

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 2 July 2017

No. T0996

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Paul's City Epistles: Colossians

Good morning! Here we are almost ready to celebrate another July 4th - American Independence Day. Nearly 250 years ago the 13 states of the British colony of America declared their independence, and the rest, as they say, is history! This morning we are continuing our look at some of the New Testament letters of Paul. We shall consider the letter to the Christians in Colosse, but before we look at what Paul had to say to them, it is worth just considering a little of the background to this city and the people who lived there.

Colosse was a city in the Roman province of Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey, situated on the River Lycus some 120 miles inland from Ephesus. It lay on the main inland trading route from Tarsus to Ephesus, and had prospered due to this trade. However, by the 1st Century its importance was declining. It was one of three cities in close proximity - the other two being Laodicea and Hierapolis. In the book of the Revelation, the Christians in Laodicea are accused of being neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm (see Revelation 3:14-22). They would have readily understood the allusion to the refreshing and invigorating cold springs in Colosse, or the relaxing and soothing hot springs of Hierapolis, both useful, unlike lukewarm water that is good for nothing.

It is generally thought that Paul had never visited Colosse personally. The Gospel may well have reached Colosse first through the preaching of Epaphras (Colossians 1:7, 4:12) and Philemon may also have been a member of this early Christian church. Paul probably wrote his letter to Colosse some time during his prolonged stay in Ephesus, around AD 60. From Colossians 4:16, we learn that Paul intended this letter also to be read in the church at Laodicea, and also for his letter to that church to be read in Colosse. So why do we not have a letter to the Laodiceans in our Bibles today? What was so important in the letter to the Colossians that the Holy Spirit guided this letter to be retained as a blessing for all Christians of all ages, whereas the letter to the Laodiceans is no longer in existence?

As we shall see, the lessons that we learn in this short letter are absolutely vital, and we shall look at them under three simple headings:

1. The supremacy of Christ (Colossians 1:1-29);
2. Set free by Christ (Colossians 2:1-23);
3. Serving Christ (Colossians 3:1-4:18).

1. The supremacy of Christ (Colossians 1:1-29)

Colosse had once been much larger and more important than its near neighbours, but by the time of Paul's writing was fading in its glory. As part of their corporate identity, there would have been a longing to be the best again. There was a large Jewish community in Colosse, and as we have already seen from the letter to the neighbouring province of Galatia, there would have been a strong pull to adopt the ultra strict practices of Judaism. To be the best for God then, all the detail of the Old Testament law had to be kept. Christianity was just one step on the road to moral and religious perfection. Added to this, stoicism - the pursuit of perfection by denying the body its natural desires, and Gnosticism - a mystical belief that denied the unique supremacy of Christ and inserted a whole host of heavenly beings that were vital to achieve the pinnacle of religious experience, combined to create a belief system that required our working to achieve salvation.

Against this background, Paul introduces the Christian converts to the radical truth of the supremacy of Christ. The Colossians may have sought for knowledge. Now Paul would tell them that in Christ, they had full knowledge. They had been *"delivered from the power of darkness, and conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love"* (Colossians 1:13). But was this merely a step in the journey, an incomplete approach to a full knowledge of God? Oh no! And in Colossians 1:15-29 we read about the absolute supremacy of Christ. This is most powerfully seen in the poem that comprises Colossians 1:15-19. Here we have the Lord Jesus supreme in creation and in the church. The formula is repeated: *"Who is the ... Firstborn!"*

He is the image of the invisible God, firstborn over all creation. He is also the beginning, firstborn from the dead.

The idea of firstborn signifies being first in rank, first in importance.

As the Creator, He is head over all creation. As the firstborn from the dead, He is head over all those who have new life. This is reinforced by the symmetry of the two *"And He"* statements in Colossians 1:17-18. *"And He is before all things ... And He is the head of the body."* In creation, in the church there is none greater than Jesus, the lowly baby of Bethlehem, the humble Nazarene! And the section revolves around the pivotal *"and in Him all things consist"* (Colossians 1:17), that is *"in Him all things hold together"* (Colossians 1:18). Anything and everything that these Colossian Christians needed is to be found *"in Christ"* for the simple reason that all things consist in Him. Anything that was not in Him was in fact nothing. Far from adding to their spirituality or their salvation, it was diminishing their enjoyment of all that Christ gives.

*"In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm"*

Stuart Townend & Keith Getty

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These are not just poetical words but accurately express what Christianity is all about. Everything that is anything is in Christ. That supremacy has acted on our behalf! We have been reconciled to God. All that had previously stood against us and had broken the relationship that God had wanted with mankind has now been removed. We have been reconciled to God. The basis upon which we can have a relationship with God has been totally changed. Whereas, in times past that relationship had depended upon human government or a good conscience or keeping the law or some other human activity, now God has fundamentally changed the basis of our relationship to Him. Our acceptability to God rests wholly on the completed work of the all supreme One on the cross of Calvary. Just pause and think about that for a moment! There is nothing that you or I can do to earn salvation. But reconciliation means more than that. There is nothing that you or I can do to make us more acceptable to God - no amount of good works or righteous living. Perhaps until now you have been trying to live a good life so that God is pleased with you, even though you know that you were saved by Him alone. Well, the message to the Colossian believers, and to us, is that we have already been presented *"holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight"* (Colossians 1:22). No amount of my good behaviour can improve upon that!

Neither were there some mystic rituals or stages to spiritual improvement that these early Christians were missing out on. But there was a mystery, and Paul explains that it has now been revealed to us. What is this mystery? Nothing less than Christ is now in us - those who have trusted in His finished work of salvation. What a glorious salvation! How wonderful the position of every Christian!

2. Set free by Christ (Colossians 2:1-23)

But now, in Colossians 2, Paul has to deal with the problem that these Christians were facing. He does this by presenting to them the wonderful truth that we have been set free in Christ. There was a real danger that the Christians in Colosse would believe that what they had so far done or believed was insufficient and that they were in some way missing out on the best. Perhaps those legalists amongst them were right and that now they had come to Christ, they had to add to their faith by keeping the law, or at least some part of it. This is still a danger to the Church of the 21st Century!

You may have been puzzled by the opening remarks of today's broadcast and the reference to "Independence Day". It is ironic that many of those who fought so passionately for their freedom from colonial rule would then fight equally passionately for the right to enslave others, amongst other things. And so America was thrown into a civil war. Shelby Foote, in his commentary on the civil war, relates the tragic but true experience of an Alabama slave that was typical of thousands of slaves. "When asked what he thought of the Great Emancipator whose proclamation went into effect that year, [he] replied, 'I don't know nothing about Abraham Lincoln, except they say he set us free. And I don't know nothing about that neither.'"

These slaves had been set free by government proclamation and yet they carried on living as slaves on the same plantations, serving the same masters as before. Seemingly nothing had changed. Now I wonder how many believers behave just like those slaves. We have been set free - from the tyranny of the devil and sin, and yet we place ourselves back under a yoke that we need not bear. Everything we have in Christ is ours by grace. It is the free gift of God, undeserved and unearned. Yet we still think that we must do something to merit God's favour, if not to earn salvation, then at least to deserve it. Dear listener, if this describes you this morning, please, once and for ever, lay hold of the message of Colossians and realise that Christ has made you free and complete. You do not, you can not

do anything to make yourself acceptable to God. This has all been done already by the supreme Saviour. So we can see some of the wonderful results of what He has done:

- *"You are complete in Him"* (Colossians 2:10).
- *"You were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands"* (Colossians 2:11 - in the Old Testament circumcision was the ultimate sign of belonging to the people of God).
- *"He has made [you] alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses"* (Colossians 2:13).

Far from Christianity being some half-way-house religion to get us to God, the Gospel believed had brought these Colossian Christians into the very highest blessing and position. To achieve a more exalted position was impossible.

Having accepted this, then the Colossians were urged to *"let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbath"* (Colossians 2:16). Neither were they to be *"cheated of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels"* but they were to *"hold fast the Head"* (Colossians 2:18-19). We have complete liberty in Christ, to live wholeheartedly for Him, without fear. But we still make rules - no food of a certain type on a certain day, or time of year. No activities on a certain day of the week. We must give a certain percentage of our income. We must obey the commandments still. Paul emphatically taught the Colossians they were dead to all these kinds of things, but that they had been raised in newness of life.

3. Serving Christ (Colossians 3:1-4:18)

The final section, comprising the last two chapters of the letter, shows us what this new life looks like. In this section we see that our new life is all about serving Christ. Let us just pause and state again what we have learned. Jesus Christ is all-supreme for in Him everything exists. He has done all that is necessary for us to be saved, and for us to be accepted by and be acceptable to God. There is nothing that we can do to improve on that. Period. No amount of good works will make me more acceptable to God. A lifetime of faithful missionary service and martyrdom will not make me more precious to Him! Does that mean I could do just as I please and still be certain of heaven and all the blessings of life with Him. Absolutely, it does! Does that mean I abuse that liberty? Absolutely not!

I love my children because they are **my** children, not because of their character or their achievements. Now, of course, I am pleased for their sake when they do achieve something, but my love for them is unconditional, because that is the kind of love my heavenly Father has for me. They are, of course, free to abuse that love, and although that may incur disciplinary actions, my love for them remains unchanged. However, happily they have all chosen to honour the love I have for them by acting in a way that they know I would approve of. So we are free to serve Him wholeheartedly as we positively affirm our thanks for the love that God has lavished upon us.

Paul highlights three actions in Colossians 3 that he wanted the Colossians to do:

- They were to put to death wrong desires (Colossians 3:5);
- They were to put off wrong actions (Colossians 3:8-9); and
- They were to clothe themselves with the new nature and the good works that that nature instinctively wants to do (Colossians 3:10-17).

You see, although we are free from any formal set of rules and regulations, we are offered the beautiful prospect of being like Christ, of acting in a Christ-like way whilst here upon earth. Although, in a miracle of grace, God loves me just the way I am, He loves me too much to leave me that way! Those wrong desires that I have are to be *"put to death."* They cannot be modified or trained to be good. As the Lord reveals to me the desires that I have that do not honour Him, then I need to be brutal with myself and in an act of conscious decision, resolve not to do them again. Wrong desires lead to wrong actions and I am to *"put these off"* - or stop doing them. But then I am to *"put on"* the new man, which cannot sin. This new nature that God gives to each believer wants to do right things, Christ-like things. He wants to make me be tenderly merciful, kind, humble, meek, longsuffering, patient and forgiving. Doesn't this paint the picture of a lovely person, the sort of person I would like to be friends with and work with? What a powerful testimony there would be to an unbeliever if they came into a company of people who were just like this. They wouldn't want to leave! But these things need to be *"put on."* They don't just happen automatically or by chance. There is the necessity for me to make a conscious decision that in this particular circumstance I can react in one of two ways. I can either blow my top and get angry as someone bothers me, or I can be tenderly merciful and patient. The choice is mine to make. Paul says, in effect, put to death the pride and anger and choose to be kind. I hope you can see that this is an everyday action. In fact, it will happen many times everyday but as we read through the letter to the Colossians, let us not try to escape the challenge there is to be lovely. Paul paints such a warm hearted attractive picture of what it is to be a Christian.

Perhaps the hardest place to be a Christian is in the home! So now Paul moves on to this realm. In case the Christians at Colosse thought that they just needed to be a Christian in church, or when they were meeting together with other Christians, or as a company of believers presenting a testimony to the world, Paul writes that their Christianity was to be lived out in the home. In Colossians 3:18-21, each member of the household is addressed. This is because the Christian home is a picture in this world of heavenly realities! God loves me so I am to love my wife. I should submit to God, so my wife is asked to submit to me. We obey God, so children are told to obey their parents. God always disciplines me well, so fathers are to exercise wisdom in disciplining their children. God's plan is perfect and we are to work from His blueprint in every aspect of our family life. If we do so, then we can be assured that we will enjoy His strength and His blessing. God does not offer any guarantees in family life, but we should not be put off from doing our part properly.

At the end of Colossians 3 and beginning of Colossians 4, Paul moves on to the world of work. Let me ask you this morning what are you working for? Is it the pay cheque at the end of the month? This should be the last of your considerations. We should view work as an opportunity to display the character of Christ and work as though we are working for the Heaven Company Ltd. Because we are! Everything we do we do for God, although the boss may look good because of it. And if we are the boss, what is your bottom line? Is it profit and loss or is it justice and fairness - those things that have been lavished upon you by Almighty God! Would you rather stand before God and say "I made 7% increase in profit year on year" or "I treated all my employees in the way that You have treated me"? There is nothing wrong with profit - it is a good thing, because it allows me to give to others. But it must not stop me from behaving like Christ in the process.

Paul then encourages the Colossians to be earnest in prayer and wise in their words. Again, that is just like Christ who *"prayed more earnestly"* (Luke 22:44) and *"No man ever spoke like this Man"* (John 7:46). Again and again in this letter, Paul does not lay down rule after rule of what we should do but in effect says "just be like Jesus". He is the One who is supreme. He is the One who is above all. He is the One who is complete and perfect. So just be like Him. And this really is the Gospel in the fullest sense. God wants men and women to be like His one and only Son, His well beloved. In the same way that I get a sense of delight when my daughter behaves just like her mother, so God is delighted when we behave just like His Son.

Finally, the letter then finishes with Paul giving his thanks to all those who have helped him (Colossians 4:7-17). Sometimes we may feel that we are the only ones who are doing anything or working hard for God. These final few verses show us just how much we need each other and should value the contribution that each of us has to make to the work of God.

So as we conclude, let us celebrate our freedom from our old master, Sin, and let us live in the glorious liberty of the salvation that is complete in Christ alone. There is nothing lacking in Christ! But let that realisation also be the motivation for the way that we live. Let us strive with all that we are to be like Him, and in so doing offer a beautiful picture to this world of our all supreme Saviour and Lord, for His name's sake.

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