

COLOSSIANS

**(PART ONE – 1:1
– 2:15)**

**IPC EALING HOUSE GROUP
LEADERS NOTES 2009**

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HOW TO USE THESE NOTES

These notes are intended to be guides for those who are leading the house group studies on Colossians. They are not intended to be a substitute for personal study on the text and in other commentaries, but hopefully should help you as you prepare the studies. I have included in these notes my brief comments on the passage, particularly showing the argument of Paul, the flow of the letter and drawing attention to difficult verses and providing help in interpreting them. I have also included at the end some suggested questions and lines of application for the studies.

PLEASE DO NOT SIMPLY READ THROUGH THESE NOTES AND JUST ASK THE QUESTIONS PROVIDED IN THE STUDY. They are meant as a help, a resource, not as an “off the shelf” study that can simply be done with no extra thought. As with every form of bible teaching, the best home group studies occur when the leaders have worked on the passage themselves, having studied it and sat under it themselves, and when the questions they asked are their own (or at least have been made their own and adapted to suit their group).

THE STUDIES

Paul's letter to the Colossians is carefully written and it is worth taking some time to study it carefully. I have divided the letter into 12 studies. The passages are not all of equal length – but I think the studies will be, because (for example) the 4 verses at the beginning of chapter 3 occupy a central place in the letter and in Paul's argument so it is important to slow down and take them in.

The divisions are as follows:

- 1 – Chapter 1:1-8
- 2 – Chapter 1:9-14
- 3 – Chapter 1:15-23
- 4 – Chapter 1:24 – Chapter 2:5
- 5 – Chapter 2:6-15
- 6 – Chapter 2:16-23
- 7 – Chapter 3:1-4
- 8 – Chapter 3:5-11
- 9 – Chapter 3:12-17
- 10 – Chapter 3:18-4:1
- 11 – Chapter 4:2-6
- 12 – Chapter 4:7-18

If you are leading a study it is worth taking some time and reading through the letter from start to finish (it won't take long!). Ask yourself – “why is Paul writing? What is the main theme of Colossians? What is the main thrust of the application?”. And then ask “how does the passage I am preparing fit into the whole letter”?

THE FLOW OF THE LETTER

Paul the apostle wrote this letter to believers in Colossae in the Lycus valley in south east Asia Minor. It was a church he had never visited personally (2:1) but he loves them and is very concerned about them.

In short, Paul writes this letter to give the Colossians (and us) a vision of the incomparable greatness of Christ, the one who has saved us and the one to whom we are united to in His life, death and resurrection. Paul is concerned that some people have been upsetting the Colossians by saying that they need something else other than Jesus Christ to live the Christian life – they may have been saying something like “It’s great you trust Jesus, but that’s just a start. You need Jesus plus religious festivals (2:16), or Jesus plus new spirituality (2:18), or Jesus plus rules (2:21-22) if you are going to be a really mature Christian”.

Paul takes the Colossians back to basics and stresses that if we know Christ, we have all we need to be mature and to grow as Christians. He shows us how great Jesus is (1:15-19), how we are united to him when we believe (2:6-12), and how living the Christian life is a case of living out our relationship with him – literally, we become what we already are, in Christ (3:1-4).

The letter to the Colossians is obviously very relevant to us today. We should all desire a closer walk with Jesus. We should all long that our faith will affect every area of our life. But we are often tempted by the “short cuts” and new teachings that are around today. We too often think the key to Christian growth is outward religion, or rules and resolutions, or strange spiritualities (“second blessings” etc). In his word God tells us that we need to know Christ more. If we feel we are not growing as a Christian it is because we have lost sight of him and who we are in him. We are naturally attracted to novelty, but Paul sends us back to Christ Jesus the Lord (1:15-19) whom we have received and need to continue to live and be built up in (2:6-7).

And this is very practical. The second half of Colossians deals with all aspects of our life – our inward attitudes (3:5-10), our relationships with others in the church (3:11-17), in the family

(3:18-21) and at work (3:22-4:1). Knowing Christ will affect everything! No wonder Paul's aim as an apostle was to:

".....proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ"
Colossians 1:28

These main themes can be seen throughout the whole of the letter and you can see them beginning to emerge in the prayer Paul prays in verses 1-14.

USEFUL RESOURCES

I make no claim that this is all my own work! Three resources in particular have been very useful to me in my study of Colossians:

Peter T. O'Brien – Colossians, Philemon (Word Biblical Commentary). O'Brien is probably the best living commentator on the New Testament epistles at the moment. This commentary is VERY heavy going and detailed, but immensely valuable.

Douglas Moo – The Letters Of Colossians and Philemon (Pillar NT Commentary). Not quite as heavy going as O'Brien, but still very detailed. O'Brien and Moo disagree at points so they are useful to compare.

Dick Lucas – Colossians MP3 Lectures (Available from the Proclamation Trust). Dick wrote the Bible Speaks Today commentary on Colossians, but about 10 years or so after it was published he went back to Colossians and produced a series of lectures on the book. As usual they are insightful and detailed.

Sinclair Ferguson – Colossians sermons (listened to online). Very helpful in modelling how to teach and preach this letter. I have used his divisions in breaking down the letter into 12, as they seemed to make sense.

STUDY 1 - 1:1-8

Notes

1. *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy our brother,*

The letter begins, as most letters did in the NT times, with a statement about who the author is. The church had never met Paul, but he stresses his God given authority to them. This is important as it is a letter written to deal with false teaching, so from the start Paul stresses that he has a word from God for them, in contrast to what they had been listening to.

Paul often includes his fellow workers at the beginning of his letters. Timothy is probably the young man Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to. His inclusion here does not necessarily mean he shared in the writing of the letter – merely that he was with Paul at the time of writing and that the gospel they preach is the same.

2. *To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father.*

It would be easy to skim over this verse to get to the main prayer from verse 3 onwards, but it would be a mistake to do so. Paul makes some very important points about the Colossian Christians here.

He describes the Colossians as “holy and faithful” (“saints” in the ESV). This is a statement of reality, not about how they feel, nor is it saying they are particularly advanced Christians. They, as Christians, have been set apart for Jesus Christ which is shown by their faith, their believing in him. They are “in Christ” – Paul’s favourite identification for a Christian, which will be explained throughout the rest of this letter.

They are also “in Colossae”. Christians are called to be saints, to be holy and faithful, wherever we are. But we need to remember our dual identity. It is as if the Colossians should have 2 passports – one stating that they are “in Christ” (raised with him in the

heavenly realms – see 3:1-4), and one stating that they are “in Colossae” (where they live now).

We get into trouble if we forget either one of these realities. If we think we are just “in Colossae/in Ealing” we will simply fix our eyes on this world, live life the world’s way and not be distinct and following Jesus. If we forget that we are “in Colossae/in Ealing” and just focus on being “in Christ” we may be tempted to think (as believers have done through the ages) that the holy life is a life of escape, or a life in a monastery, or a life which avoids work in the world (which believes to be a nun or a missionary or vicar is the only holy life), or a life which avoids marriage. Christ calls us to be “in him in the world” – living out our relationship with him in the detail of life at work, in the home. But more of that later in the letter.....

Paul then brings a greeting of “grace and peace”. This is not just a cliché, it is a reminder of the heart of the gospel – God’s free unmerited gift of peace with him, which comes from him to us.

3. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,

Paul now reports his prayer for the Colossians, and begins by stressing how he prays with thanksgiving for them. This is surprising for two reasons. Firstly, these are Christians he has never met personally, and yet he suggests he is regularly praying for them (and the apostle must have had a very long prayer list already of people he knew), and secondly, the Colossian Christians were not perfect, they had difficulties, yet Paul begins by stressing his thanks to God for them.

Paul directs his thanks to God (obviously!), but notice how he describes God – “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Paul makes it very clear that to truly pray to God is to pray to the God of the bible – the God whom Jesus Christ reveals to us and that we have a relationship with through Jesus. This is Paul beginning to stress the centrality of Jesus Christ, the main theme of this letter.

4. because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints –

Paul's thankfulness for the Colossians is that they have heard and received with faith the true gospel message. In this verse Paul gives thanks for the right response they showed to the gospel ("faith") - again, notice how it is "in Christ Jesus", faith always has an object, it is always in something, and to be a Christian is to trust Christ Jesus.

He also stresses the natural fruit of true faith ("love for all the saints"). It is common in Paul's letters to stress that brotherly love for fellow Christians always accompanies true faith. A right relationship with God will always lead to right relationships with others who are united to Christ, no matter what gender, ethnic or previous religious background they were. This love is not simply warm feelings, but is practical, serving love as modelled by Christ. This love is to be continually worked on, and later in the letter Paul will apply the teaching of the letter to areas where love needs to grow in the church (see 3:12-17).

5. the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel

In his letters Paul commonly links faith, hope and love as the right fruits of the gospel taking root in people's lives, and he does so here.

The hope the Colossians have is the basis for their faith and love. This hope is not simply wishful thinking (e.g. "I hope it won't rain tomorrow" – but we don't know whether it will or not). It is certain "stored up for you in heaven", like having money stored up in a bank (although perhaps that is a bad example at the moment!). Our future is secure and because of that our faith and love grows.

The rest of Colossians fills in the content of this hope and how we can be so certain of it. It is not vague – it is personal. The hope we have is in Christ Jesus himself (1:27), whom we are united to, and who is in us guaranteeing us of our future glory.

The Colossians came to hear about this hope in the gospel, which is the good news about Jesus Christ. It is "truth". Paul assures them that what they have heard and believed is true – it was when they first believed it, and it still is now. This is a deliberate contrast

to what Paul will mention later in the letter – the wisdom of this world which is “hollow and deceptive” (2:8).

6. that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth.

Paul continues to stress the truth of the gospel message. The gospel the Colossians heard and responded to was the same message that is going out all over the world. The gospel itself is growing, as more and more people receive it and show that faith, hope and love which are its natural fruit.

This all seems very obvious, but as we read on in the letter it becomes clear that the Colossians are having their faith in Christ knocked by people who are claiming they need something else as well as the gospel. Paul restates the gospels credentials here. It is not a small wacky message which can be ignored, no, it is the message for the whole world which continues to bear fruit. To listen and respond to the word of truth is the only way you can experience the grace of God.

The emphasis on the gospel “bearing fruit and growing” is important, because that is what the Colossians (and we) want to do in our Christian lives. The gospel bears fruit and grows in us, as well as by saving more people. The Colossians were being tempted to turn to other things in order to bear fruit in obedience and closeness to God (we’ll see this when we look at the end of chapter 2), but here Paul stresses that fruit comes from the gospel alone. If we move away from the gospel, we will be fruitless.

7. You learned it from Epaphrus, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,

Paul underlines to the Colossians that this gospel message was the message they had received. They had not received a partial gospel that needs to be added to – no, Paul deliberately mentions the name of the person who first brought the gospel to Colossae and approves of him. Epaphrus took the apostolic message of the gospel to Colossae. He was a “faithful minister of Christ” – not a faithful minister of religion, or of spirituality, but of Christ who spoke on behalf of the apostles, and his message was a message about Christ. The Colossians can be sure that what they heard and

believed in was God's word to them. Therefore if they reject it and move on to something else, they are moving away from God.

8. and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

Paul finishes this part of his prayer on a positive note. Epaphrus has reported back to Paul with news of their love (see verses 4 and 5), love which is not simply natural niceness, but love "in the spirit" – Holy Spirit produced love which comes from the bond of unity they have as they are united in Christ. This love which comes from the gospel is the opposite to the pride and superiority that religion and other spiritualities produces (see 2:16, 23).

Possible Questions

What do we learn about the writer of the letter in verse 1? Why is this significant?

How are the recipients of the letter described in verse 2? Why is this significant?

Why is it important to remember that we are both "in Christ" and "in Colossae/Ealing"? What are the dangers that follow if we forget either one of our two identities?

What does Paul thank God for in the Colossians? What is the connection between the faith, love and hope they have?

What comes into your mind when you hear the word "faith"? What does Paul say about the content of the Colossians faith?

What comes into your mind when you hear the word "hope"? How is the hope in verse 5 different?

How does Paul emphasise that the gospel the Colossians heard was God's word?

From these verses, what is the evidence that you can point to that someone has believed the gospel?

STUDY 2 - COLOSSIANS 1:9-14

So Far

Paul has begun the letter by giving thanks for the clear evidence that the gospel has taken root in the lives of the Colossians – the faith in Christ Jesus and the love for all the saints which flows from the hope they have. He has underlined the fact that the gospel they received was the true gospel. Now Paul continues in prayer for the Colossians.

This Section

Paul's prayerful desires for the Colossians are not disconnected from the rest of the letter. Through what he prays, he is subtly correcting the emphases of the false teachers in Colossae which he will speak about in chapter 2. These verses teach us about how we grow as Christians, about what our salvation involves, and how to pray for fellow believers. Remember Paul is praying for a church he has never met personally (see 2:1) – how much more then should we be praying these things for one another!

Notes

9. For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding

Paul is not content that the Colossians have become Christians. He wants them to grow, and he assumes that Christian growth is possible. Paul has been regularly praying for their growth as Christians since he heard about them.

What the Colossians need is to be filled with “the knowledge of his [God's] will”. They need to know what God would have them do. This request and the next statement “through all spiritual wisdom and understanding” may sound very mysterious but it's important we read on to the next verses to let Paul explain himself. He's not asking that the Colossians receive special words and pictures from the Lord showing them the future.

10. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.

“Knowledge of God’s will” is needed so they can live as people “in Christ”, living up to His name, pleasing Him, and being fruitful (this does not simply mean that Paul wants them to be prosperous, but to bear real spiritual fruit as they do what God has called them to do – see Eph 2:10, Gal 5:22, and John 15:4. We bear this fruit as we know God better.

And notice that as we live in obedience to God we grow in our knowledge of God. There is a continuing cycle here. As God reveals his will to us, we obey it, and as a result we know him better. To know God is not simply to know what he says – we only grow in our knowledge of him as we obey.

11. being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully 12. giving thanks to the Father

Paul’s next prayer for the Colossians is for power. This is an exciting prayer! We’d all love access to the power of God – the power that created the world and that rose Jesus from the dead. We’d all love that power – to do miracles, to impress the world.

But what Paul says next may take us by surprise. We need this incredible power for “endurance” and “patience” and to “joyfully give thanks to him”. This is humbling, yet it is realistic. We need access to the power that brought back Jesus from the dead simply to keep going as Christians, to wait on God, and to praise him. This reveals the depth of our sin, yet it is an encouragement – because God promises to give it to us. We must pray the same thing, if we don’t we are revealing our self dependence and lack of trust in God.

, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. 13. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14. in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This is the reason we “joyfully give thanks to the Father”.

Paul talks us about being “qualified” for salvation because this was the language of the false teachers. See 2:18. They were saying you were “disqualified” from salvation if you didn’t worship angels etc. Paul says “No!”, God the Father has qualified you to share in his inheritance which is given to the “saints” (all who are “in Christ” – see vs 2 in the ESV) because it is Christ’s and we are united to him.

The images of “light” and “darkness” are common images in the New Testament to express the total difference between belonging to Christ and not belonging to Christ. If we are Christians we have moved from one to the other. Notice the past tense, this HAS already happened. The new kingdom is the kingdom of “the Son he loves”. It is Christ’s kingdom, so we must not move away from him.

Notice in these verses how full our salvation is. It involves forgiveness of sins (vs 14), transfer into a new kingdom under Christ (vs 13), and the waiting for an inheritance (vs 12). You cannot have one of these things without the others.

Possible Questions

What is the first thing Paul prays for the Colossians (vs 9)?

Why might we want to know God’s will? Why does Paul say we need to know it? (vs 10)

Trace the pattern of Christian growth that Paul draws out in verse 10.

Why might we want to be “strengthened with all power”? Why does Paul say we need that?

Why is this both humbling and encouraging?

What has the Father done for us that should lead us to give thanks to him (vs 12-13)? Discuss the different things involved in our salvation.

STUDY 3 – COLOSSIANS 1:15-23

So far

Paul has begun his letter by giving thanks to God for the work he is doing in the Colossians, which began when they heard the true gospel from Epaphrus. He has them prayed for them asking that God will enable them to live lives worthy of him through being filled with knowledge of him, and by being strengthened with his power so they can keep going. Paul concluded the previous section by assuring the Colossians that they are qualified for heaven because of what Jesus has done for them.

This Section

Paul expands on verse 13 to show who Christ is. He is fully God, he is the maker and sustainer of the universe, and he is the only one who has reconciled God and the universe (which includes the Colossians).

It is tempting to take verses 15-20 out of its context in Colossians and just see it as a great piece of abstract theology. However we need to remember that it is part of Paul's argument in Colossians – he writes this to the Colossians to give them assurance in their salvation (in the face of those who are disqualifying them for the prize – see 2:18), but it also shows them that to move away from Christ is not just foolish, but it is dangerous – there is no salvation, no way to God outside of him.

These verses speak of Christ's relationship to God (vs 15, vs 19), his relationship to creation (vs 16-17), and his relationship to his church (vs 18). These are all related. Jesus is the one who has reconciled us because he is both God

Notes

Vs 15 - He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

We tend to read verses 15 – 20 as a list of things which are true about Jesus Christ, but it is important to notice that this verse is Paul's "headline" to this section. This is the most important truth. Verses 16 onwards explain it – notice the "for" (or it could be put "because") at the beginning of the next verse.

This is what we need to know about Jesus. He reveals the unseen God to us perfectly. It is important to notice that as well as

stressing Jesus' divinity this statement also stresses his humanity – Genesis 1:27 states that mankind is created in the image of God, yet after the fall that image is marred. Jesus Christ is the perfect man who perfectly revealed God to us.

Creation belongs to him. "Firstborn" does not mean "born first" or "created first", as Jehovah's Witnesses may like to tell us. It is about status. The firstborn in a family received the inheritance and carried on the family name in ancient cultures. Jesus is God's king ruling over all creation. See Psalm 89:27.

Vs 16 - For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

This verse begins to unpack verse 15. Jesus' creating role is stressed. He is the creator, not part of the creation, and he is the purpose of creation – everything was made "for him". This emphasises his pre-eminence.

This would be very important for the Colossians to know. Anyone who tried to take their focus off Jesus in worship would be trying to get them to commit idolatry (see Col 2:18 – even worship of angels, notice the emphasis on Jesus creating things in heaven as well as on earth).

Vs 17 - He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Jesus Christ existed before all creation, and he sustains the universe (keeps it going).

In all this Paul is magnifying our view of Jesus Christ – he is not "just" the one who forgives sins!! Everything is under Jesus Christ's control.

Vs 18 - And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Paul moves from talking about the creation to talking about the new creation. He rules the church, and is the vital source of life for the church. His resurrection makes that a reality, he is the "firstborn from among the dead", having died for sin and been raised to life he takes the place of pre-eminence and rule (see Philippians 2:6-11). By doing so he is "the beginning", he opens the way to the resurrection for all who trust in him.

Vs 19 - For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, “Fullness” is stressed here because it seems to have been a bit of a buzzword amongst the false teachers in Colossae. Paul keeps emphasising that the “fullness of God is in Christ” (see 2:9), and we can easily imagine the Colossian teachers saying something like “you need more than Christ, you need a ‘full’ Christian life”. Paul says “no” – look at Christ! He is fully God. If you are in him you don’t need anything else.

Vs 20 - And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Just as Christ created all things, his death has reconciled to God all things. He is the one mediator whose death on the cross has paid the price for sin. Nothing else contributes to this great work – angels, our works etc. it has been done. v

This does not mean everyone will be saved. What it is saying is that salvation is about more than individuals being forgiven – it has a cosmic aspect to it as the curse of sin is undone and the universe is reconciled to God. The whole creation is liberated from bondage to sin and will bow the knee to Christ.

Vs 21 - Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.

Verse 20 has consequences for us. We were enemies of God – cut off from an offended God. Notice why - we acted wrongly (“evil behaviour”) which affected the way we thought (“enemies in our minds”). Romans 1:18-32 draws this out in more detail where we are shown that our sin leads us to suppress the clear truth about God.

This relation between actions and thinking is important to see, because when we get to chapter 3 we see that the way we deal with our sinful actions is by thinking rightly.

Vs 22 - But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish, and free from accusation –

What Christ has done for the whole universe is now applied personally to Christians. He has taken the initiative to deal with the break up in the relationship. Notice the emphasis on the cross by the stress on Christ’s “physical body”.

The purpose of this was not simply to cancel out our sins but to “present you holy in his sight”. To be set apart for God, perfect in his sight.

“Free from accusation” – any accusation which says we are not good enough, whether it be from our consciences, the devil, or from false teachers (see chapter 2).

Vs 23 - if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

The gospel does not make us complacent. The warning is strong that if we move away from Christ and the gospel there is no hope for us. We must persevere in the gospel promises rather than moving to trying to get to God some other way.

Paul emphasises that these verses are the true gospel. Any other “gospel” is false.

Possible Questions

(Recap) What do we know about the church in Colossae?

From vs 12 and 13, what has God done for us? How has he done it?

What is the main point Paul wants us to know about Christ in verse 15?

- Why does he stress “image”? Where else do we hear about the image of God in the bible? How does this emphasise both Christ’s divinity and humanity?
- Does “firstborn” mean created?

What has Christ done? (vs 16) Why does creation exist?

- what implications does this have for not worshipping him/ worshipping other things.

Has Christ just created? What is his role at the moment (vs 17)?

What is his role regarding the church? Why is that the case (vs 18)?

What is re-emphasised in vs 19?

What has Christ done? (vs 20)? What does that tell us about Christ's work? What can it not be telling us? What are the implications for living in the light of Christ's work?

How does Paul describe what we were (vs 21). Trace the stages.

What has Christ done, and why (vs 22)?

What warning does Paul give in verse 23? Why does he give it?

STUDY 4 – COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5

SO FAR

Through reporting his regular prayers for them, Paul has been assuring the Colossians that they have become new people “in Christ” (vs 1) because the true gospel of Jesus Christ has come to them through Epaphrus and they have responded to it (vs 3-6). He has shown them how great Jesus Christ is (vs 15-20), how they grow as Christians by knowing him more and by knowing his resurrection power (vs 9-13), and he has warned them of the danger of moving away from him (vs 21-23).

THIS SECTION

Although it would be easy to see this section as simply a transition section from the prayer in chapter 1 to the description of the false teachers in chapter 2, as we read it becomes clear that Paul gives his purpose for writing this letter in these verses. In 2:2 he tells us that he wants these believers (and by extension, all believers) to be united and have the “full riches of complete understanding”. He wants for them what the false teachers want for them – maturity and fullness – but Paul makes it clear that those things are found in 1 place only, or rather in 1 person only, in “Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”. Paul makes it clear that he has devoted his life to serving the church by proclaiming Christ so that the church may be presented perfect in him.

The false teachers, which Paul will go on to expose later in chapter 2, begin to appear in these verses, with Paul saying that he is stressing these things “So that no one may deceive you by fine sounding arguments” (2:4).

The verses have a double application. Firstly they teach us the way to true Christian maturity – by knowing Christ. Secondly, by following Paul's example, they teach us how we can build up and disciple others. Paul's example is a pattern for gospel ministry in any age and situation.

NOTES

Vs 24 – Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church

In this verse Paul is stressing the hardship he is going through to serve the Colossians. Just as Christ suffered for the Colossians in his death, Paul suffers as a servant of Christ for them.

This is a difficult verse to fully understand (don't get too hung up on it in the study)- Paul is not saying that Christ's death lacked any sufficiency in saving the Colossians. They have been completely redeemed because of what Christ has done (vs 13/14, 22), but it can be said that as Christians suffer in this world Christ is suffering (so as Paul is suffering as an apostle for the church, those sufferings can be said to be Christ's suffering).

Vs 25 – I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness –

Just as Christ was a suffering servant, Paul's role as an apostle is to be a suffering servant of the church. He stresses he has been directly appointed by God with a clear task – to present to them what God has revealed completely.

As we'll see in the next few verses "word of God" has a double meaning. It refers to the bible (God's revelation), but also to the content of that word – Jesus Christ, the living word of God.

"Fullness" is a word Paul uses a lot in these chapters, and it is highly likely that the false teachers were using it to try and influence the Colossians to accept their teachings. Paul is saying all "fullness" is found in the gospel alone.

Vs 26 – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but it is now disclosed to the saints.

Presenting "the word of God in its fullness" involves declaring the "mystery". We think of "mystery" as being something secret, accessible only to a few special people (and that was how the false teachers in Colossae were presenting their message), but in

the bible a “mystery” is something which, as this verse states, was not known, but now has been revealed. It has been “disclosed to the saints” – to all Christians, not just to a special elite.

Vs 27 – To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The great mystery in “Christ” and the riches of that mystery is the fact that he is “in you, the hope of glory”. Once we know Christ, he dwells within us, and he is the content of all our hope. There is nothing more to seek after, we have it all in Christ.

Paul stresses that the riches of this mystery are available to all the saints – including the gentiles (non Jews). This would have been a radical thought in the early church, and continues to make Paul’s point that there is no spiritual elite in the church, everyone (Jew and gentile alike) are equal.

Vs 28 – We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. As a result of verses 25-27 Paul stresses how he goes about his task as a servant of the church. He proclaims “him” – Christ and nothing or no one else. He does this by “admonishing and teaching” both positive training and negative correction. Paul does this so that everyone reaches maturity. He has the same aim for them as Christ has (see vs 22).

Vs 29 – To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

As a result of verse 28 Paul works hard. Christian ministry is hard work! And yet, it is not all down to Paul He works because Christ is working in him (remember verse 11).

2 vs 1 – I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.

Paul applies these verses personally to the Colossians and assures them he is working hard for them. It is amazing to think he is saying these things to a group of Christians he has never even met.

Vs 2 – My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they might know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,

This expands on what Paul means by “present everyone perfect in Christ” in 1:28. he wants them to be “encouraged”. This means more than simply feeling positive and supported – it means strengthened. He wants them to be united – to recognise that they are united and equal in Christ. And he wants them to know Christ, to have a complete understanding of God’s provision for them, and so they know how to grow as Christians.

Vs 3 – in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge

Paul again stresses why it is so important not to move away from Christ. In him there is wisdom and knowledge – true knowledge of God and of how to live. Don’t move from him.

Vs 4 – I tell you this so that no-one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.

This is an allusion to the false teachers Paul will mention in the rest of chapter 2. he has spent time stressing the centrality of Christ so we are not deceived by others who teach something different. The fact that they “deceive” implies that they will not always be easy to spot, so we need to take time and effort getting to know the authentic gospel.

Vs 5 – For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Paul stresses here that though there are threats to the Colossians, they are standing firm, trusting Christ, and are “orderly” – not running off in different directions after different heresies.

Possible Questions

How does Paul stress how hard he works for the Colossians? (Vs 24)

How does Paul stress why he works for the Colossians? (vs 25)

What does Paul tell us about what he does as he works for the Colossians? (vs 25)

What comes into your mind when you hear the word “mystery”?
What is Paul talking about when he uses that word? (Vs 26-27)

What is Paul’s aim for the Colossians? How will that aim be achieved? (vs 28)

How does Paul work (vs 29)?

What does this teach us about Christian service in the church?

How does Paul expand on his purpose for the Colossians in 2:2?

Why do you think he says what he does about Christ in verse 3?
What encouragements does Paul have as he hears about the Colossian church (vs 5)?

What should be our aim as Christians? What threatens that aim?

STUDY 5 – COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

So Far

It is clear that Christ is at the centre of Paul’s ministry and his letter to the Colossians. He is thankful that this church have received the true gospel of Christ and he has prayed that they grow in him. He has emphasised the supremacy of Christ – the one who has rescued them, and he has emphasised that his ministry as an apostle is to present everyone perfect in Christ.

This Section

In this section Paul continues to stress the need to continue “in Christ” especially in the face of false teaching which may be attractive, but does not depend on him. What we have “in Christ” is emphasised – we have fullness in him, because united to him through his death and resurrection the power of sin in us has been broken, our sin has been forgiven, and in him the evil powers have been triumphed.

Notes

6. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,

This verse summarises Paul's teaching in the whole letter.

Christians are to go on as they began – having received Christ Jesus as Lord when we first heard the gospel (as the Colossians did, remember 1:6-7), we grow as Christians by continuing in that gospel, knowing we are now “in him”, united to Christ (remember 1:2). We must not look anywhere else.

7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

This verse explains how we are to “continue”. Notice again the emphasis is on Christ, “in him” we are to be “rooted” and “built up”. God has planted us in Christ – he has done everything to unite us to him (remember the descriptions of our conversion in 1:13 and 1:21-23). The way to continue is to grow in the place we are.

This happens as we stay faithful to the gospel (“the faith as you were taught”). This implies that as Christians we do not need new teaching, but we need to know and appreciate more the gospel we have already received. We also need to be “overflowing with thankfulness”. This will be a natural consequence of appreciating the gospel, and will be a positive safeguard against moving away from Christ. You do not move away from someone or something you are thankful for!

Notice how thankfulness is often mentioned by Paul in this letter. It is one of his great desires that Christians should be thankful (notice that he prays for this in 1:12 as well).

8 See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

The false teachers threatening the Colossian Christians are mentioned. God, through Paul, is writing this letter so we will not lose our freedom in Christ (he has redeemed us – see 1:14), and be taken back into captivity by those who teach other things.

We cannot work out in detail what the original false teaching facing the Colossians was, but that is a good thing. This verse is just as applicable today as it was then. Paul is warning us against any “philosophy” (a catch all word for any system of teaching or thought) which is “hollow” (i.e. empty) and “deceptive” (claims one thing, but does another). The way we can tell a philosophy is hollow and deceptive is if it depends on anything else other than “on Christ”.

There is much discussion in the commentaries about what “human tradition” and “the basic principles of this world” means. Don’t get bogged down in this. The point is clear – they are contrasted with teaching which comes from Christ and builds up people in Christ. As we’ll see the false teachers in Colossia were saying that there were other ways of growing as Christians other than being “rooted and built up in him”.

9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form

Again, the reason why Christ is the one in whom we need to be built up is emphasised. Paul reminds us of 1:15-20. God in his fullness has revealed himself in a human body, in Jesus Christ, so we should not go anywhere else to find him.

The emphasis on the human body of Christ might also be here because the false teachers were saying that what is “bodily” is evil and what is “spiritual” (i.e. non bodily) was good (see 2:16, 2:20-23). They were trying to impress the Colossians with talk about spiritual beings (see 2:18). Paul is perhaps saying here “the human body and physical world is good, God has chosen to reveal himself in a body!”. Don’t be impressed by anyone who tries to teach anything else.

10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority.

It is not just that Christ is fully God, but that as Christians, united to Christ, we now have “fullness” in him. If you are full, you don’t need anything else.

The Christ we are united to is the ruler of the universe (remember 1:15-20) – therefore to go anywhere else for “fullness” or teaching is foolish.

11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,

These next couple of verses are tricky to understand and the commentaries differ on how to understand them. In basic terms, they relate to our unity with Christ – in him we are freed from the power of sin (our sinful nature has been “put off”, not that we are sinless, but that we have been moved from the realm of being controlled by sin, to being controlled by the Spirit in Christ, see Romans 8) – which is what verses 11 and 12 are saying, and in him our sins are forgiven, which is what verses 13 and 14 are saying. These things come about because of the cross.

With Douglas Moo (Pillar Commentary) I think the best way to understand this verse is that Paul is saying that if we are Christians we have been circumcised – not that a piece of flesh has been cut off of our physical body by men, but that our sinful nature has been cut off us by Christ (our hearts have been circumcised). The sinful nature which once controlled us has been taken and dealt with. This does not mean we are now perfect (see Colossians 3), but its power has been broken.

12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Paul here stresses our unity with Christ in what he achieved for us. As he was buried, we were buried, as he was raised, we are raised as new people. He speaks about our “baptism” and “faith” as where the means by which we are united to him.

It would be wrong to construct a full theology of baptism from these two verses. On one side of the argument Paul is not clearly arguing that baptism is the NT equivalent to circumcision (the contrast is physical circumcision with spiritual circumcision) – we need to go elsewhere to show this. On the other side, it would be wrong to use verse 12 to prove that baptism must be full immersion, or must always follow faith (notice it is mentioned first here). As Douglas Moo (a Baptist) writes-

“The popular explanation that Paul uses baptism as a symbol of our death to the old life (when we are plunged beneath the water) and resurrection to a new life (when we arise out of the water) is also wide of the mark. Baptism does not symbolise what happened

when we were converted; it somehow is integrally involved in that conversion itself”.

However we must not give the impression in the studies that baptism saves – that is not what Paul is saying. But what we can say is that the believer can look back to their baptism, and if they have faith, can have confidence that they are united to Christ and therefore the power of sin in their life has been broken.

13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,

The first sentence in this verse is a summary of verses 11-15. We were dead in our sins, far from God and not part of his people (uncircumcised – like the nations in the Old Testament), but God has made us alive in Christ.

Our sinful nature has not just been cut off but our sins which we have committed and deserve punishment have been forgiven. “All our sins” are forgiven – even those which we still remember and grieve over.

14 having cancelled the written code, with its regulation, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

This explains why our sins need to be forgiven. “The written code” refers to God’s law which stands against all humanity whether we were Jews or not (see Romans 2 and 3). The punishment which we deserve for breaking the law (death – see Genesis 2 and 3) has been taken by Christ on the cross.

15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

However, Christ achieved more on the cross than simply forgiving our sins. Remember 1:19. Christ took on Satan and his demons and defeated them. He triumphed over them, but he did it by the cross – the moment of his apparent weakness, the moment when Satan believed he had won the victory.

The word for disarmed more literally means “strip off”. This is probably too much detail for a study – but it is interesting to note, especially as that language is used to describe what we are to do with sin in chapter 3 verse 9.

Possible Questions

From verses 6 and 7, how do we live and grow as Christians?

Why do you think Paul stresses the need for thankfulness in verse 7?

What threat is there to obeying verses 6 and 7? How do we test any teaching or philosophy to see if it is “hollow and deceptive”?

Why should we not move away from Christ? (vs 9-10)

What are some of the benefits of being united to Christ

- in verses 11 and 12
- in verse 13

Why do we need to be forgiven? (vs 14) How can we know we are forgiven?

What else has the cross achieved (vs 15)?