



LETTERS FOR TODAY: COLOSSIANS 1

The Background of the Letter

Paul (Col. 1:1) wrote to the church in Colossae, although he had never met them (Col. 2:1). As a result of Paul's extended ministry in Ephesus on his third round of missionary travels (Acts 19:10), Epaphras became a follower of Jesus and returned to his home in the Lycus Valley, about 100 miles east of Ephesus, where he planted congregations in Colossae and the nearby cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13).

When false teaching arose in the church, Epaphras traveled to Rome, where Paul was under house arrest (Acts 28:30), to inform him of events in Colossae (Col. 1:7-8). The so-called "Colossian heresy" was a syncretistic combination of several religious systems. The teaching included elements of Jewish legalism (Col. 2:16-17), Oriental mysticism (Col. 2:18-19), and Greek asceticism (Col. 2:20-23). As a result, it distracted the Colossians from the person of Christ. The false teaching did not deny Christ, but it dethroned him. It gave Christ a place, but not the supreme place. It made him prominent, but not pre-eminent.

The Purpose and Theme of the Letter

In response to the news Epaphras delivered, Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians (c. A.D. 61-62) in which he proclaimed their *completeness in Christ* (Col. 2:9-10) and expressed his personal concern for the young congregation (Col. 2:1-5; 4:10-17).

The Opening of the Letter (Col. 1:1-14)

After a salutation (Col. 1:1-2) and a thanksgiving section (Col. 1:3-8), Paul describes his prayers for the Colossians (Col. 1:9-14). Those prayers include his request that the Colossians might be filled with a knowledge of God's will (Col. 1:9a). The means for knowing God's will are provided by the Holy Spirit (Col. 1:9b). The purpose of knowing God's will is that they might work in a manner worthy of Christ (Col. 1:10a). The results of knowing God's will be seen in their conduct, their relationship with God, their character, and their attitude (Col. 1:10b-12).

The Pre-eminence of Christ (Col. 1:15-23)

The heart of Chapter 1 is Paul's discussion of Christ's pre-eminence. The Colossians were in danger of putting other things ahead of Jesus, and Paul wanted to remind them that Jesus is absolutely supreme over all things. He incorporates what many scholars consider to be an early "hymn" about Christ (Col. 1:15-20) and, then, applies that teaching to his readers (Col. 1:21-23). In doing so, he sets out three truths.

Truth #1: Jesus is pre-eminent in *creation* (1:15-17).

- Paul makes two claims for Christ (1:15).
 - "He is the image of the invisible God."
 - "He is the firstborn over all creation."
- He supports those claims ("for . . .") with credentials (1:16-17).
 - "All things were created through him."
 - "In him all things hold together."

Truth #2: Jesus is pre-eminent in the *church* (1:18-20).

- Paul makes two further claims for Christ (1:18).
 - "He is the head of the body."
 - "He is the firstborn from the dead."
- He supports those claims ("for . . .") with credentials (1:19-20).
 - "All fullness dwells in him."
 - "All things are reconciled through him."

Truth #3: Jesus should be pre-eminent in the lives of the Colossians (1:21-23).

- They were alienated from and hostile to God (1:21), but Jesus reconciled them and presented them holy and blameless to him (1:22). Doing so brought them into the church, where Jesus is pre-eminent (cf. 1:18-20).
- They should, therefore, continue in the teaching they had received in the preaching of the gospel (1:23). They should not be distracted by false teaching suggesting that they need something in addition to what they already possess in Christ.

Does Christ have a rival for your attention and affection? Is he truly pre-eminent in your life, or is he simply prominent? To give him prominence instead of pre-eminence is to de-throne him. Paul's point is . . . ***We must make Jesus pre-eminent, not simply prominent.***

GETTING PERSONAL

Take some time to read though Colossians 1:1-24. Then, reflect on how you would answer the following questions.

1. When was the last time you told another member of the Faith family why you were thankful for him or her (1:1-8)?
2. What would it look like in your life if you were consistently walking in a manner worthy of Christ (1:9-14)?
3. Why should it be important for your daily life that Christ is pre-eminent in creation (1:15-17)?
4. Why should it be important for your daily life that Christ is pre-eminent in the church (1:18-20)?
5. How should remembering what Christ has done for you encourage you to continue living faithfully for him (1:21-23)?