to God for the good report he had received about them (1:4-5). His thanksgiving also extended to the spread of the Gospel (1:6), and to the work of Epaphras (1:7-8).

1:4-5 — "Faith . . . love . . . hope" - This triad is found in other epistles of Paul (I Cor. 13:13; I Thes. 1:3; 5:8). "Faith" rests "in Christ Jesus" for salvation and Christian growth; "love" shows itself through kindness to God's people; "hope" is the reward preserved in heaven for the Christian. "Faith" looks back to the finished work of Christ; "love" looks around to meet the present needs of people, especially believers; "hope" makes the saint look forward to receive his future reward in heaven.

"Truth of the Gospel" — This is the source of faith, love and hope.

1:6 — "In all the world" - Paul is using this hyperbole to express how rapidly the Gospel was being spread in the world (cf. 1:23). It is not to be taken in exact literalness.

"Brings forth fruit" — The Gospel has power within itself to bear fruit (cf. I Pet. 1:23). In most Greek texts there is also an added thought: "and increasing" or "and growing." Not only is the Gospel bearing fruit, but it is rapidly growing or spreading throughout the world, just as it did at Colosse.

"Grace of God in truth" — Paul emphasizes the grace and truth of the Gospel in contrast to the legalism and false statements of the Gnostic teachers that had invaded the town of Colosse.

1:7 — "Epaphras" - He may have become Paul's convert when Paul ministered at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Then it seems he returned to the Lycus Valley to spread the Gospel in Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:12, 13). He was successful in starting churches in each of these places.

1:8 — "Love in the Spirit" - The fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal. 5:22; cf. Rom. 15:30); the Colossian Christians manifested this grace.

C. Consecration — 1:9-14

1:9 — "For this cause" - Paul's prayer of consecration for the Colossian believers was based on the report he had received from Epaphras concerning them (1:3-8).

"Do not cease to pray for you" — Paul prayed incessantly for churches and individuals (1:3; Rom. 1:9; I Cor. 1:4; Phil 1:3-4; I Thes. 1:2; II Tim. 1:3; Philemon 4). He earnestly prayed that the Colossian brethren might know God's will and conduct a worthy walk that would please Him.

"That ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will" — It is God's purpose that this prayer be accomplished for every believer. God wants His children to know His will (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:17). His will can be known by a thorough knowledge of His Word (Ps. 19:8; 119:105; Prov. 6:23). In some cases the Word deals directly with the main problem to be solved, while in other situations it provides answers to some peripheral problems and these answers in turn will shed light on the main problem.

"In all wisdom and spiritual understanding" — "Wisdom" refers in a general sense to what we should be and do, while "understanding" refers to the means of reaching those goals. "Wisdom" appears in the Colossian letter six times (1:9, 28; 2:3, 23; 3:16; 4:5), while "understanding" only appears twice (1:9; 2:2). In this verse, however, they appear together and should be considered as a unit of thought expressing the need for a clear and practical knowledge of God's will. The two adjectives, "all" and "spiritual," modify both wisdom and understanding. It takes "all" wisdom and understanding to know God's will perfectly; a "little" knowledge is a dangerous thing. Therefore, to be safe, it is wise also to seek the counsel of others (Prov. 11:14). The other adjective, "spiritual," refers to wisdom and understanding in the sense that it is Spirit-enlightened. Knowledge from God's Word is not enough; it must be "spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14) to reveal God's will.

1:10 — "Walk worthy of the Lord" - This was Paul's second desire for these believers in his prayer of consecration. The natural result of having a full knowledge of God's will is to walk as a Christian ought. Four participles are used to show how a Christian should conduct his life in a manner worthy of the Lord: "being fruitful," "increasing," (being) "strengthened," and "giving thanks" (10b-12).

"Being fruitful in every good work" — First, the Christian is to practice good works (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14). One cannot become a Christian by good works, but after he is a Christian, he should produce good works. Good works are not the root, but the fruit of the Christian who is walking worthy of the Lord and pleasing Him.

"Increasing in the knowledge of God" — Second, the Christian must grow in or by, his knowledge of God in order to walk worthy of the Lord. He is like a fruit tree that continues to grow as it produces fruit; he is not like grain that dies after its fruit has been harvested. "In the knowledge of God" can be translated "by the knowledge of God." The first translation expresses the need for the Christian to grow, that is, to develop, "in" his personal knowledge of God through an obedient walk with Him. The second translation teaches that a Christian will grow "by" his personal knowledge of God, which

seems to fit the context better. A personal knowledge of God for the believer's growth and fruitfulness is like rain and sunshine to the fruit tree.

1:11 — "Strengthened with all might" - Third, the Christian who seeks to walk worthy of the Lord must not attempt to do it in his own strength; he must do it by the power of God (II Cor. 12:9, 10; Phil. 4:13). More specifically, he must do it by the power given to him by the Spirit (Eph. 3:16), Who indwells him (I Cor. 6:19). The use of this strength is for "patience" (endurance under trials) and for "long-suffering" (suffering without retaliation) so that he can do it with "joyfulness" (James 1:2). He will need as much power, if not more to overcome these kinds of trials in the Christian walk, as Elijah needed when he called fire down from heaven.

1:12 — "Giving thanks unto the Father" - Fourth, the Christian who walks worthy of the Lord should be grateful to Him for the many special blessings enumerated in vv. 12-14.

"Has made us meet" — First, the heavenly Father has made the believer fit, that is, He has qualified him by His gift of salvation in Christ to share in the inheritance of the saints. This is a high privilege for which the believer should not cease to give God thanks.

"In light" — God dwells in the realm of light (I John 1:5), and He has made it possible for the believer to dwell with Him in that brilliant kingdom of glory (II Cor. 4:6; I Pet. 2:9).

1:13 — "Delivered us from the power of darkness" - Second, God has rescued the believer from the power of Satan and sin. In the context of this letter, Paul probably used "darkness" with the Gnostic heresy in mind.

"Translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" — God not only rescued the believer from darkness, but thirdly He "translated," or better, He "re-established" him in light (cf. v. 12). "Translated" is a word used in secular literature for removing conquered people from one country and re-establishing them in another country following the war. Believers have been conquered and re-established by God, but their lot in life has not been impoverished by the move. To the contrary, it has been greatly improved. They have been moved to the kingdom of "His dear Son" - literally "the Son of His love."

1:14 — "In Whom we have redemption" - Fourth, Christ paid the ransom price by His death on the cross to redeem all sinners from the kingdom of darkness. "Redemption" was the term used to purchase slaves out of bondage. "We have" indicates that this redemption is the present possession of all believers.

"Through His blood" — This phrase does not appear in all Greek texts, but an almost identical phrase does appear in v. 20.

"The forgiveness of sins" — The fifth reason the believer should give God thanks is his forgiveness of sins. Literally, "forgiveness" is the "sending away of sins." Sins are removed through the redemption provided by Jesus Christ. For this and the other four blessings the believer should give thanks to the Father (1:12-14).

II. Preeminence of Christ — 1:15-20

A. Christ is the Image of God — 1:15a

1:15a — "Who is the image of the invisible God" - Jesus Christ "is" the image of God; He was never "made" in the image of God, He is the exact "likeness" of God. He is also the "manifestation" of God's nature and being, which are invisible to man's eyes and even to his natural mind (Jn. 1:18; I Cor. 2:9ff).

B. Christ is the Firstborn of Creation — 1:15b

1:15b — "Firstborn" - This does not mean that Christ was the first of all creation to be created, because the next verse says, "By Him were **all** things created." It does not say, "By Him were all **subsequent** things

created." "Firstborn" refers to Christ's existence before all creation, but it primarily refers to His supremacy over all creation (cf. Ps. 89:27; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:17).

C. Christ is the Creator of All Things — 1:16-17

1:16 — "For by Him were all things created" - Christ is the undisputed Creator of everything. "By" (Him) in the beginning of this verse is not the same Greek word used for "by" (Him) in the latter part of this verse. The first "by" (Him) could be translated "in" (Him) with the sense that in His mind He first designed all creation as an architect would do, and then the second "by" (Him) indicates that all the things of creation were constructed "by" Him as a builder would do.

"Thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers" - These were ranks of angelic beings, none of which were given the task of creation as the Gnostics taught.

"For Him" — The goal of all creation is for the glory of Christ (Phil. 2:10, 11).

1:17 — "He is before all things" - Since Christ existed before all things that were created, He could not have been created.

"By Him all things consist" — Christ holds all of creation together by His power. Without Him all things would fly apart. Therefore, Christ's pre-existence is an absolute necessity for creation to exist.

D. Christ is the Head of the Church — 1:18a

1:18a — "He is the head of the body" - The church is the body and Christ is the Head of the body. Christ has the supreme position in the supernatural creation (the church) as well as in the natural creation (1:15-17). In Romans 12:5 and I Cor. 12:12-27, Paul emphasized the function and importance of the body of Christ, but in this passage he emphasized the marvelous Head of that body (Christ).

E. Christ is the Beginning and Firstborn from the Dead — 1:18b

1:18b — "Who is the beginning" - This is a reference to Christ as the source of life for the believer. The beginning of this life was made possible by His death and resurrection.

"The firstborn from the dead" — "Firstborn" in this passage has the same meaning as in 1:15; priority in time and superiority in rank. With respect to time, He was the first to be resurrected from among the dead with a glorified body. Regarding His rank, after He was resurrected He was lifted to the highest level of authority in heaven and in earth (Mt. 28:18), so that He is truly first. He is pre-eminent everywhere.

F. Christ is the Fullness of God — 1:19

1:19 — "All fullness" - This refers to the fullness of deity in Jesus Christ. He is complete in His deity with all the powers, nature and attributes of God (cf. 2:9). The Gnostics taught that there were many ranks of angels that stood between God and man, Christ being one of them, and each rank of angels had a different degree of deity in them, but none of them had the fullness of God. Paul, on the other hand, asserted that all the fullness of deity dwelt in Jesus Christ.

"Dwell" — This word indicates a permanent residence. Therefore, the fullness of Jesus Christ is permanently in Him; it is not temporary in any sense.

G. Christ is the Reconciler of all Things — 1:20

1:20 — "Peace" - Jesus Christ made peace between God and man by satisfying God's holy demands against man's sin.

"Blood of His cross" — Only the blood of Christ, Who is sinless, could satisfy the holy demands of God (Heb. 9:11-10:18). Sinners can be reconciled to God only by His blood.

"Reconcile" — Reconciliation involves a change from being an enemy to a friend. God is never reconciled; He is propitiated (satisfied). It is man that must be reconciled (changed). However, there are

two sides of reconciliation: God's side and man's. God's side is to remove sin so that reconciliation can be completed.

"All things" — Sin has affected all of creation, so that all things must be reconciled. This reconciliation will affect things in earth and in heaven. Where there is no will involved, there is no reception of Christ needed. God's side of reconciliation is sufficient. Christ's atoning work will be applied and all things of creation will be freed from their bondage (cf. Rom. 8:19-22). However, those creatures with a will must receive Christ's sacrifice on their behalf or remain an enemy of God forever.

III. Peace by Christ — 1:21-23

A. Sinner's Condition — 1:21

This verse describes the condition of all sinners.

1:21 — "Alienated" - A sinner is a foreigner and stranger to God.

"Enemies in your mind" — A sinner has hostile thoughts against God.

"Wicked works" — A sinner's thoughts provoke hostile acts against God.

B. Christ's Reconciliation — 1:21b-22

1:21 b — "Has He reconciled" - Christ's work of reconciliation was finished on the cross. "It is finished" was Christ's cry of victory just before He died (John 19:30).

1:22 — "Body . . . flesh . . . death" - The Gnostics denied the humanity of Christ, and thus they denied His work of reconciliation on the cross.

"Holy and unblameable and unreprouvable" — This is a description of the believer who has received Christ's work of reconciliation. This depicts how he will appear before God (cf. Eph. 1:4; 5:27).

C. Believer's Continuation — 1:23

1:23 — "If you continue" - The true believer will continue in his faith, but the one with a false profession will turn aside (cf. Judas). The true believer will continue because his faith is built upon a good foundation - the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who defect to Gnosticism, or any other cult, and remain with that false teaching, prove that they were never reconciled.

IV. Privileges of Paul — 1:24-29

A. To Suffer for the sake of the Church — 1:24

1:24 — Paul counted it a privilege to suffer for Christ on behalf of the Church. He had no thought that his suffering was for the sins of others to give them salvation. He was simply suffering the hostilities of the world against Christ with the purpose of extending and strengthening the work of the body of Christ in the world.

B. To Minister the Mystery of the Gentiles — 1:25-27

Paul counted it a privilege to have the responsibility to make known among the Gentiles a glorious truth that had been hidden in the mind of God in ages past, namely, that Christ would dwell in Gentiles as well as in Jews. Paul suffered much misunderstanding and hostility from his countrymen for faithfully bearing this responsibility.

1:25 — "Minister" - Same word as for deacon: one who serves.

"Dispensation" — Administration or stewardship; a responsibility Paul had in God's household.

"Fulfill the Word of God" — To carry out the Word of God.

1:26 — "Mystery" - Refers to a truth that had not been revealed by God previously, but now was revealed to the believers.

1:27 — "Christ in you, the hope of glory" - This was the truth that was hidden in ages past, but was now made known by God through Paul to the Gentiles. Gentiles could be fellow-members with Jews in the Body of Christ. They could share in the same position and privileges that only the Jews had access to in the past.

C. To Preach Christ by His Power — 1:28-29

Paul counted it a privilege to preach Christ. Even though it was difficult work, he was given Christ's power to develop believers into mature saints. His preaching involved the warning of sinners and the teaching of saints with the goal of presenting every believer to Jesus Christ as a mature Christian.

1:28 — "Warning" - Paul's negative ministry of exposing sin, declaring God's judgment, and calling for men to repent.

"Teaching" — Paul's positive ministry of leading men to Christ, showing them how to walk with God, and preparing them for fruitful service.

"Perfect" — Refers to a believer's maturity.

1:29 — "Labor" - Wearisome toil.

"Striving" — In the athletic arena, it was used for a struggle against an opponent. We get our English word, "agonize" from this Greek word. Paul agonized in his struggle against many opponents of the Gospel.

"Working . . . works" — Same root in the Greek. We get our word for "energy" from this word. Paul needed God's energy to do this work.

"Mightily" — Often translated "power" (Acts 1:8). We get our word for "dynamite" from it. Christ's power was placed in Paul to enable him to do his work.