

# THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS

## PART II - THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

I. The introduction of the letter to the Colossians describes in rather optimistic terms the call to grow, spiritually, intellectually, and morally into becoming more the people of God.

A. The address includes St. Timothy, who will later be appointed an episcopos, i.e. bishop, and, as often the case, both boldly identifies St. Paul's mission with the will of God and calls the people to be holy.

B. The next six verses describe very optimistically both the calling of the Colossians and the rapid spread of the Gospel.

1. St. Paul has received reports from the likes of Epephras, who evangelized them and possibly Philemon and/or his escaped slave Oesimus. These reports have apparently been mostly positive, with some reports of errors that the letter will later address.

2. St. Paul phrases the beginning of the thanksgiving in terms of faith, hope, and charity, with the faith in Christ being allied with mutual love, and the cause of those two virtues seemingly being hope of heaven. It may be that this promise of heaven was what first attracted people to the faith in Colossae. St. Paul will describe again these virtues. See Col. 1:23 (faith and hope), 1:27 (hope), 2:12 (faith), 2:2, 3:14 (love.)

3. There is a great deal of optimism about the gospel spreading throughout the world.

C. The next six verses are also positive, but contain a subtle warning that the Colossians still have far to go and will have to endure suffering.

1. St. Paul expresses his callings in describing what he is praying for. This approach is diplomatic and expresses his connection with the Colossians.

2. The order of things seems to be that the knowledge of God's will through spiritual wisdom and understanding lead to living a life worthy of God, which in turn leads to knowledge of God Himself.

- Knowing God's will probably means both the moral law and His plans for all things. The doctrinal part of the letter will deal with the plans of God. The next section of the letter deals with living a life worthy of God.
- This knowledge and life make one increasingly able to know God, a knowledge that is not merely intellectual but personal.

3. The increasing knowledge of God then makes the people stronger and more able to endure the struggles that will come with joy and even thanksgiving. A Christian can not only accept suffering as necessary to attain any good end, but can do so with joy and gratitude, knowing that such suffering is offered for the Christ. See Acts 5:41; 1 Pet. 4:13; Col 1:24.

4. St. Paul then describes the glorious goal of being transferred from a realm of darkness to live in and have an inheritance in the kingdom of light, where all sins are forgiven. This notion, of which the promise to the ancient Jews of the Holy Land was a foreshadowing, is now reflected in the baptismal rite prayers. Jesus had frequently spoken of a kingdom that, at once is both here, but also will come at the end of all things. See, e.g., Matt 4:17, 5:3, 10, 11:12, 12:28, Mark 1:15; Luke 11:20, 17:20-21 (expressing a kingdom that is already here); Matt. 5:20; 25:1-46; Luke 19:11-27; Acts 1:6.

II. The letter then proceeds to the doctrinal section, which begins with a hymn or poem, then proceeds onto a description of St. Paul's ministry, and concludes with both the positive presentation of the universal salvation won by Christ and a denunciation of teachers who would seek salvation in another way.

A. The Colossians hymn, which is in verses 15-20 expresses the theme of Christ as the beginning, middle and end of everything, who unites the church and all reality, and reconciles us with God.

1. St. Paul may have chosen this method of teaching in order to express the truths in a fashion that both reflects the beauty of God's kingdom and is easier to remember. In this sense, it is similar to the prologue of the Gospel according to John. See John 1:1-18.

2. The first three verses describe Jesus as the source and continuation of all of creation.

- Verse 15 shows both Christ's divinity and His humanity, calling Him the image of God, the one through whom we

see God. See John 1:14, 18, 14:1-10. Humans are created and restored in the image of God, see, e.g., Gen. 1:27, 5:1; the Son, by contrast is that image. Referring to Jesus as the firstborn of creation reflects both of these ideas: He is born of God and thus is of the same nature as God, and yet also is in creation. There may be an implication that the humanity of Jesus was intended from the beginning, and thus His humanity was also at the beginning as an idea, even though He did not become human until later.

- Verse 16 reflects the fact that all things whatsoever was created "in Him. . . through Him and for Him." The idea seems to be that: (1) all things are in Christ because they are called to reflect the glory of God as the Son does perfectly; (2) all things are created through the Son, for the Son is entrusted with their governance; and (3) all things are created for the Son because they all lead back to His glory, and possibly because the whole of created reality was meant to result in the glory of Jesus Christ, God and man.

- This creation includes both the visible and the invisible. The fact that the thrones, principalities, dominions, and powers seem to describe the visible as well as the invisible realm led St. Thomas Aquinas and Catholic tradition to conclude (as a matter of traditional belief, not doctrine) that those nouns refer among other things to four of the choirs of angels. Other choirs include angels, archangels, virtues, cherubim, and seraphim. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part I, question 108, article 5; see also Is. 6:2, Ex. 10:20; Eph. 1:21; Jude 9.

- Verse 17 shows the Son as the one who not only created all things but holds all things together throughout time. There is a rejection of a deistic notion that God merely created the universe and then let it go. All things exist and are ordered only because of God's continuing love.

### 3. The second three verses then describe the new creation the Son brought about by becoming man.

- Verse 18 refers to the Son as: (1) both the head of the Church, who is His body, see also Col. 1:24, 27, 2:17, 19, 3:15; 1 Cor. 6:15, 10:16-17; Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 1:12, 4:15-16; 5:23; and (2) also the firstborn of the dead, now one in nature also with the dead, but born again to everlasting life as the leader of all people to rise again in glory, see also Rom. 8:29, 1 Cor. 15:20; Rev. 1:5. The Church and the Resurrection are not merely things that Jesus Christ caused to happen, but are a part of Him and flow from His very life. He does not merely cause the Church and the Resurrection, but is the Church and the Resurrection. See, e.g., John 11:25; Acts 9:5.

- Verse 19 indicates that the fullness of divinity and/or created goodness is in Christ. Whichever the meaning, the idea is that all goodness is only through Christ and cannot be attained in any other way.
- Verse 20 then proceeds onto the notion of reconciliation and peace through the sacrifice of Christ. St. Paul has not described it yet, but there is a clear implication that sin and death have damaged this creation, and thus here he brings the reference to the Cross as the only way to repair it. That peace both reconciles us on earth, and reconciles earth and heaven.

#### 4. Verses 21-23 then apply this hymn to the Colossians.

- Verse 21 describes the state we now call original sin, a hostility to God due to the sinfulness of humanity in general and one's own sins. In this unredeemed state, people are in that kingdom of darkness that is opposed to God.
- Verse 22 then describes the restoration through Christ, which involves both reconciliation through the forgiveness attained by His sacrifice, and also sanctification, i.e., the call to be holy. The sacrifice of Christ not only attained forgiveness of sins (justification by forgiveness), but also allowed us to attain a state of holiness (justice leading to sanctification.) See Catechism 1987-1995
- Verse 23 then warns that one must persevere in this faith in order to receive forgiveness and attain holiness. St. Paul warns against placing hope in something else, shifting in the direction the false teachers condemned in chapter 2 are presenting. There is once again a note of universality regarding the Gospel, saying that it has been presented to every creature under heaven, presumably including the natural world. See Rom. 8:18-23. Rejected is any gnostic notion of a deep knowledge available only to the few.

#### B. In verse 24, and through chapter 2, verse 3, St. Paul then turns to a brief reflection upon his own ministry.

1. He begins by describing his own suffering as completing the suffering of Christ for the church. The death of Christ was sufficient for redemption in general, but that redemption must be applied to each person, in what is called subjective redemption. And the suffering of the faithful is not only a result of that application, but helps it. Among other things, that suffering: (1) makes the proclamation of the Gospel more credible; (2) purifies the soul and unites one with Christ; and (3) is a channel of God's grace through that unity. St. Paul also emphasizes again his ministry as bringing the word of God to

completion. This statement could mean: (1) that the very ministry to the Colossians and others is bringing the word of God we now know as the Bible to completion; and/or (2) the word of God is brought to completion as it is heard in every human heart. Cf. Luke 4:21.

2. St. Paul then describes the mystery, riches and glory of God's kingdom as hidden from all ages, but now freely available to all of God's "holy ones" who have come to know Christ. St. Paul uses all of the language that the classical world would appreciate, speaking in terms of a great mystery and wisdom, and of riches and glory, but here presenting them as available, not by being a member of a select few by birth or intellect, but rather by the acceptance of Christ and life of holiness. In verse 3 of chapter 2, he reiterates this theme.

3. St. Paul then describes in vague terms his struggles to proclaim the Gospel. He does not go into as many details as he would elsewhere, see, e.g., 1 Cor. 4:6-17, 2 Cor. 11:16-29; Gal. 1:11-2:14; Phil. 2:12-26, possibly because his authority was not as challenged here as elsewhere. It is ironic that he is more respected in the Lycus Valley, where he has not been seen that other places that he has actually been visited.

C. In verses 4-23, St. Paul then turns to the false teachings that have apparently been spread among the Colossians.

1. St. Paul begins once again with an optimistic note about the steadfastness in faith, warning again clever, but erroneous ideas.

- He contrasts, as he did in the letters to the Corinthians, between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of Christ, saying that relying only on the wisdom of this world will lead one astray. See 1 Cor. 1:18-31. He is not arguing that true natural wisdom is worthless, but that a reliance only upon it is insufficient.

2. In verses 9-15, St. Paul then focuses on the main theme, our relationship with Christ.

a. First, and most importantly, St. Paul states clearly the fact that Jesus is fully divine, who has now taken on humanity, in a human body. There is a rejection of either the belief that Jesus is merely one among other saviors, or a belief that this world is simply evil and that holiness involves a rejection of it.

b. Second, Jesus is the head, not only of the church, but also of every power and principality. Coming from a similar reference in chapter 1, verse 16, those powers and principalities seem to be both invisible (the angelic realm) and visible (the human realm.) One implication, which St. Paul does not develop, is that earthly power should still be based upon the law of God. Cf. John 19:11; Prov. 8:15-16; Wis. 1:1, 6:1-5; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17.

c. St. Paul then compares baptism and the Christian life generally to the ancient Jewish circumcision, which was the physical mark of being Jewish. See Gen. 17:11-14; Ex. 4:24-26; Lev. 12:3. Here, he presents that operation as merely the symbol of spiritual surgery, getting rid of carnality. The reference to circumcision comes before and after the reference to baptism, connecting the two ideas.

d. St. Paul also describes Christians as already sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism. This notion of baptism being a death and resurrection is also reflected in the current Rite of Baptism.

e. St. Paul then concludes with an argument that this power of Christ, poured out over us in baptism, is of colossal power over sin and over every other power. In particular, in verse 14, he describes Jesus as cancelling the bond or paying the debt of humanity through the Cross. There is a notion of a legal obligation that was held over humanity. He also describes salvation in terms of defeating the powers over humanity (which could be fallen angels, or sin and death) and leading them away as conquered foes after the war.

3. In verses 16 and 17, St. Paul refers to the festivals, new moons and Sabbaths of the Old Law as mere images of the everlasting kingdom, and thus tells the Colossians that they are not to be a matter of judgment against others, although he does not forbid them either.

4. Verses 18 and 19 are directed against: (1) the worship, or religion, of angels, indicating that the angels were getting the same attention as Jesus, cf. Rev. 19:10, 22:9; (2) some excessive practices of humility. The virtue of humility itself is commended in the Bible, including verse 12 of chapter 3 of this letter; thus the criticism of delighting (the Greek word *thalon* can also imply being spell-bound or enthralled) in humility, or self abasement is based upon the excessive focus upon it, or degrading practices that would bring it about.

- The text indicates that some people are condemning others (the term *katabrabauato* has the connotation of

forcing someone down) based upon some private vision, which could be a claimed supernatural vision or simply someone's insight, that is not being referred back to Christ.

5. Verses 20-23 then criticize a focus on ritual rules, perhaps those adopted from the Jewish laws of ritual purity or possibly the rituals carried over from Stoic or similar philosophies.

- Verse 23 does grant that strict ritual rules may have some similarity to wisdom and may help make one in devotion and humility, but they do not in the end achieve victory over selfish desires and what we now call concupiscence, an effect of original sin.

III. Chapter 3 then presents the more positive requirements of a life in Christ.

A. The first three verses give the overall theme that our hopes are in heaven, upon a realm that is invisible because it is above us.

1. Jesus Christ is presented at "the right hand of the Father," referring back to Psalm 110, in which God promises a successor of David, who is also a priest and from eternity, and who will conquer all enemies. See also Matt. 22:41-46.

2. The controlling and intertwined principles are to live in the world as one seeking a greater realm and to live as one whose life is Christ.

- There is once again a notion of a hidden truth, but one that we can know, albeit imperfectly, if we are in tuned with Christ.

- There is an exalted notion of the moral life here, not just as following the teachings of Christ, as one might follow the teachings of a moral leader, but actually to be living the life of Christ, and thus by implication, to be sharing in heaven even now. Cf. John 6:54-58, 15:1-10.

3. These verses are then followed by a list of vices, a list of virtues, and advice on the conduct of a household.

B. Verses 5-10 list a number of vices that must be put to death.

1. Even though we have died to sin in baptism, there is still the need continually to put to death individual sins. We now describe the process in terms of baptism curing original sin and presence in a kingdom of darkness, but still leaving the effects of original sin to be overcome over the course of a lifetime. Verse 10 gives the image of gradually becoming a new creature and gaining in knowledge of God as one rejects sins.

- The sins incur the "wrath of God," which in Romans is described in part as leading to greater degradation in the desires of those who reject God. See Rom. 1:18.

2. There are basically three sets of vices condemned: (1) the first set of five vices that involve an excessive desire, for pleasure or possessions; (2) three sins directly against charity, anger, fury and malice; and (3) three sins of speech, i.e. slander, obscene speech, and lying. The letters to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Thessalonians have similar lists, indicating that certain behaviors will keep one from the inheritance with Christ. See Rom. 1:24-32; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5; 1 Thess. 4:3-8. The passage adds that greed, and probably all of the vices in the first set, are forms of idolatry. The notion is that, if one puts something above God, such as money or pleasure, it has become one's god. See Catechism 2113.

3. The list grants that Christians often formerly committed such practices, But to do so now would involve weakening or rejecting the faith that is life with Christ.

C. Verse 11 can be seen either with the list of vices or the list of virtues, or as a transition.

1. If seen with the list of vices, the instruction appears to be condemning factionalism based upon a Jewish or Gentile, or on national grounds. It appears that some people were considered to be of "barbaric" origin, and there was perhaps some discrimination against Scythians (a people north of the Black Sea in the south of modern day Russia.) It is nearly certain that there would have been discrimination in favor of masters and against slaves.

2. If seen with the list of virtues, the instruction is that all alike are called to holiness, Jew or Gentile, foreigner or native, master or slave.

3. If seen as a transitional sentence, the verse can mean that the general principles of morality apply to all people equally.

D. Verses 12-17 then describe a list of positive calls.

1. The notion of putting on Christ would appear to be a baptismal formula. See Gal. 3:27. There is the notion of wearing the uniform, or at least the clothing of the new kingdom that one now belongs to. See also Rom. 13:12-14; Eph. 4:22-24.
2. In verses 14 and 15, the virtue of love and the unity with Christ and His body the Church is central. The moral life is not an isolated phenomenon, with individual saved alone.
3. Verse 16 builds the calling to including teaching and worship as a part of the moral life.
4. Verse 17 concludes with the goal that every action of one's life be for Christ to the praise of the Father.

E. Chapter 3, verse 18 to chapter 4, verse 1 then give advice on the keeping of a household. St. Paul gives similar advice in letters to the Ephesians and to St. Timothy. See Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Tim. 2:81-15; see also 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7.

1. The first two verses call for love and submission between husband and wife. It is likely that both commands are directed toward both, i.e., a husband and wife should love each other and be submissive to each other's desires. However, the main advice is probably directed toward the one for whom it is most often a struggle, men to show love and women to allow another to have his way.
2. The advice to parents and children is balanced, avoiding either the youthful rebelliousness that is common in prosperous societies and the exclusive focus on parental rights common in official classical mores. This part of the advice reflects Jewish thought. See Prov. 23:22-25; 30:11, 17; Sir. 3:1-16.
3. As with the letter to the Ephesians, the longest section is on the dealings between masters and slaves.
  - The term here for slave, *doulos*, can mean either slave or a relatively low ranking servant. Cf. Mark 10:43-44 (who would be great must be a *diakonos*, a servant or minister, but who would be greatest must be a *doulos*, a slave, to his brethren.)
  - St. Paul is not commenting on the legitimacy of slavery, but is writing in the context of a society in which it was

common. His comments can be applied by extension to any employee/employer situation.

- St. Paul calls for steady work for God even if the human master does not reward it. Part of the idea is that work helps bring order to the world, and part of the idea is that, if Christians are good employees, it will make the faith look better. Cf. St. Justin the Martyr, First Apologia ch. XII.

- St. Paul promotes an advancement, telling masters that they must treat their slaves fairly, for they are equally under the judgment of God.

4. The controlling principle of all of the advice regarding a household is that Christians should do all things to please the Lord. See Col. 3:18, 20, 22, 23, 4:1.