

“1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus *our* brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love *which ye have* to all the saints, 5 For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; 6 Which is come unto you, as *it is* in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as *it doth* also in you, since the day ye heard *of it*, and knew the grace of God in truth: 7 As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; 8 Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit.” (Col 1:1-8)

About 1000 miles--as the crow flies--East South East of the city of Rome, in what is now the nation of Turkey in Asia Minor there used to be three cities lying within a few miles of each other: Laodicea, Hieropolis, and Colosse. These cities of the Lycus River Valley in Phrygia were thriving towns at the time of Christ, and derived much wealth from sheep-herding and the dying of garments. As time passed, the city of Colosse lost ground to the cities of Laodicea and Hieropolis. Eventually all three were destroyed by an earthquake, and their ruins can be seen today, although very little remains of the city of Colosse: what stones remained until the 19th century have mostly been removed to build the town of Honaz and other building operations. The ruins of Laodicea and Hieropolis are much more extensive.

William Hendrickson says that these cities were pagan towns of some importance. Hieropolis had many springs and hot pools to which many people came for health reasons. Thousands would come to partake of the cures. Here in Hieropolis was also the Charonion or Plutonium, a huge hole that reached far down into the earth, from which poisonous vapor came. This vapor supposedly even killed the birds that flew over the pit. Myths and legends grew up among the pagan people, and many temples and shrines were established, which also contributed to the wealth of the area, and thousands came to worship the deities there. It was considered a holy city.

Colosse, though older than Hieropolis and Laodicea, was not able to compete with the two cities that were favored by the Empire, and went into decline. The area was part of the Eastern Roman Empire until it was conquered by Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. By the 12th century, Colosse has disappeared completely.

Some two thousand families of Jews had been transported to this area by Antiochus, from Mesopotamia and Babylon. Those in the Lycus Valley prospered, and attracted other Jews. By 62 BC the region of Laodicea had more than eleven thousand Jewish freemen; women and children would make the number much larger. In fact, the Talmud reports that the "wines and the baths of Phrygia have separated the ten tribes from Israel." Acts two speaks of Jews from Phrygia being present at the feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given. It may have been some of these Jews, who helped plant the church in Colosse.

The church had come to Colosse. It was never a famous or great church, but it received from the Apostle Paul two extremely important and precious letters, that should always be considered together: Colossians, and Philemon, for Philemon was an important member of the church at

Colosse. It is important always to remember that even small churches may have a very important part to play in the plan of God for the world. There are no insignificant Christians or churches.

The threat to the church in Colosse came from the two sources: the paganism of their past and surroundings, with pre-gnostic ideas; and the Jewish population, mixed with some Essene influences, either directly, or indirectly from relatives and friends in Palestine. The Apostle Paul does not name or clearly identify the heresy, but there are many indications of its nature, from the content of his letters, and the words that he uses.

For the church was in danger of falling back into the wicked immorality of their pagan past, and there were many strong ties to lure them that way. There were those who promised them a more full Christianity by their rules and regulations, their visions and dreams. Added to these was the influence of Jewish Christians, who gave added significance to special days, circumcision, dietary laws. There were perhaps pre-gnostic influences, in angel worship and will-worship, and extreme asceticism that has no part in Christ. They were vain in their conceit in pretending to possess higher knowledge, mystery, mystic insight. All of these were derived from pagan superstition and debased Judaism.

This brings us to the book itself. It was written by Paul from Rome, and carried to Colosse by Tychicus and Onesimus, the slave who is the subject of the book of Philemon. Paul had had no part in the founding of the church at Colosse, but he cared for them, and was greatly concerned that they walk according to the truth of the Gospel. Their pastor, Epaphras, had made the long journey to Rome to visit Paul in prison, and reported on the state of the church. This, and the affair concerning Onesimus, gave cause for Paul to write to them. His authority must have been well received there, for he does not defend his apostleship, as he does to the Corinthians, where it was much disputed.

But let us look at the words.

vs. 1,2. The faithful brethren. His address is to the saints; sometimes he addresses the church; sometimes the saints. I don't know what the significance of that is, but it is interesting. But one thing is certain: Paul never sends his epistle to the officers of the church for them to hold has secret knowledge unavailable to the common people. God's word is for all the people of God, and is to be read by them, and to be discussed by them, and to be embraced in their hearts. When the ministers of the church become an elite band, arrogating to themselves the sole right of interpretation, and this is accepted by the members of the church, then Bible study and prayer and devotion disappear from the church members.

Grace and Peace: Peace translates the OT "Shalom." Healthy condition of life. This flows from grace. God is our Father, only because of our union with Christ. Paul sets the theme at the beginning: all good things come to us from Christ, by whom we are united to the Father. Instead of inner discord, fightings, fears, unrest, the child of God has peace with God: this is through justification, not only objective in the work of Christ, but subjective in the application of the Holy Spirit who works faith. Only the child of God by faith in Jesus Christ knows the inner harmony that the pagans wrote about, but never experienced.

vs. 3-5. Paul now comes to thanksgiving. This means that he recognizes the true source of spiritual blessing: the Triune God. Thanksgiving and prayer go together. True prayer arises in thanksgiving, according to Psalm 50.

He thanks God for three things, which only come from God: These three always go together, and are the work of the Spirit in the heart. They are rooted in grace, and in the work of Jesus Christ. Anything that would remove us from the fullness in Jesus Christ, is a war against faith, love and hope.

Faith: This is the gift of God. It is the inner assent to the gospel story concerning Christ. It only comes through the gospel story, and no other way. The essence of faith is to accept as true the story of Christ. As the HC says, it involves a certain knowledge (which only comes by the Holy Spirit), and trust from the heart to rely only upon Jesus Christ and his righteousness.

Love: This love is two fold: love for Christ, which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and love for the people of Christ, his body. It was certain that they belonged to Christ because they loved the people of God. It is vain hypocrisy to claim to have love for Christ, but have no love for God's people: not some of them, but all of them. Sectarianism, cliquishness, clannishness, are all opposed to the Spirit of Christ, and are not to be tolerated among us.

Hope: Hope. Hope is of the essence of faith, for faith is connected to the promises. In fact, hope could be considered another way of looking at faith. Thus, Paul says we are saved by hope. Hope in the Bible might be considered objectively: that is, God's promise is certain and what He has promised will certainly come; or subjectively: the inward response of the heart, which includes joy and anticipation.

The hope here is heaven. Faith lays hold on nothing less than the hope of eternal life and heaven in the presence of God. This was always man's destiny: even the name of the Garden of Eden, (Paradise) looked forward to heaven, for Christ did not promise the thief on the cross that he would be with him in the Garden of Eden that day.

The joys of heaven are "laid up" as a treasure is laid up. This same word is used in a bad sense in the parable of the Talents, when the evil servant "laid up" his talent in a napkin. But the point is well taken: Heaven is securely saved up for the people of God, and there is no possibility that we will not come there at last, if we belong to Jesus Christ.

The truth of the Gospel. This means more than the Gospel is true. It is very emphatic. Paul is saying: "the Gospel is true, in contradiction to all the stuff you have been hearing." Paul was not one to find common ground with anything that would draw men off from Jesus Christ and His righteousness.

It was what they had heard before. The gospel whereby they had received the Holy Spirit in newness of life is the true Gospel. Beware of any other message. The gospel is not just another religious competitor to which you may or may not assent. It is the truth. It has nothing in common with the vain philosophy that Paul will speak of later, or the choking legalism that the Jews would impose.

vs. 6: The Gospel is truly the power of God. There are several things:

1. It is a message from God for the whole world. It does not adapt and become one with the prevailing religious idolatry, but it replaces it.
2. It is a message for them. It will not only change the world, but it will change them. Don't be so quick to take it to the world until it has changed you. Both messages must be emphasized: It changes me; and it changes the world.
3. It is living and powerful. It brings forth fruit: Gal. 5: love, joy, peace, etc. It is the Gospel message that changes the inner man; no other message can do this, because all other messages are human. Only God's message changes the heart.

Spiritual blessings. It brings forth fruit. The deep, deep work of the Holy Spirit, bring repentance from sins; love in the heart; mercy toward others; grace and peace. This is the grace of God in truth. It is a constant power in the life, in the soul, in the deepest part of man.

"Knew" is "epignosis" knowledge in the deepest part of the soul. This knowledge is contrasted with a mere mental grasp. It means an "assimilation of the inner meaning of the gospel, so that truth is transformed into experience." (Tyndale Com). The word must be received into the heart, in order for the heart to be changed, and the man or woman transformed by the gospel. James puts it, "Receive the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls."

This is beyond the reach of human effort. God alone knows and tries the heart, and God alone works in the heart. It is reserved to Him alone, although He has graciously admitted men into the fellowship of the Gospel, to carry the Gospel, which alone is the power of God unto salvation.

They knew the gospel "in truth," that is sincerely and without pretence. Paul would connect the people with their faithful minister: to disarm the devices of the devil, who has many deceitful workers.

vs. 7,8: Epaphrus was their faithful pastor who had faithfully preached the Gospel to them. Paul commends him as a "faithful minister of Christ."

Love in the Spirit; this means true spiritual love. Supernatural grace: the result of the Gospel.

Human love has an external root (Calvin). It sees something pleasing in the object. Human love is a commendation of that which is loved, because it has something lovable about it. Human love is an expression that something is worthy to be loved.

Spiritual love has an internal root: it is the work of the spirit in the heart. Its source is not in that which is loved, but in the person who is loving. Such love God has for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. This love commends the one who is loving. It is far better to love with spiritual love, than it is to be loved with human love.