

We completed our study of the book of Exodus and are now moving to the New Testament letter of Colossians to begin our new year. As we refocus the goal and calling of this body of believers, the elders felt led to this particular book to help us. Though we do not have the same heresies arising that the Colossians encountered, Paul's exhortation of the fundamental truth of the Gospel is certainly a great help in clarifying the essentials of our life in Christ.

The letter to the Colossians came under fire by critics because it so clearly points to the deity of Christ. (Colossians 1:15-16) They rightly point out that the proclamation by the early church of the divinity of Christ took years to really settle in. It was a huge spiritual step for Jewish believers in Jesus as Messiah. It is one thing to say that Jesus opened the way to God for all, (1Corinthians 1:2) and still another to say that He is God.

Has God given you a goal for this year? My personal goal for this year is to work on a book that shows the many clear links between Jesus of the New Testament and YHWH (the eternal God) of the Old. Accepting that Jesus is God is the major hurdle to becoming a Christian. It is the one thing that makes Christianity unique. Neither Buddha, nor Mohammed, nor Krishna claimed to be the only God and creator of all things. Only Jesus claimed to be the exact representation of God by saying such things as, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30; 20:28), and "If you have seen me you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). But these were recorded by the Apostle John in the last gospel, which was written decades after Jesus died. I have no doubt they are authentic. I am just saying there are no such clear statements in the earlier gospels. The closest we have is the declaration of Paul in one of the earliest letters, perhaps even written before the gospels, who declared that Jesus is the One through whom all things came. (1Corinthians 8:6)

I think the reason behind the lack of clear expressions of Jesus' divinity was not that the Apostles did not believe in it, but rather that it was so controversial and difficult to comprehend. Before the destruction of the Temple, they avoided turning away potential converts and unnecessary persecution from the Jewish community (the main source of early persecution – Acts 8:1) by not overtly declaring that belief. When Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians and John wrote his gospel and Revelation, the recipients were in Asia Minor. Jews were a smaller part of the Christian community, but the understanding of the divinity of Christ had already developed as a part of the Christian faith.

Commented [Paul1]: Colossians 1:15-16 (ESV)

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Commented [Paul2]: 1 Corinthians:2 (ESV)

to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Commented [Paul3]: John 10:30 (ESV)

³⁰ I and the Father are one."

Commented [Paul4]: John 20:28 (ESV)

²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Commented [Paul5]: John 14-9 (ESV)

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Commented [Paul6]: 1 Corinthians 8:6 (ESV)

⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Commented [Paul7]: Acts 8:1 (ESV)

¹ And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The divinity of Jesus has always been the stumbling block, because if Jesus is God, He has every right to tell us truth and expect obedience. If He says it's better to chop off your right hand than to enter into hell with both hands (Matthew 5:30), then sin is a serious issue with serious consequences. If He says the greatest command is to love God with your all (Matthew 22:37), then that is what God expects of us and that is how we should live. If he says loving our neighbor is like loving God, we better allow His love to fill us with a loving heart of service. (Hebrews 6:10)

Commented [Paul8]: Matthew 5:30 (ESV)

³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Commented [Paul9]: Matthew 22:37 (ESV)

³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

Commented [Paul10]: Hebrews 6:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

Paul wrote the letter while in prison, probably from Caesarea or Rome. He wrote it around the same time as the letter to the Ephesians and the little personal letter of Philemon. He wrote to the small town of Colossae in the Lycus Valley, a town that was fading into insignificance because of the nearby and much larger and more important twin cities of Hieropolis and Laodicea.

Apparently, Epaphras had been discipled by Paul in Ephesus and gone through the Lycus Valley starting new churches. Epaphras had brought news to Paul of some false teachings that were seducing the believers in Colossae. The letter is a rebuttal of those teachings and encouragement to realize all that believers have in Christ.

He begins the letter in his usual greeting format (Ephesians 1:1-2). He first states his authority in writing such a letter. Colossians 1:1 (ESV) ¹ *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother*, Paul is his Greek name. It means small. His Hebrew name is Saul after the first king of Israel from the same tribe of Benjamin. His office is that of an apostle, that is to say, he is an official ambassador of God, or a representative of God. (2Corinthians 5:20) But it is not by his own will that he holds the title. In fact, he was knocked from his horse while on the way to persecute Christians when he received the appointment. (Acts 22:14; 26:14) It is the will of God that he became the apostle that he is. That is why he has the authority to address the teachings they are hearing. That is why we study his letters today. He held the same title as the disciples of Jesus, apostle.

Commented [Paul11]: Ephesians 1:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Commented [Paul12]: 2 Corinthians 5:20 (ESV)

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Commented [Paul13]: Acts 22:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ And he said, "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth;

Commented [Paul14]: Acts 26:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

Paul includes Timothy as a co-author. Timothy is Paul's young protégé, and yet he is given credit as co-authoring the letter. Paul recognized that every born again believer has something to say because of the Spirit of God within us. (Romans 1:11-12) And yet, there is still authority and God appointed offices within the church. Timothy was an elder. (1Timothy 1:3)

Commented [Paul15]: Romans 1:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—

¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

Commented [Paul16]: 1 Timothy 1:3 (ESV)

³ As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,

² *To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.* Saints and faithful brothers refer to the same people. We can be

uncomfortable with the term saints, but all believers in Jesus are sanctified by what Jesus did for us on the cross. (Hebrews 10:10) To deny that we are made holy is to deny Jesus took our sins, past, present and future. We certainly don't act holy at times, and that is what makes us uncomfortable with the term. When we use the term only for super-spiritual people, we are implying that it is works that make us right before God. Look at the person next to you and tell them they are a saint. It means separated for God's service. You were separated to serve the living God when you accepted Jesus' death in your place as the payment for your sins. (1Thessalonians 1:9)

Paul called them *faithful brothers*. As we will see, they were not so faithful to the doctrine that was delivered to them. Believers are called faithful because we are credited with the faithfulness of Jesus. (2Corinthians 5:21) "Brothers" is literally siblings. Paul saw the believers there as family even though he had not met them. **Believers in Jesus are a family of saints.**

To be "in Christ" does not mean He is the object of our faith, though He is that. The phrase refers to our sphere of life. We are no longer "of the world" in the sense that it is our identity. (John 15:19) We have a new identity in Christ. We are citizens of heaven. (Philippians 3:20) There are only two kinds of people, those in the world and those in Christ. Slabs of stone in the catacombs of Rome that covered the bones of the dead believers were inscribed with the words "In Christ". And because they were in Christ, the other inscription read, "In peace." To be a part of the mystical body of Christ is to be in the *shalom* of God.

Then Paul greets them with a familiar phrase, "*Grace and peace from God our Father*". It is in a sense a prayer that the God whom by grace they came to know as Father would continue to pour out His grace and peace on their lives. All believers are recipients of grace. (Ephesians 2:8) It is by grace we are saved. We all have the peace that comes from knowing our sins are forgiven and we are right with God. Paul desires that grace and peace to continue to flow from God into the lives of these believers and to all those to whom he wrote. As believers, we should desire to see the grace and peace of God be poured out upon every believer, even those who may have offended us. Grace is necessary for our sanctification.

Paul continues with his prayer for them. Greek letters often started out with a prayer, and that is common in Paul's letters. ³ *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,* ⁴ *since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,* ^{5a} *because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.* He always prayed a prayer of thanks first. He was thankful for their testimony

Commented [Paul17]: Hebrews 10:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Commented [Paul18]: 1 Thessalonians 1:9 (ESV)

⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

Commented [Paul19]: 2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV)

²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Commented [Paul20]: John 15:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Commented [Paul21]: Philippians 3:20 (ESV)

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Commented [Paul22]: Ephesians 2:8 (ESV)

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

of faith and love for all the saints. An attitude of gratitude permeates the letters of Paul. His gratitude was a fruit of the Spirit in his life. He had allowed God's love for mankind into his heart. (Philippians 4:1)

The Colossians' faith and love were evidences that they were family, genuine believers, holy, faithful brothers. Faith is evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit, love. (Galatians 5:6)

The love believers share is not based upon similar interests or status, or blood relations, or even agreeing on every detail of worship, but rather on the commonality we have in devoting our hearts to the same Savior. We share the same experience of forgiveness of sins and the same love of the One that paid the price. Because of that, we are willing to forgive one another and refuse to let offenses or weaknesses override our eternal relationship as the family of God. (Ephesians 4:32) This deep bond of our heart's priority is willing to look forward to a time (*the hope laid up for us in heaven*) when the work in us will be brought to perfection and the little annoyances and disagreements will be no more. The "my way or the highway" attitude can only prevail when we put the real passion of our heart second to temporary personal preferences. Situations will come and go, but we are a family forever!

If Paul was in Phoenix (about the same distance as Ephesus from Colossae) would he hear about our faith in Christ and love for all the saints? It is not that we should be concerned with what others think of us, but is there evidence of life in our church? I think we might be known for things we do. That is a kind of evidence of our faith. But I don't think the Colossian believers were known for any special program. It was their faith that was manifest in fruit in their individual lives. Their love for their fellow saints was so evident that the word got around. I think we have lots of room for growth in this area. I look forward to the day when people as far away as Phoenix will hear about our faith and love for all the saints. Those are the key attributes of genuine believers, faith, hope, and love. (1Corinthians 13:13)

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, This faith, this love for the brothers, and this hope laid up for us in heaven is the gospel. It's the good news. The fruit that it was bearing in their lives, was faith, hope and love. You've seen those three together before and indeed Paul has put them together several times in his letters. (1Thessalonians 5:8) "Faith inspires service, love energizes it, hope perpetuates it."²⁸

Commented [Paul23]: Philippians 4:1 (ESV)

¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Commented [Paul24]: Galatians 5:6 (ESV)

⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Commented [Paul25]: Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)

³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Commented [Paul26]: 1 Corinthians 13:13 (ESV)

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Commented [Paul27]: 1 Thessalonians 5:8 (ESV)

⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

Commented [Paul28]: Interpreter's Bible, Volume 11

Is the gospel bearing the fruit of faith, hope, and love in your life? That is evidence of your salvation. And it should be growing. We should be increasing in faith, hope and love. Paul is saying that it is having that effect in people wherever it is proclaimed and the grace of God is understood in truth. (2Corinthians 5:19)

It is not special programs or idea driven efforts of anyone, but rather the simple proclamation of the truth of Jesus, of His grace and love, and of the hope available to those who place their faith in Him. The lives transformed by the grace of God into living examples of the fruit of the Spirit make others hungry to hear just what it was that changed their lives. In any culture and any time, the account of Jesus and His work and promises change lives and give hope. This is the universality of the Gospel. (1John 2:2)

Paul was using the language of Genesis 1:28, the first command of God to Adam. He was to fill the face of the world with fruit. That meant physically of course, but as Adam was yet unfallen, and created in the image of God, God meant to fill the face of the world with those in God's image, that is filling the world with His glory. Adam failed. The second Adam is Jesus (1Corinthians 15:45), who is the Word, and whose body now takes the Word to the ends of the earth, bearing fruit (subduing sin) and bringing God glory. Paul was saying the first command of God is being fulfilled through the Gospel.

⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf It was one evangelist, Epaphras, who faithfully declared the grace of God to the Colossians. It is amazing what one person empowered by the Holy Spirit can do. When you share the good news of how Jesus changed your life, you never know how far God can take that word. When we look at a seed, we have no idea how many times it will be reproduced, as Jesus taught, 30, 60, or 100 times. (Mark 4:8)

Epaphras was a fellow bondservant of Jesus. Paul was calling him an equal, a man fully surrendered to service to Jesus and one who carried out that service faithfully. He had relayed to Paul their love in the Spirit. It sounds as if Epaphras had shared about the messenger from whom he heard the Gospel, Paul. In response, the Colossians loved Paul as well, for he was their spiritual grandfather. The word is the power that changes lives, but when the word is proclaimed by someone who not only feels its power but lives in utter surrender to it, the word comes with conviction.

I used to watch speakers to try to understand why some were more effective than others. I saw what I later read eloquently described as "logos, pathos, and ethos". Powerful witness comes from the Word (logos), delivered by someone who feels its

Commented [Paul29]: 2 Corinthians 5:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Commented [Paul30]: 1 John 2:2 (ESV)

² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Commented [Paul31]: Genesis 1:28 (ESV)

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Commented [Paul32]: 1 Corinthians 15:45 (ESV)

⁴⁵ Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

Commented [Paul33]: 1 John 2:2 (ESV)

² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

power and genuinely cares about the hearers (pathos), and whose life has been changed by the Word (ethos). What I was witnessing is the ethos portion – the life lived in Christ. They had that love for their brothers. That is the power of our personal witness. We need all three, but it is ethos that causes the hearer to take notice. There is no power to invite others to fall in love with our Savior if we do not possess that love.

⁸ *and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.* It is not certain that Spirit should be capitalized. (2:5) Epaphras had come to encourage Paul in prison that these spiritual grandchildren he had never met loved him. What an encouragement it must have been for the Apostle to hear that his fruit was bearing fruit! It was worth it. The imprisonment and hardships of being an apostle of Jesus resulted in lives finding faith, hope, and love in Jesus.

Before the Apostle got to the admonitions the church needed, he encouraged them with the fact that they were loving saints. If we are to be a church of Jesus Christ we must be known for the same. We must find the love of God for one another that puts self last and overlooks differences, because we share the main thing, a love of our Savior.

How do we get that love? How do we give up our selfish use of our time and begin to be those who serve one another in love? We let the love of Christ fill our hearts to overflowing.

In the early church, the wonder of what Jesus had done out of love so overwhelmed new believers, that they dropped their social status, came out of acceptable ways of the world around them, and humbly served one another. It didn't matter if they were master or slave, as long as they loved the same Lord, they loved each other.

This is what attracted the world. It was so strange, that society made up rumors to explain it. The real explanation was the transformation of the heart. Servant could be an elder to his master. Master could call his slave his brother. High society people ate with the lowliest, even serving them. The only way we can be like that is to have the same awe of a Savior that accepted us while we were yet sinners. The ground is level for all at the foot of the cross.

There were personality differences and conflicts then as there are now, but there was commitment to one another then that we seem to have lost today. Do you know how committed Jesus is to you? He has that same commitment to every believer. If He has that kind of loving, enduring, commitment to us, and is living in our hearts, will we not have the same commitment to one another, whether they leave this fellowship or disagree with our doctrine, or even say hurtful things about us?

Commented [Paul34]: Colossians 2:5 (ESV)

⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Without a first love of Jesus, we will not love our brothers. That is where the love begins. If we lack love for one another, we must love Jesus more. (1John 3:14) We love Jesus more when we meet Him in His word, in prayer, and in our daily circumstances. Our relationship with Him will translate into love for one another. It is the inevitable outcome of a genuine love for God.

Commented [Paul35]: 1 John 3:14 (ESV)

¹⁴We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

Questions

- 1 Which books of the New Testament clearly tell us that Jesus is God?
- 2 Why would the earliest writers hesitate to state it so clearly?
- 3 What are the implications of Jesus being God?
- 4 Why does Paul include Timothy as a co-author?
- 5 Are you a saint? Why?
- 6 What qualities does Paul see in the Colossians?
- 7 Why are they essential for us?
- 8 How do these qualities work together?
- 9 What is the term Paul used for Epaphras? Application?
- 10 What ingredients make a powerful witness?