

Jesus Christ

The Image
of the
Invisible God

An Exegesis of the Epistle to the Colossians

Study 4 Exhortation to Steadfastness (Colossians 1.22-29)

Look at Colossians 1.21

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled”

The church at Colosse was predominantly a Gentile congregation, as is evident from Paul's description of his readers' pre-conversion condition. Notice that before being saved, Paul asserts that we were all enemies of God (Romans 5.10 & 8.7 et al) and in need of being reconciled to Him.

Look at Colossians 1.22

Paul's reference to Christ's "fleshly body" likely helped him distinguish it from His spiritual body, the church (v. 18). He may also have mentioned it to contradict the false idea that Christ did not have a genuine physical body. One of the heresies of the early church was Docetism, though it may not have been common as early as A.D. 60-62. Docetists taught that Jesus only appeared to have a physical body. They based this view on the incorrect notion that physical flesh is inherently evil.

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

"... such an emphasis would have been a bulwark against any Gnostic tendencies that attempted to question the reality of Christ's death: the firstborn of all creation attained his status as firstborn from the dead by experiencing the full reality of physical death."

(Dunn, JDG. 1996 *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary series.)

In these verses, holy, blameless and unproveable have the following meanings:

Holy means set apart from sin.

Blameless means without blemish or defect.

Unproveable means totally without occasion for criticism.

Paul was not speaking about the personal conduct of Christian's here, but about their position in Christ.

Look at Colossians 1.23

"If" introduces a condition that the writer assumed was true to reality for the sake of his argument (a first-class condition in Greek). We could translate it, "Since." Paul assumed his readers would do what he described because perseverance is *normal* for genuine believers (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Phil. 1:6; 1 John 2:19).

(Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*)

The Greek conditional particle “εἰ” which is correctly translated “if” in English is what is known in ancient Greek as a first class condition. In Colossians 1.23 it is present tense, indicative mood which

means it is of great force and when properly understood is a presentation of reality, indeed a supposition. It means that the point of argument is based on the assumption of reality. In other words, what follows the word "if" in the text is assumed true for the sake of argument.

(Wallace DB. 1996 Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament)

However, perseverance in the faith is not *inevitable*. Apostasy is a real possibility to which he alluded here (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-2; et al.). It is necessary to abide in the faith to obtain a "good report" from the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. This was Paul's concern for his readers here.

(Wilkin, B. 1991 Is Continuing in the Faith a Condition of Eternal Life? *Grace Evangelical Society*)

(Bing, CC. 2007 The Warning in Colossians 1:21-23, *Bibliotheca Sacra*)

One of the most sobering truths in the bible is that not all who profess to be Christians are actually genuinely saved. Our Lord warned; "*Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*"

(Matthew 7.22-23)

In commenting on verse 23, MacArthur says: "Of all the marks of a genuine Christian presented in scripture, none is more significant than the one mentioned here. People give evidence of being truly reconciled when they continue in the faith, firmly established and steadfast. The bible repeatedly testifies that those who are truly reconciled will continue in the faith. Perseverance is the hallmark of a true saint."

(MacArthur J. 1988 The Gospel According to Jesus)

Following on from the quote from MacArthur above, the scripture tells us in very concise and unmistakable terms that there will be people who profess to be saved who are not. They publicly lay claim to Christ but their actions over time betray the state of their heart. This is seen in the following scripture:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

(I John 2.19 KJV)

Look at Colossians 1.24

In the development of first century Christianity, Peter became the Apostle to the Jews while Paul became the Apostle/Missionary to the Gentile world, preaching the gospel of reconciliation. He then goes on to talk about his suffering. He explained that his afflictions were part of God's plan, and he rejoiced in them. Paul could "rejoice" because he knew his imprisonment would benefit his readers, at least through his ministry to them in this letter, if in no other way.

Furthermore, he regarded his "sufferings" as what any servant of Christ could expect in view of the world's treatment of his Master ("in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions").

The afflictions of Christ Paul speaks of in this verse should be regarded as Christ's actual sufferings now, not the suffering He endured on the cross to atone for the sins of mankind but in and through Paul whom He indwelt (cf. 2 Cor.11:23-28). The Greek word "*thlipseon*" is a correctly translated as afflictions, but is never used in the new testament to speak of the atoning suffering of Christ.

"Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches."

(II Corinthians 11.23-28)

When believers suffer, Christ also suffers because He indwells us. "It is no wonder, then, that Paul rejoiced in his sufferings. Seen in the light of his union with Christ, they were transfigured and made an occasion for fellowship with Him, as well as a benefit to the body, the church."

(Johnson, SL Jr. 1964 *Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians. Bibliotheca Sacra*)

This assertion that Christ suffers as we suffer because He indwells us is further attested to by the writer to the Hebrews:

"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

(Hebrews 4.15-16)

Summary Statement

Christ suffers now, today, not in relation to the atonement, but in relation to His indwelling fellowship

Look at Colossians 1.25-27

Paul is saying here in verse 25 that he has received a stewardship from God. He considered himself to be a servant of the church with the responsibility to fully expound the revelation of God in Christ Jesus predominantly to the gentiles. A big part of this responsibility was to reveal the mystery that God had kept hidden from past ages and generations (Daniel 12.4 & 9).

So, what is this mystery that Paul was to reveal? In the scripture he sets forth several aspects of this mystery:

First, it is characterised by “riches and glory” (Colossians 1.27), two terms used together to point to the immense greatness of the mystery with the latter suggesting that it shared in the character of God Himself. Here was a message that was truly glorious, for in it the wealth of God was lavished in a wonderful way.

(O’Brien PT. 1991 *Understanding the Basic Themes of Colossians, Philemon*)

Secondly, God has graciously included both Jew and Gentile, those with no knowledge of Him who were aliens without hope. Paul elaborates on this in his epistle to the Ephesians:

*“How that by revelation **he made known unto me the mystery**; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ”*

(Ephesians 3.3-9 KJV)

Thirdly, the essence of this mystery is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1.27). “For Christ to be *among* the Gentiles involved being *in* those who believed. And He was and is for them *the hope of glory*, the pledge that they shall share in His glory to come (cf. Colossians 3:4).”

(Johnson, SL Jr. 1964 *Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians. Bibliotheca Sacra*)

Fourthly, the church as the Bride of Christ is called by Paul a mystery in his letter to the Ephesians:

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as

*their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. **This is a great mystery:** but I speak concerning Christ and the church."*

(Ephesians 5.22-32 KJV)

Lastly, Paul refers to the rapture of the church as a mystery in his first letter to the Corinthians

*"Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. **Behold, I shew you a mystery;** We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."*

(1 Corinthians 15:50-58 KJV)

Look at Colossians 1.28

"Paul proclaimed this new revelation as a completed fact. The word *katangellomen*, translated "proclaim," implies its completed character.

'Counseling' (*nouthetountes*) and 'teaching' (*didaskontes*) describe two attendant circumstances of Paul's preaching. The former word has to do with the will and emotions and connotes warning. Here it relates to non-Christians, the thought probably being that the apostle sought to awaken each of them to his need of Christ. . . . 'Teaching,' which probably refers to a ministry for converts, stresses the importance of instruction in proclaiming the Word. 'With all wisdom' seems to express the way the teaching was done.

Warnings, encouragements, stimulations, admonitions ("admonishing") and "teaching," presented through wise (appropriate) methods ("with all wisdom"), were necessary to bring all people ("every man"), not just the privileged few, as in Gnosticism, to full maturity ("complete") "in Christ." Paul had the imminent return of Christ in view, as the time when he desired to "present" every person mature in Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13). Paul proclaimed a Person, not a philosophy. Note that he did not just preach the gospel message, but the whole counsel of God ("all wisdom"). His goal was not just to get people saved, but to lead them to maturity in Christ (cf. Matt. 28:20)."

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

Look at Colossians 1.29

"Paul had to expend physical, mental, and spiritual energy toiling to this end ("for this purpose," i.e., to bring the Colossians to maturity). Sometimes he had to "strive" and contend with adversaries in the world, as well as with his own flesh, and the devil. Nevertheless, the supernatural "power" of the indwelling Christ energized him ("mightily works in me")."

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

Paul's view of his ministry was certainly a high one. He would have despaired had he not learned the sufficiency of God's grace in his life (2 Cor. 12:9).

Summary Statement

With words Paul courageously preached to the gentiles the life changing message “Christ in you the hope of glory” and from prison he preached the riches of this glory with his life. This is how every Christian can fulfil the Word of God – a faithful life speaks as loudly as faithful words