**The Letter to the Colossians**

**The Gospel in Heathen and Multi-Religious Society - #2**

**What was the major question?**

**Colossians 1:9-20**

**The City**

It was a cosmopolitan city of Colossae, where Gentiles, Jews and some Christians lived together. It was about 100 miles inland (east) from the port of Ephesus. It was a large and prosperous city, changes in the volume of trade and wars led to its decline. In the time of Paul it was only a “small town.” Again, it is situated about 10 miles from Laodicea and 13 miles from Hierapolis on the Lycus River (see, Col 2:1 and 4:13).

**The Church**

The church in Colossae was probably founded by a Colossian, namely, Epaphras (Col 1:7; 4:12) who himself was, a prisoner with Paul in Rome (Phmn 23). Epaphras had apparently traveled to Rome to inform Paul of the state of the church in Colossae, especially in light of the debates that had developed within in the church (Col 1:8).

**What was the Major Question?**

1. Paul was combating some superstitious, ascetic life that leads to illumination, and legalistic tendencies that came with Jews when they converted and became members of the church.
2. Paul referred to these as “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (2:8). We may assume, therefore, that it possessed definable features and a distinguishable—however much in its infancy—intellectual outline.
3. Some of the features of this false and obviously syncretistic philosophy had a Jewish element, not unlike those Paul faced in the Galatian churches (cf. Galatians and Acts 15), where regulations about food and drinks as well as the observance of festivals and new moon Sabbaths (2:16-17) were debated. A pagan element is indicated by the worship of angels (assuming that 2:18 is a purely descriptive statement) and the demand for rigorous asceticism known in the Greek Mystery cults (2:18-19). This latter element is probably related to what later developed into full-blown heresey known to us by the name Gnosticism (2nd century).
4. Gnostic thought is characterized by several tenets, some of the more important being:

a. Matter is evil

b. Humans were emanating from the one pure and unknowable God (Plotinus?),

c. Salvation comes through knowledge and initiates a person into an elite chosen group. The particular twist on these ideas in Colossians may have involved the notion that angels and principalities played a significant role in the giving of the Law and therefore regulated communication to and from God. The result was that they needed to be placated and feared by strict legal observances.

**Paul’s Challenge**

In response to these false reaching Paul does the following:

1. Paul warns the Colossians not to be taken captive, i.e., kidnapped by such philosophy (2:8)

2. He exposed the empty deceit and arrogance of the philosophy as to its impermanence (2:4, 8, 18, 22-23);

3. Paul expanded on the superiority of Christ, that is, his person, his saving work, and his complete sovereignty over the “emanations” of the Hellenic schools (i.e., the so-called principalities and powers). It is through the death and resurrection of Christ—who is the “final reality” and is the “eternal destiny of humanity” to which the OT points (2:16-17), as the Sole Mediator between God and man, and the One in whom all the fullness of the deity dwells bodily.

4. We by faith are joined to all the fullness of God and his blessing (2:9-10). Christ is not Superior among others; it is through him alone that we overcome sin (2:11-13; 3:1-4:6), and are released from the condemnation of the law (2:14), gain victory over the power of demonic forces (2:15).

5. This Superior Christ reveals to us the bankruptcy of religious propaganda. Further, this is a message of the Gospel that gives spiritual joy and is available to every man; there is no stoicism, mere asceticism, legalism, or libertinism in the Pauline conception of Christ’s ongoing work in his church (1:23). *“If you have Christ, you have everything”* is Paul’s response. *“Don’t add anything else,”* the apostle warns, *“lest you distort, diminish, or denigrate the superiority of Christ, his gospel, or the Christian life.”*

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**Colossians 1:9-11**

**Christian Life**

[***9***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-9.htm) *And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,* [***10***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-10.htm) *so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;*

[***11***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-11.htm) *being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.*

**Notes and studies**

**Verse 9 –** Prayers have to be according to our growing knowledge of the will of God. This is cabled by “understanding and spiritual wisdom”

**Note from Philemon**

**God’s will, our prayer**

Abba Philēmōn said the will of God the Father is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Our prayers must remain in the scope of this revelation. When Paul said that we need knowledge to know the will of God when we pray, Paul was fully aware that we are united with Jesus in his death and also in his resurrection, so when we have no answer we better read and remind ourselves with these words,

 *So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,*

*“You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”*

*And as he says also in another place,*

*“You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”*

*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.* (Heb 5:5-10).

Prayer is the only school for learning how to obey God.

**Verse 10 –** There are three different kinds `of wisdom:

1. Earthly wisdom (2 Cor 1:12)

2. Wisdom of men (1 Cor 2:5, 13), which is the “Wisdom of this world” (1 Cor 2:6)

3. Wisdom of the Spirit (Col 1:9)

**Discernment**

1. Wisdom that is other than the Wisdom of God:

a. Is hostile to the crucified Jesus

b. Loves power

c. Has its base and function on superiority (Nazis)

2. Wisdom of God:

1. Works for love and better understanding.
2. As in (Col 1:10), in “all good works”.

**Verse 10-11** – Christian conduct aims at being pleasing and worthy of the Lord.

***‘Worthy of the Lord’***

Abba Philēmōn said, “There are two ways to look at these words:

1. We are united forever with our beloved Jesus, so our daily life is always keeping this union as an aim.

2. The only behavior that pleases Christ our Lord is that of love and is aiming at love, for God is Love.”

**Colossians 1:12-14**

**Hymn of thanksgiving**

[***12***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-12.htm) *Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.* [***13***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-13.htm)*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,* [***14***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-14.htm) *in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*

**Notes and Studies**

**Verse 12 –** Prayer has joy and thanksgiving (Phil 1:40, 1 Pet 1:8); Joy is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). God has qualified us or literally has “authorized” to share or to participate in the “inheritance” that according to (Ps 15:5) is the Lord himself. This is the same portion of the Holy Ones or the Saints who are also “in the light” in Jesus the Light.

**Verse 13** – In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, *“deliver us from evil”* (Matt 6:13) and from the “*Judgment of the world the wrath to come”* (1 Thess 1:10).

Paul wanted to be delivered from the “body of death,” the mortal body.

But here what is the “power of darkness”?

1. We have two domains that are of darkness.
2. And that domain where God and His Beloved Son are ruling as King

**Darkness:**

1. In Paul, darkness is life without God. This was the statute before believing in the Light Jesus:

***17*** *Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.* ***18*** *They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of hearts.* ***19*** *They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*

 ***20*** *But that is not the way you learned Christ!,* ***21*** *assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,* ***22*** *to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,* ***23*** *and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,*

***24*** *and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.* (Eph 4:17-24)

2. Again,

***8*** *for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light* ***9.*** *for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. (Eph 5:8-9)*

3. See also 1 John 2:11, where hatred is life in darkness, for the Light of God that is His Son shines in the darkness (John 1:15).

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**Two Notes from Philemon**

***What does God want me to do?***

Brother George

Peace in Jesus who is our peace and love in the Beloved who is our true love. You have raised the question of all time: “How do we speak of the knowledge of the will of God and in particular the teaching of St. Paul in Col 1:9?

First, we know the will of God in Christ. Never speak of the will of God without Christ because you will slide in to the pit of abstract perception. Jesus our Lord is the Revelation of God. All words and concepts must find their real meaning in him and through his teaching, life, death and resurrection. If you get away from this defined scope of true and eternal knowledge, you will be walking away from our Love that is Jesus. Some told me that the will of God is in the commandments, but they have not succeeded to tell me what is the relationship between all the commandments and the Two Great Commandments: Love God and your human brother as you love yourself. This was the witness of the prophets and later on our Master and the apostles that the whole Law is based and is an expression of these Two Great Commandments.

St. Paul provided us with a good commentary of the Two Great Commandments (in

1 Cor 13:1-8). These words (of 1 Cor 13:1-8) are the very Icon of the Life of our Lord. Every word is about his love.

Second, you ask me what is the will of God regarding your marriage or your becoming a monk or leaving us to study abroad? My beloved brother, this is the last time you write or speak about “God”! Try to be a Christian and write and speak all the time about “God the Father of our Lord Jesus.” There is a way of a vague life where God just like the Moslems speak of God (Allah is common among Christians who speak Arabic) but for us the Fatherhood of God is the very foundation of our Knowledge of the will of our Father, thus we say “your will be done” and that is to be done in union with Christ because outside this unique communion with God there is no will that we can do or even pray for. Be on your guard, the will of the Father is to be like His Son. The will that we seek is to love like Jesus and this is our cross. The heavenly Father does not impose his will on any one. You want to get married, the Father will bless you. You want to be a monk, the Father will accept your offer. You have to choose because your choice is your love. If you fail in either marriage or monastic life, the Father will heal your failure and give and accept you as you are.

Third, I have met too many people who ask me: Is it the will of God that I become a priest? I say to all of them:

Do you love to serve the Lord and to take the cross of ministry? Do you sincerely love and forgive your enemies and bless those who insult you? If these two great commandments are too hard for you it means that your love for the Lord is not mature enough to become a priest. Again, if any one wants to offer his life to the Lord such a person must learn the difference between the life of the people of God and the life of those who are called to service as teachers of the Gospel. The second must be fully crucified with the Lord and daily die to their will, while those who have a secular job must do the same, die to their will but for their work which is also for the Lord but not for the Gospel. The difference is very little and it is only for the style of their life and the duties. Let us carry our cross and that cross will teach us how to truly love and learn from our growing love what is the will of God.

This is enough for now

Philemon asks your prayer

20 August 1965

**Abba Philemon**

***Where do I find the will of God?***

George beloved of God,

May God our Father grant you the courage of the Children and take away any form of fear that can hold you up as a prisoner of your own self.

You asked me, Where is the will of God in our daily life? My simple answer is “keep the commandments” if you truly love the Lord. The commandments are like the wide circle which all of us live inside to experience God’s love as our Father. They are not a chain of slavery but the way to true life. Then you have to be free, for our Lord Jesus did not tell us how to dress or what to eat. He did not even define times for prayer or attending the church. All these are the little circles of our own freedom and the Lord has his joy in watching us freely move in this life guided by our love not by the fear of the slaves. Some brothers asked me if it is right to go to the Cinema? I never been in a Cinema and when I told them that Christ did not fix a code of behaviour and that they have to choose what is fitting and beneficial, they were not pleased with me. I quoted the great words of Paul the free disciple of Jesus: *“The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.”* (Rom 14:22). The brothers were confused because they have been under the “custody” of their own law, not the Law of Jesus that is founded on love.

Let us be clear that we have the right as the children of God the Father to organize our life in any way that does not put us outside the circle of the divine commandments and live our Christian life according to whatever way that is in harmony with our love for the Lord Jesus.

When you come back you have to tell me what people see in the Cinema.

May the Lord be with you.

 Philemon / 2 Sept 1965

**Colossians 1:15-20**

**The Old Hymn in Colossians – First part**

[***15***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-15.htm) *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.* [***16***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-16.htm)*For byhim 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.* [***17***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-17.htm) *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* [***18***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-18.htm)*And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.* [***19***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-19.htm) *For in him all the fullness of (God) was pleased to dwell,* [***20***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-20.htm) *and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

Christ means life eternal but this seems to have been threatened by the false teaching at the city of Colossae. Here we can sense the pain of Paul who in sharp way presents to his readers before dealing specifically with the false teaching, the doctrine of Christ in a form of a hymn in Colossians (1:15-20).

This was written in six verses. It was only in modern NT studies that NT scholars recognized here that Paul has used established forms of both Hebrew and Greek poetry. Here in (Col 1:15-20) we can a rhythmical prose, with a strophic arrangement such as is found in much early Christian hymnody and was used also in a "Christ hymn" in Philippians 2: 6-11. This rhythmical prose does not appear in the English translations.

*The First Strophe (1:15-16)*

*He who is the image of the invisible God, Firstborn before all creation, because in Him all things were created things in heaven and things on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers, they have all been created through Him and for Him.*

**Notes and Studies**

This first strophe celebrates the role of Christ as Creator of the Cosmos who is being the Wisdom of God. This early Christian theme has been the foundation of faith and confession of Jesus as Lord and has been fundamental in the Church's Christology. It was not confined to the Pauline circle nor it did not originate in it. It finds expression in the opening chapter of Hebrews (Heb. 1:2-3), in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-5), and in the Apocalypse (Rev. 3:14).

**The Image of the invisible God**

Christ, then, is introduced as "the image of the invisible God." This has been mentioned before and has been affirmed already by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:4, in a context, which was related to Paul’s conversion experience. Paul recognized the One revealed to him on the Damascus Road as Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In his Jewish background was how Paul recognized Him also as the image of God enthroned at the heart of the rainbow-like brightness "*a likeness as it were of a human form*" (Ezek. 1:26). This was expressed later on when Paul recognized "*the glory of God in the face of Christ*" (2 Cor 4:6). He is not merely echoing someone else’s words but he is expressing what his own experience confirmed as true.

To call Christ “the image of God” is to say that He is the One who represents God to reveal the Unrevealed God. The use of “image” certainly belongs to the Revelation of God who is revealed to “Represent” the Hidden God not by word but in His being and so in this Image God have been perfectly manifested in Christ Jesus.

Here in this new Revelation the invisible has become visible. Paul declared this Revelation, that it has its place since the creation of the world as the everlasting power that has created everything (Rom. 1:20). But now it is manifested by His "everlasting power and divinity'' and has been granted to us to see, "*The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*" which is now has shining into His people's hearts through the same creative Word that first called light to shine forth out of darkness at the creation of the world (2 Cor 4:4-6).

***Not* the image of the Adam**

In addition to being the image of God, lest this be confused with man as the “*image and likeness of God*” in (Gen 1:26), Paul declared that Christ is the "Firstborn before all creation." This rendering is designed to clarify the force of the genitive phrase "of all creation." To understand the wording as though He Himself were the first of all created beings is to run counter to the context, which insists that He is the One by whom the whole creation came into existence.

This construction is similar to that in John 1:30, where John the Baptist says Jesus was “before John the Baptist.” Jesus revealed the "everlasting power and divinity'' of God the Father for, "*The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*" has shone into His people's hearts through the same Creator Word that first called light to shine forth out of darkness (2 Cor. 4:4-6).

**The Firstborn**

The construction denotes not only priority but also primacy. The title "Firstborn" perhaps echoes the language of Psalm 89:27, where God says of the Davidic king, "*I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.*" Now the meaning is clear for it belongs to Christ not only as the Son of David but also as the Wisdom of God. In the wisdom books of the Old Testament wisdom is at best the personification of a divine attribute or of the holy law, but when the New Testament writers speak of Wisdom in personal terms, they consciously refer to One who brings not the Law but life. For Paul, Christ was the personal (not personified) and incarnate Wisdom of God for He became man. The “Wisdom of God” is actually Christ who lived on earth as Man, who died and rose again, "*whom God made for us our wisdom*" (1 Cor. 1:30) is the One who was before all creation, in spite of being Son of Man (as in the Parables) yet He has been before His incarnation. Colossian (1:15ff) is not the only place in the Pauline letters where the preexistence of Wisdom is stated or implied. Paul speaks of the Son not only as preexistent, but also as the Lord of the cosmos and had already used language of this kind; in 1 Corinthians 8:6, saying Christians acknowledge "*one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him*" and in Rom 8:19-21. The fact is that our redemption was not the work of a creature but of the Creator Son of God.

**In Him**

*"In Him" that all things were created* means a “personal” relationship between the Creator and Creation. Please notice that it was in the Revised Version that appeared in 1881 that had this rendering in place of the King James Version's "*by Him*.”

The Son does not create from “far away” since there is no distance that can actually exist between God and creation. Christ is not identified with the beginning "in" of Genesis 1:1 because "*the beginning*" in Colossians 1:18 is totally different for Christ is the Lord Creator who created everything. He is viewed as the sphere within which the work of creation has taken place, as in Ephesians 1: 4, the people of God are chosen "in Him" even earlier, before the world's foundation. God's creation, like His election, is accomplished "in Christ" and not apart from Him.

**Through Him**

The preposition is changed to “through Him” to put emphasis on creation having taken place "through him,” and is not alien or far from Him. In verse 16, He is denoted as the One by whom God brought the universe into being as in Hebrews 1:1-3 and John 1:1-3 affirms that “through” the Son all were created. God made the world (Heb 1:2), and "*all things came into being through him* [through the Logos, who is the Son, and apart from Him none of the things that exist came into being" (John 1:3).

Although the Logos-Wisdom was known before Paul and John in the Greek circles of Philo and the Stoics, yet two important facts must be remembered:

1. The Logos-Wisdom is a Person not a principle.
2. He became human and the Incarnation was utterly unacceptable for the body was given as a form of punishment.

Thus Christ through whom the divine work of redemption has been accomplished (Col 1:14) is the One through whom Creation came to be. His Mediation is part of his work as Creator for He provides and maintains the being and the function of the whole creation, but now He is the Planer and the One who executes the plan of salvation.

The immediate result is that the Gospel is not alien to the created order and that was a great help to those who were living at the beginning to see that life and their faith is part of the divine plan. So the Redeemer is also Creator — the Origin and Goal of all.

**All were by Him and for Him**

Paul is saying it does not matter what the others say about the powers they deal with in fear or in worship.

**The "Colossian heresy"**

Paul then emphasized that if Christ created all things such as “Thrones, principalities, authorities, powers, and dominions" probably represent the highest orders of the spirit world are like the rest of creation, are subject to Christ as the One in whom, through whom, and for whom they were created.

**The Eternal Image (1:17-18)**: *“He indeed is before all things, and they all cohere in Him; He is also the head of the body, the church.”*

The first strophe is recapitulated here in a twofold reaffirmation of the preexistence and cosmic significance of Image of the Invisible God: "*He indeed is before all things, and they all cohere in Him.*" The phrase "*before all things*" sums up the designation of the "*Firstborn before all creation*" and excludes any possibility of interpreting that designation to mean that He Himself is part of the created order. Since the word” all things “denote priority in importance, this signification, as well as the idea of priority in time, is well be presented here.

It would have been meaningless to preach a Savior who is a creature like us:

1. He will be under the created order of the universe like the rest of creation.

2. He has nothing new to offer to creatures like himself

The statement "all things cohere in Him" adds something to what has been said about the “divinity of the Lord.” He is the Creator who preserves Creation for He has been brought it to be. The same teaching is maintained in the letters to the Hebrews, where the Son is not only the One through whom the worlds were made but also the One who upholds all things by His almighty and enabling word (Heb. 1:2-3). Paul is saying the living Christ, who died to redeem His people, is the Sustainer of the universe and the unifying power of its life and existence.

**Christ the Head of the Church**

Christ is the Head of his body the church (1:18) and it is repeated that He is above "of every principality and power" (2:10). This puts the Church at the center of Ruling; Christ being the Body of the One who rules and sustains creation.

 The Church is the Body of Christ appears also in other letters (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Rom. 12:4-5, Eph 5:28-33). This is the identity of this new community which has its origin in the Creator of the Cosmos.

To be continued next week …

***Pope’s Notes***

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