



The Greatness of Christ: A Study of Colossians

Week 4 - Chapter 1:24-2:23

Paul's Suffering for the Colossians 1:24-29

- Paul had never met the Colossians, and apart from Epaphras, they had not met him. Having first laid out the grand salvation found in Christ, and now found in Colossae, he speaks of his own ministry in Christ, and also consequently in Colossae.
- The key characteristic Paul brings to describe his life and ministry is suffering. He first speaks of his suffering in Christ.
 - Verse 24 is an odd verse “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions [*thlipsis*] for the sake of his body, that is the church.
 - What is Paul trying to say here about Christ’s own sufferings (i.e. his passion and cross)? Is he implying that Christ saving work on the cross is insufficient? No.
 - To rightly frame Paul’s idea, cf. his own conversion (Acts 9:4-5) and elsewhere his description of suffering as a Christian and for the Gospel (2 Cor. 4:7-12)
 - The ongoing life of the Church, its vocation at least in part, is to suffer, just as Christ did. To be the people of God in this age means to suffer. Just as Christ bore in his flesh suffering (albeit for salvation and atonement), so too does his Body, the church, bear and share in his suffering (see also Philippians 3:10)
 - Paul is not advancing an alternative theory of the atonement (as this verse is sometimes, inappropriately used), nor is he implying that Jesus’ death was insufficient in some way.
- Paul then connects his ministry and suffering with God’s great plan, which is to reveal the mystery of his glory, previously hidden and only hinted at in promise and symbol, to the Gentiles
 - The heart of this mystery is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27). Jesus isn’t just a new or better option among the cults and pantheons – Paul is building on 1:15-20
 - Paul’s ministry and suffering, his struggle, is to proclaim Christ, to warn and teach, so that all who trust in Christ will be mature in Christ.
- Other churches that Paul has not met
 - At the beginning of our study we mentioned the geographical area of Colossae, and the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul now mentions the former specifically, stating that even though he has never met them, his struggles are still for their sake.
 - This is a wonderful pastoral portrait which takes into account the mystery of fellowship that all Christians share with one another on account of their union with Christ.

Maturity in Christ 2:1-7

- Paul’s desire for all of these people is that they reach maturity in Christ, a major theme of the whole letter
 - What is maturity in the biological sense? All people, given time, care, and nutrition will grow physically. What about mentally/emotionally?
 - What does it mean to be mature in Christ? Hearts knit together in love, attain to a sense of assurance and understanding of all that God had done in Christ (2:2).
 - Paul now takes a step towards the polemical part of the letter, by indicating that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are from God and found in Christ.
- In opposition to maturity stands delusion, being led astray – sometimes willingly, sometimes under deception.
 - He does not want them to be deluded, even by “plausible arguments” (2:4)
 - Paul will now launch into the great and central (pastoral) point of the letter, which broadly may be characterized as a negative warning (2:8-25) followed by positive instruction (3:1-4:6). This neat ‘division’ is a bit of a simplification, but generally speaking works.

Do not be led astray 2:8-15

- The believer in Christ, through faith and baptism, already has everything they need. The empty philosophies and deceits Paul warns about carry a two fold danger:
 - They seek to reduce the fullness of Christ, by insisting that one must add to the work and nature of Jesus for a “more complete” spirituality
 - They are rooted not in divine revelation but in human tradition and the elemental spirits of the world.
- Human tradition and wisdom always falls short. God’s wisdom often comes across to us as foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18-31), but is in fact truth and life. Human wisdom comes across as good and helpful, but in the end is in fact foolish. Theology of glory vs. theology of cross.
- The term “elemental spirits of the world” is an intriguing one – *kata ta stoicheia tou kosmou*
 - *stoicheia* at its root means a series or row, as in learning ABC’s or 123’s, and thus are ‘elementary’. The word as it is used here can mean either the foundational principles of a particular subject (the basic principles for better living, for example) or can also refer to the elemental spirits or deities that have reign of the various elements of the earth. Either or both meanings would work in this context, but given the spiritual mix of Asia and the competing presence of pagan religions, mystery cults, and Judaism, the latter meaning carries greater weight.
 - This is especially reinforced by 2:9, “for in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”. Again Paul is bringing the Colossians back to the claims of 1:15-20
 - We should note that Paul uses this term only one other time, in Galatians 4:3,9; In that passage he is specifically referring to the keeping of the Mosaic Law as submission to the *stoicheia*, and in Colossians he uses the same indicators of such submission: observing days and months and seasons of the year (Gal 4:10; cf. Col 2:16).
- Verse 10: You already have it all in Christ! You don’t need other spiritualities or religions.
 - Paul’s point is not to give the Colossians license to belittle their pagan neighbors, but he is reminding them that they are already rich in Christ; Jesus doesn’t need to be added to
 - In what ways do we try to add to Christ in our own day and age?
 - The means of covenantally being united with Christ are a ‘circumcision made without hands’ (See Deut. 10:16;30:6). The passage here evokes the OT language of covenant, circumcision, promise, the law, and the need to not just be externally circumcised, but be cleansed in the heart in order that one may finally be able to love (i.e. keep the law).
 - It is likely that given Paul’s mention of this expressly Jewish practice, and in light of his arguments that follow in 2:16-25, that he has in view a potential temptation on the part of the Colossians to leave Christ in favor of Judaism, which would be equivalent to being taken captive by the *stoicheia*. Note the word for captive (*sulagogon*) is extremely rare and may be a play on words with sunagogon (synagogue).
- Baptism: a matter of death and life (2:12-13)
 - Compare with Galatians 2:20-21, Romans 4:25, Ephesians 2:1-10
 - What was accomplished on the Cross? The power of the law, which because of sin, brings death, has been cancelled. Paul then brings the argument full circle by stating that on the Cross the power of (demonic) rulers and authorities, who seek to corrupt, accuse, and drag down humanity, have been put to shame by God’s grace.
 - Paul’s use of the terms “the written code” and “regulations” which stood against us, is given light by Luther’s explanation that the law, while good, does not help us toward righteousness but actually hinders us (*Heidelberg Disputation:Thesis 1;1519*). The law actually disqualifies us from entrance into the new age. But God in his grace, through the cross of Christ and by disarming the written code, has now qualified us (see 1:12).
 - See Romans 4:13-14; 7:4-12; 8:1-4 for Paul’s treatment of the role of the law, and the righteousness that comes from faith, which simultaneously through Christ causes us to die to the power of the law. Note, Paul in Colossians does not use the specific terms found in these other passages, but the theology is identical. I believe this is because in Galatia and Rome Paul was addressing a mixed congregation of Gentile and Jewish Christians who had a working “Jewish” vocabulary of these things – in Colossae I am led

- to think that the congregation was composed only of Gentile ex-pagans who may have a limited awareness of these Jewish terms, but contact with them nonetheless.
- What happened on the cross is the 'wonderful exchange': Christ takes our sin and we are given his righteousness.
 - Atonement and Incarnation
 - The central theological vein of the letter is the direct and necessary connection between the atonement and the incarnation. To atone means to set right that which was wronged, in our case failure before the law because of sin. Jesus' death is a sacrifice on our behalf, the righteous for the unrighteous. His worthiness and purity validates that he may stand in our place. But God's grace doesn't stop at just atonement; God reckons the righteousness of his son to us, so that to be "in Christ" means that when God looks at us he "sees" the death and resurrection of His Only Son, and we share in such with him.
 - But the only way this would work, the only way a Man could be pure and perfect under the law and worthy to represent all humanity before God, is if that Man were God himself. Thus for the Atonement to 'work', the one dying must be God, thus the Incarnation. We find the two key theological passages of Colossians (1:15-20 and 2:8-15) focusing on both of these great and central doctrines of the Christian Faith.

Be not Disqualified 2:16-23

- Because the power of the law has been nullified, and the accusation of demonic authorities has been shamed by Christ's Cross, the believer is fully qualified (i.e. judged righteous) apart from the law. Therefore, Paul argued, none should be "disqualified" (literally, "judged" 2:16) because they don't keep certain observances of the Law, in this case specifically regulations of food and drink and observances of new moons and Sabbaths – all distinguishing practices of Judaism.
 - Not that these things are in and of themselves bad – they are part of God's revelation and his law, but as Paul indicates, their purpose was to point to Christ rather than be an end in and of themselves. Thus he states they are "a shadow of the things to come but the substance belongs to Christ."
 - Some would argue that to be fully in Christ means you must worship angels and keep all manner of ascetic practices, and if you don't you do not qualify, or at least are second class. Paul vehemently rejects this falsehood.
- In the end such things only puff up and lead one away from Christ, not closer, which is ironically what they are intended to do but fail to accomplish.

Closing Thoughts

The root idea that Paul is getting at is this: to receive Christ Jesus as Lord, through faith from the Gospel and sacramentally in baptism, does not simply mean you get an asterisk next to your name from God and can carry on as usual, as if nothing is changed or different. Such an attitude indicates that at best one has not understood Christ, and at worst is in danger of rejecting him. To be in Christ means you are caught up in the new creation, the overlapping of ages, part of the grand cosmic story of redemption. This is a free gift of God to sinners (part of the grand mystery revealed), and the fruit of this grace requires the putting on of a new self (or rather the fullness of your true self in Christ) and seeing the world through the lens of Christ, faith, and Gospel. This is maturity. What it looks like is the topic of the next chapter of Colossians.