NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 64

Prison Epistles – Part Four

Colossians

This is the third of four letters Paul wrote while most likely under house arrest in Rome around 62 A.D. We have already studied Ephesians and Philippians. We still have Philemon to cover after this lesson.

I. BACKGROUND

A. Paul's Reason for Writing

Evidently, Paul wrote the Colossian letter to correct a heresy that had crept into the church. Our knowledge of the heresy comes from careful reading of the letter along with our knowledge of the developing Gnostic[1] heresy that beset the church in the decades following Paul's letter. As a fundamental premise, the heresy taught that between God and man stretched a number of angelic beings that mediated and controlled much of what went on with humanity. Called "elemental beings," these angels were set over planets and parts of space. Arguably, as Christ came to earth from God, he would have had to pay tribute to these beings, not very differently from the way a traveler would pay a tax to use a road.

Thus, God was removed from mankind and the "mystical truth" (or knowledge) was understanding the presence of other "beings" who ruled over much of human activity. An aspect of this included certain ramifications on life. Some adherents believed that God was "spiritual," while humanity was both spiritual and physical. The spiritual was considered "holy" or Godly while the physical was considered mundane and even profane. In this regard, the Gnostic heresy ultimately took one of two basic forms. Some would live with a license to sin believing that any deed of the flesh was irrelevant anyway. Others would shun anything physically joyful or fulfilling, viewing such acts out of step with the superior spiritual knowledge attained.

[1] "Gnostic" comes from the Greek word "*Gnosis*" (γνωσις) which means "knowledge." The root of the heresy was "special knowledge" held by some that elevated their spirituality beyond that of the ordinary folks missing the "special knowledge."

© Copyright 2006 by W. Mark Lanier. Permission hereby granted to reprint this document in its entirety without change, with reference given, and not for financial profit.

Paul writes the Colossians to put an end to this heresy before it grows far. Paul will discuss each aspect in the letter, especially in the early chapters.

B. Background on the Church.

We do not know much about the starting of the church at Colossae. Most likely, the church started while Paul was teaching at Ephesus (Acts 19). We can assume from the letter that Paul had not previously visited the church though he expected to soon (see also Philemon on this point).

Paul writes for the Colossians to share their letter with the church at Laodicia, a much larger town ten miles down river from Colossae. Reciprocally, Paul asks the Colossians to read the letter Paul was writing to the Laodicians. We no longer have that letter.

Colossians is easily divided into two sections. The first two chapters deal with theological and doctrinal issues. The last two chapters deal with practical issues of Christian living.

II. THE TEXT

A. Doctrine and Theology (Chapters 1 – 2)

Paul begins the letter in typical fashion, noting himself and Timothy as authors and the "holy and faithful" in Christ at Colossae as recipients. Paul greets the Colossians with a standard Hebrew and standard Greek greeting: Grace (Greek) and peace (Hebrew). Also typical, Paul immediately offers thanksgiving and a prayer for the readers.

The thanksgiving is for the faith and love of the Colossians. Paul's prayer is for God to fill the Colossians with the "knowledge" of his will through all "spiritual wisdom" and "understanding." Each of the words set in quotations in the previous sentence are most certainly buzz words among those holding the Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics believed they possessed the "knowledge," "spiritual wisdom," and "understanding" that exceeded most and set them apart as the truly spiritual and intellectual folks. Paul is already setting up his letter that explains the truth behind what is "knowledge," "spiritual wisdom," and "understanding."

Paul adds that he prays for these virtues so that the Colossians may live a life worthy of the Lord, pleasing the Lord in every way. Paul has no concern about pleasing or living for angelic hosts. Paul makes no reference to the need to satisfy spiritual beings beyond the Lord himself. Paul wants the Colossians strengthened with all power according to ***God's*** glorious might, not that of other beings. That is the power that would give endurance, patience, and appreciation for the Father's rescue. The rescue brought us into the kingdom of the Son and gave us forgiveness of sins that accompanies our redemption (1:1-14).

Paul then begins a discourse that most likely is part of an early hymn or liturgy about Christ. It fits Paul's purposes perfectly for it sets out the gospel truth in opposition to the heresies that prompts Paul's letter.

Paul explains that Christ is the image of the invisible God and the first born over all creation. Christ was no aberration or lesser image that was some insubstantial part of creation. Christ himself was also creator, not just of earth, but of things in heaven as well. Christ would never have had to subjugate himself to any being, for any being made was made by and through Christ. This is true of earthly matters and unseen matters as well. Powers, rulers, principalities – Christ created them all, and even more … ***for*** Christ. This was the true knowledge and mystery. Christ is supreme over not just his church, but also everything.

Christ was no second rate Messiah or God. In Christ, God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell" (1:19). What is more, through this same Messiah, God reconciled the world and the heavens to himself by making peace through Jesus' death.

This means that though we were once alienated from God, lost in our sinful desires and nature, we are now reconciled. The reconciliation came through the physical death of Jesus. This was no esoteric or mystic symbolism. It was a real atonement of a holy and spotless physical sacrifice that brings a blemish-free holiness to us who follow him.

This is our good news ("gospel"). This is our faith and hope: Jesus, our Savior by his choice and death. This is also the real mystery. Not a special knowledge of celestial beings, but a real knowing of

God working on earth. God has made known his riches to all people: Christ in his people, the hope of glory (1:20 – 27).

Paul writes in a way that contrasts his teaching with that of the Gnostics. Paul sees the hope of glory in Jesus, not in philosophies or special words of knowledge. Paul's wisdom is rooted firmly in a historical and physical event on earth with eternal consequences, not in lofty ideas that reconstruct reality and minimize what we see and live.

Paul writes that he personally cares and struggles deeply for those to whom he writes. He wants them to have "complete understanding" to know "the mysteries of God." The mysteries, however, are summed up in one word: Christ. It is in Christ that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. There is no one else or no other power possessing such. Paul wants the Colossians to be safe from the deceptive teaching of others and their "fine-sounding arguments" (2:1-5).

So, Paul wants the Colossians to continue in Christ and let their roots grow deep into him. Paul saw the options to faith in Christ as "hollow and deceptive" (Philosophies built on earthly tradition and worldly principles rather than eternal truths and Christ.) In Christ, all the fullness of God lives in bodily form. Christ is not subject to angels or planetary authorities. Christ is the head over every power and authority. Furthermore, we have fullness in Christ. We have no need for some greater and more special knowledge beyond the knowledge of God in Christ.

It is God in Christ that brought us into a new relationship. Our old sinful self was removed in a spiritual circumcision. Our baptism is a burial of an old sinful self and a rising of a faith and new life. Gone is the old written code; powers and principalities are disarmed. We stand not in shame, not in immaturity, but in Christ. We do not need any angelic help; we need not follow idle notions that make other's head swell with trumped up knowledge. Ascetic commands for the mere sake of appearance or appeasing some fanatical notion of reality are useless to us. We live in light and truth of God and reality (2:6-23).

B. Christian Living (Chapters 3-4)

Paul doesn't miss a beat as he fuses into his reality of what Christian living entails. Paul wants us, as those raised with Christ, to set our hearts on things above. We have died to this world and its ways. We are found in Christ seated at the right hand of God. We are in Christ and Christ is in God. Our harmony and relationship with God is set aright. Our fellowship is restored. Eden's loss has redemption in Christ. We should live accordingly!

We need to put to death those sins that accompany the sinful nature that died with Christ. Paul lists a number of traits and habits that should no longer have place in our lives: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. All have no place in our lives. Nor does anger, rage, malice, slander, or filthy language. We are not to lie. We are to remember and realize that we are being renewed in the image of our Creator. Regardless of whether we are Jew or Greek, circumcised or not, slave or free, we belong to God. We should wear his holiness and love. We should dress with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We should bear with one another and forgive each other. After all, aren't these the very traits of God we saw in Jesus and his life?

This is the peace that Christ has that should set up and reign in our hearts. This is our calling: to have Christ dwelling in us as we speak and encourage each other.

Paul says that "whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus." This is a triply emphatic statement. "Whatever" means literally all we do. Similarly, "in word or deed" means the same. In Greek thought, everything was properly classified as either a word or a deed. So, Paul's statement is a second way of saying "whatever." Paul then adds, "do all…" This is his third way of saying the same thing. Seeing Paul go to that length to emphasize his point, it is well worth pausing for a moment to soak it in.

We live in a different age than the Colossians; however, like them, we have a tendency to classify some matters as sinful, some as spiritual, and some as plain ole normal. Paul shouts no to this approach or understanding. For Paul, everything from the mundane and the everyday as well as the "sacred," needs to be done in the spiritual sense of service to God.

In that vein, husbands and wives are to relate in love. Children and parents as well as slaves and masters are also to live in proper regard for each other.

Paul urges the Ephesians to live devoted to prayer. Paul wants their conversation seasoned with salt and full of grace. This is right and proper.

In conclusion, Paul adds many personal notes that so many of his letters have. Paul signs the letter with his own hand, hoping to come see the recipients soon.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Christ – No greater Savior
2. Christ – No greater Knowledge
3. Christ – No greater reason.