

New Testament Survey Colossians & Philemon

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Preface

The Apostle Paul had a remarkable ministry and we must be profoundly grateful to the Lord for the legacy he has left for us in the number of letters we have written by him in our New Testaments. The two letters we are surveying in this book have the same destination, the city of Colossae but are quite different. The one to a Church that was having to battle against subtle false teaching, and the other to an individual member of that same Church over a totally unrelated issue. What is evident as you read both of these books is how full of Christ they are, and it is that which makes them such precious portions of Scripture. Christ and his glorious being and work of salvation are clearly set out for all to see that he alone is the one we are to trust in and whom we are to love and serve. When Christ is at the centre of our lives we are both protected from being led astray by false teaching and empowered to live lives that truly honour and please God. Doctrine when held aright will have a profound affect for good on our behaviour.

I am again grateful for the help of Roger Prime whose talks on these two New Testament books first aired in the Serving Today radio programme for pastors and Church leaders form the basis for the contents of this booklet.

As you read this survey, and more importantly as you read the letters themselves, may God enlarge your understanding of the person and work of Christ and help you to see something of his glory, that your love for him will increase and your desire to serve him be energised and strengthened.

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May 2009

Introduction

We are going to look together at the epistle to the Colossians, and also to link it with the small letter to Philemon. The reason for this is that Colossians was a letter that Paul wrote to the church in the city of Colossae, situated in what we would know as Turkey today, whereas the letter of Philemon was written to an individual with that name who was a leading member of the church at Colossae. In fact it would appear the church met together in his home.

If we look at the people who sent greetings with Paul that are listed at the end of each letter, we discover the list of

names is the same. This suggests both letters were written at the same time. Also if we look at Colossians 4, verses 7-9 we see that Paul is sending Tychicus to Colossae, probably to take this letter, but that he would be accompanied by Onesimus, who Paul describes as 'one of you'. If we compare that with the letter to Philemon, we see that letter was written appealing to him to welcome back Onesimus into his home, for he had been a runaway slave but now was returning as a Christian brother. Clearly Philemon was a member of the church at Colossae and verse 2 of the letter to him refers to the church meeting in his home.

Chapter 1 – Background

The Origin of the Church

Precisely when this church came into being is difficult to say because there is no record in the book of Acts of Paul going to Colossae and preaching the Gospel there. We do know from Acts 19 verse 10 that while Paul was in Ephesus the Gospel spread out from that city into all the surrounding area. This probably happened as people from the area travelled into Ephesus, heard the Gospel from Paul and were converted, and then took the message back to their home cities and towns. In Colossians 1 verse 7 Paul says that these believers had first heard the Gospel from Epaphras, who Paul describes as a faithful minister of Christ. We also learn from Colossians 4 verse 12 that

Epaphras is described as being 'one of you'. He came from Colossae and it is likely he travelled the 100 miles from there to Ephesus, perhaps for some business purpose. While in Ephesus he heard Paul preaching, was converted and spent some time with Paul, before returning to Colossae to take the message back to his own people.

The Occasion and Reasons for These Letters

We can see from Colossians 4 verses 3, 10 & 18 that Paul was writing from imprisonment. We believe this to be his experience of house arrest recorded at the end of Acts and from which he also wrote the letters to Ephesus and Philippi. You may remember that when Paul wrote to the Philippians he was expecting to be released from captivity and visit that church. We see also in the letter to Philemon that Paul is expecting to be set free to visit him. In Colossians 4 verse 12 we discover that Epaphras was with Paul when he wrote and it is probable that he had taken to Paul news of events at Colossae which caused him to write to the church.

The letter to Philemon is a personal letter written to go with Onesimus as Paul sent him back to his master. Onesimus had been the slave of Philemon. He appears to have wronged him in some way and run away. In Rome he met Paul and heard the Gospel. Having been converted to Christ he became a great support to Paul in his imprisonment, but now Paul was sending him back to his

master with this letter urging Philemon to receive him back as a dear brother in Christ.

The purpose of Paul's letter to the church is quite different. We have seen already that Epaphras had gone from Colossae to visit Paul in his imprisonment in Rome. While there he shared news with Paul of the faith, love and hope in Christ of the believers in Colossae. We see that in Colossians 1 verse 3-8. However, he also shared news of the danger the church was facing from false teachers who were seeking to lead the believers away from their faith in Christ. Paul was naturally greatly concerned by this news and wanted to give advice and encouragement to the church. It would appear from Philemon verse 23 that Epaphras by this time was also being held captive with Paul, so the Apostle could not send him back with instruction and teaching for the church. These circumstances caused Paul to write this letter to warn them of the dangers and encourage them to stand firm in the faith. He also assures them in Colossians 4 verse 12 of the prayers of Epaphras on their behalf that they would stand firm in all the will of God. As far as we can tell the teaching of these false teachers was a mixture of Jewish legalism and Greek philosophy. It is likely from the way Paul addresses the Church in Colossians 2 verse 13, where he describes them as having been dead in their sins and in the uncircumcision of their sinful nature, that most of the believers were Gentiles. However, there was probably a community of Jews in the city whose ancestors had been forced to flee there in earlier times. They may well have

held onto their Jewish legalism while absorbing Greek philosophy from the culture around them and so were promoting this strange teaching.

We get a clearer idea of what this false teaching was by considering what Paul wrote. In Colossians 2 verse 14 he states that in his death Christ has cancelled the written code with its regulations as a means of finding acceptance with God. It is only through trusting in the death of Jesus on the cross we are made right with God. He then goes on in verses 16-23 to warn against a number of areas of Jewish legalism they need to avoid as ways of seeking to earn favour with God. Then in Colossians 2 verse 8 Paul warns them not to be taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophy. This Greek philosophy was probably an early form of a heresy called Gnosticism. This taught that salvation was not obtained through faith in Christ, but through gaining spiritual knowledge and insight into the mysteries of God. This knowledge was only available to those with superior intellects. It also taught that all created matter was evil which led to a denial of the creation of a material world by God and a denial that in the incarnation Jesus took human flesh and became a man. Since this created world was so alienated from God these false teachers taught that he could only be approached through a series of angels. This led to the worship of angels referred to in Colossians 2 verse 18. In their teaching Christ was relegated to nothing more than a created being.

Clearly Paul had to answer these errors and help the church to maintain its faithfulness to the true gospel of Christ, and this he does. The main thrust of his letter is to present to the Colossians the truth about Christ so that they would be built up in their faith and knowledge in order to withstand the attacks of the false teachers. We see in Colossians 1 verses 15-23 how Paul shows the full deity of Christ, the creator of all things, but also the one who in his humanity died to be our Saviour. Paul also wrote in Colossians 2 verse 3 that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ and are available to all who believe and not to a spiritual elite who have insight into the mysteries of God.

Chapter 2 - The Teaching in Colossians

Having seen something of the false teaching that was threatening this church, we notice that Paul presents these believers with positive truth to oppose the heresy as well as giving to them warnings against the dangers.

Paul begins his letter in his usual way, by referring to his apostleship and sending greetings to the believers. That was typical of Paul, and he then offers a prayer of thanksgiving for the faith, love and hope of the Colossian believers that he has heard of through Epaphras and rejoices in the way the Gospel is bearing fruit all over the world. This opening thanksgiving is followed by a prayer that Paul offers for these believers that they might have

spiritual wisdom, that they will live a life worthy of the Lord, being strengthened by God's power. Indeed, there is so much in these opening verses that they could be used as the basis for preaching a very helpful series of messages.

We notice next that Paul moves on to write about the glory of Christ in Colossians 1 verses 15-20. This is one of the most glorious passages found in the New Testament because Paul sets Christ in his rightful position as one who is fully God which is clearly stated in Colossians 1 verse 19:

'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.'

This truth is brought out in these verses where we see Jesus as the image of the invisible God, the one who in his humanity came to reveal God to us. We see him also as the firstborn over all creation. This does not mean that Jesus is the first of the created beings as some have falsely claimed. Instead it is used in the sense that the firstborn son in a family would be the rightful heir to all the family inheritance. So as the eternal Son of God Jesus is the rightful heir over all creation. In this paragraph we learn so much about the Lord Jesus Christ. He created all things, he upholds all things by his power, through his death and resurrection he has become head over the church and now has supremacy over all things, even to the point of reconciling the whole of creation to God so that Christ will be glorified in the new heavens and earth. This is a very

important passage, not only in setting Christ as the Sovereign Lord over creation but also in showing that the creation itself, whilst now spoilt by sin, will be restored by God in the new creation.

Paul then moves on from showing the glory of Christ in his person to teach that Christ's work on the cross is sufficient to reconcile sinners to God and present us as those who are holy in God's sight. Nothing more is required for our salvation than faith in what Christ has done for us. In the closing verses of the chapter Paul shows that the mystery of God's purposes has been fully revealed in Jesus and this is the Gospel Paul preaches with the desire to present every believer perfect in Christ.

When we come to Colossians 2 Paul expresses his concern for these believers and also those at Laodicea that they are not deceived by the arguments of the false teachers. It is interesting to note that in Colossians 4 verse 16 he instructs the Colossians to send this letter on to Laodicea once they had read it and also that they were to read a separate letter he had sent to that church, which some think could possibly be the Ephesian letter which was circulating round the churches, but we cannot be sure. We see something of the links there were between the churches and it is quite possible these false teachers were affecting both of these churches mentioned. Having expressed his concern Paul urges them in Colossians 2 verses 6-7 to stand firm in their faith in Christ. He warns of the dangers of the deceptive philosophy which depended on human tradition rather than

Christ. In the verses that follow he teaches that all the fullness of the deity lives in Christ and in him is found all that we need as believers for our salvation and for living the Christian life. In his death on the cross Christ not only saves us from our sin and the power of the sinful nature, he has also cancelled all the demands of the Old Testament law. We are right with God through faith in Jesus, not through what we do. Paul goes on to tell them they were not to allow themselves to be judged regarding their observance of the Old Testament ceremonial law. He also warned against the dangers of angel worship, which does not bring us closer to God but cuts the believer off from Christ who should be the source of our spiritual growth. Paul then deals with one other aspect of the false teaching which taught that all matter was evil. This led to practices known as asceticism, which taught that if you treated your body harshly by obeying man made rules, you could control your sinful desires. Paul warns that such outward self-denial has no effect in restraining sinful behaviour. The only answer to sin is to have a new life in Jesus and to have our hearts set on Christ and our minds focused on the things of God.

This brings us to Colossians 3 where Paul begins with the need for our hearts and minds to be focused on Christ. This leads us into the more practical teaching that Paul gives in the second half of his letter. We see the correct principles of Christian living are not to be found in outward observances but by living the new life we have in Jesus in the power of the Spirit. He goes on to list the things of the

old sinful nature that we are to get rid of from our lives and then lists the characteristics of Christ-like living we are to display. Everything we do as believers is to be done in Christ's name. Indeed Paul shows how these principles for Christian living are to affect our lives in a variety of situations. We see practical teaching as to what it means to live for Christ in marriage as husbands and wives, in the family as parents and children, and in the workplace as servants and masters. This is all very helpful and practical teaching for us and our congregations still today. We constantly need to be understanding what the Scriptures teach about the way we live out our Christian faith in our everyday lives. We notice in Colossians 4 verses 2-6 that Paul gives instructions concerning prayer and the way as believers we should behave towards those who are unbelievers. He also appeals for prayer on his behalf, not that he should be released from his captivity, but that even in his situation there will be opportunities to preach the Gospel. The remainder of Colossians 4 is taken up with personal greetings and instructions for the church at Colossae.

Chapter 3 - The Teaching in Philemon

We saw earlier that Philemon lived in Colossae and was a member of the church Paul wrote to there. In fact part or all of the church met together in his home. This letter is addressed personally to Philemon urging him to receive back Onesimus, who had been the slave of Philemon and

appears to have wronged him in some way and run away. In Rome he met Paul and heard the Gospel, having been converted he became a great support to Paul in his imprisonment, but now Paul sends him back to his master, with this letter urging Philemon to receive him back as a dear brother in Christ.

In verse 2 of the letter Paul describes Philemon as a dear friend and fellow worker. If we link that with verse 19 where Paul reminds Philemon that he owes him his very self, this suggests Philemon was converted through Paul's ministry probably during the time the Apostle was preaching in Ephesus. They not only became close friends but Philemon is referred to as a fellow worker, probably because he is one of the leaders of the church at Colossae. Paul also refers to Apphia and Archippus in his opening greeting. Apphia, who is referred to as our sister, is probably the wife of Philemon and Archippus could well be another of the leaders of the church at Colossae since Paul refers to him as a fellow soldier in Colossians 4 verse 17 where Paul encourages him to complete the work he had received in the Lord.

After these initial greetings Paul gives thanks for the faith and love of Philemon. Then he comes to his real purpose in writing this letter. Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of love. Knowing that he has experienced the love of God in his own heart and life, he appeals to him to show love to this man Onesimus, who had been his slave but who Paul now describes as his son, because he had been converted

through Paul's ministry. Interestingly and significantly the name Onesimus means useful. Paul acknowledges that before he ran away Onesimus had not been a good slave – in fact he described him as useless - now that he was converted and was returning to his master as a Christian brother, Paul described him as useful to them both. He was living up to his name. He certainly appears to have been useful to Paul in his imprisonment because the Apostle describes how he would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him. However, Paul sees that it is right to return him to his master Philemon so that he may now be useful to him. He appeals for Onesimus to be received back as a Christian brother and for him to be shown forgiveness for all he had done wrong. In fact Paul says that if Onesimus owed his master anything, the Apostle himself would pay it back on his behalf. He was, however, confident Philemon would respond to his appeal and anticipated being released from his captivity and visiting Philemon in Colossae.

The most important lesson from Philemon is that of forgiveness towards those who have wronged us. We are taught in Scripture we are to forgive one another as we have been forgiven by God through the death of Jesus. Our human forgiveness should reflect God's forgiveness. In fact, when we see the way Paul was willing to pay the debt of any wrong Onesimus had done we are reminded of Jesus taking the debt of our sin upon himself so that we could be forgiven.

We can also see here that while the Bible does not directly condemn the practice of human slavery, the way Paul writes shows that slaves were to be treated humanely as people and not property, which is a principle we see in other New Testament Scriptures. In fact, in the appeal Paul makes in verse 16 to receive Onesimus back as a dear brother rather than a slave and also in verse 21 where Paul is confident Philemon will do more than he asks, there may be the hint that Paul wants him to be released from his bondage to slavery by his master altogether.

Chapter 4 - Preaching From Colossians

The letter only has four chapters and whilst you could consider doing a series on the whole book, there is a lot of teaching in these chapters and it may be helpful to look at shorter series to cover the teaching. For example, from Colossians 1 verses 3-14 we could profitably preach some sermons based on Paul's thanksgiving for the believers at Colossae and also his prayer for them. Then there is the wonderful passage that centres around Christ. We could preach some sermons from Colossians 1 verses 15-23 showing the teaching there on the person of Christ in both his deity and humanity and also his work in both creation and salvation. We also see important teaching in Colossians 2 on the work of Christ in salvation and the importance of holding onto him by faith and not being sidetracked into trusting in our own efforts for salvation. From Colossians 3 onwards there is some very important

teaching on the way we are to live out our faith in our daily lives, particularly in putting off the old nature and putting on the virtues of Christ-likeness. Then we could also preach on the way our faith affects attitudes and relationships in the home and our places of work from Colossians 3 verse 18 to 4 verse 1.

A Sermon Suggestion

Colossians 4 verses 2-6: these are verses that focus on **Prayer and Witnessing** and we could use that as the title for our message. By way of introduction we could make the point that effective evangelism comes as the result of effective prayer. There are two main points to draw out on the matter of prayer – firstly we see in verse 2 that we should be **persistent in prayer** and from verses 3 & 4 that we should be **informed in prayer**. Paul mentions two needs he has in prayer: that he might have an open door to preach the message where he is in captivity and that he should preach the message clearly. Those two requests will give the Colossians a focus for their prayers and they are good areas for us to focus on when praying about evangelism. Then we see how Paul focuses on two areas relating to witnessing in verses 5 & 6. Firstly, he tells the Colossian believers to **live wisely** for all witnessing must be backed up by consistent Christian living. Then he tells them to make the most of their opportunities to spread the Gospel by **speaking wisely** through gracious speech and being prepared to answer the questions which may be asked and applying the Gospel in our answers.

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