

CHAPTER 1

Opening Words

(COLOSSIANS 1:1–8)

1 Paul, an apostle of the Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy the brother, 2 to the consecrated and faithful brothers in Colossae: grace to you and peace from God our Father.

3 As we pray, we always give thanks for you to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ, 4 having heard of your faith in the Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the consecrated ones 5 because of the hope stored for you in the heavens, of which hope you heard earlier through the truthful word of the gospel 6 which is coming to you as it also does in all the world. It is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you from the day you heard and fully and truly experienced the grace of God, 7 as you learned from Epaphras our beloved fellow-slave who is a faithful servant of Christ for your sake, 8 who also described to us your sincere (or, hearty) love.

Who wrote the letter? How we relate to what we read is determined to a large extent by the answer to that question. A brief reminder on a napkin composed by the late president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, is more valuable by far, and its contents the valid object of more attention, than a carefully crafted letter by Mr. Nobody in Particular. Paul was not his own messenger. God sent him; Paul merely obeyed. God is the ultimate the author of this letter.

Could Paul have done otherwise than undertake his mission? Of course not. The God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, who commanded nothingness to become existence, ordered Paul: "Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:6). As Hannaniah put it, "You will be his witness to all the people of what you have seen and heard. And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name" (Acts 22:15-16). "So then," Paul said, "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" (Acts 26:19). He wrote to the Colossians as a messenger, appointed "by the will of God."

In other words, Paul's message was not his own. He was "an apostle of the Christ," whom he identified as Jesus. Paul's message had primarily to do with the Christ, which is probably why Paul added the definite article and at times mentioned Jesus' title before his name, an order found only in the apostle's writings. Paul's words bore authority because he was Christ's representative. Unlike many purported messengers who focus on health and wealth, the Law, Jewish roots, an experience of the Spirit, the gifts, Calvinism, or eschatology, Christ constitutes the main burden of Paul's message. He was sent to promote Jesus, no one and nothing else. He spoke and wrote nothing but what he had been commissioned to speak and write, and his words were to be heard and heeded.

Paul did not write alone. The letter to the Colossians came from him and from "Timothy the brother." Paul was not inclined to pull rank for a display of honor. When necessary, he did not hesitate to do so, but he also considered it his duty to mentor others, to train and promote them in the ways of the Lord. He did not hesitate to treat Timothy as an equal. Timothy is here described as a brother, Paul's brother, and brother to the Colossians. As such, Timothy wrote with Paul out of concern for the welfare of the Colossian Christians and for the glory of God, on equal par with Paul.

The Colossians were dear to God. They were "the consecrated ones." They had been set aside for Him by virtue of creation, through which mankind belongs to Him, and by the life, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit, through which the redeemed are His.

The Colossian Christians had been dedicated by God to Himself. Consecration is not a higher level of spirituality achieved by human means, as the false teachers in Colossae taught. All such human effort is the product of a divine initiative: He consecrates and man responds by devoting himself to God. Every spiritual blessing and every advancement in spiritual life that Christians enjoy are gifts from God in Christ.

Christians should live in the light of this truth. We should look on life as the framework in which we have been consecrated to the service of God.

The Colossians served because they were not only “consecrated,” they were also “faithful brothers.” They lived as they ought to have lived. It is worth noting, as other commentaries in this series have done, that both the Hebrew and the Greek language view faith and faithfulness as two sides of the same coin. None but those who have faith can be faithful; none can be faithful without faith; all who have faith are inevitably faithful, however much they fail.

These faithful, consecrated ones to which Paul wrote were not figures in a storybook. They were real people who lived in a real place, in this case, “in Colossae.” Colossae was the context in which they lived out their life in Christ, but they were to do so more like those who are in Christ than like the others who lived in the city. Their life in Christ was the determining factor, which at times meant they were obliged to resist local influences to be “faithful.”

Faithfulness, among other things, meant that the Colossians were to remain true to the faith they had learned from Epaphras. This was the purpose for which Paul penned this letter. He was anxious to encourage them to continue to trust in Jesus and in His accomplishments rather than supplementing what Jesus had done.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father.” Paul enlisted the familiar traditional greeting of his time, transforming it from mere lip service or a literary convention (“Dear so and so, ... Respectfully yours”) into a distinctly Christian greeting. Everything the gospel touches is transformed. Cultures are valid expressions of life experienced in community, and when addressed by the gospel, they are changed as lives are changed. Mere words become intentional, full of meaning.

“As we pray, we always give thanks for you to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ, having heard of your faith in the Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the consecrated ones.” Paul assumed the Colossians would take it for granted that he prayed. Prayer is as natural and as commonplace to Christians as breathing. When Paul prayed, he had reason to thank God for the Colossian Christians. The text does not clearly state if the reason of his gratitude was the fact that they believed, that they loved all the consecrated ones, or both (which is most likely), but think about it: Why would the apostle thank God for the Colossians’ faith or their love unless God was their effective cause? Paul attributed to God what we might be inclined to attribute to the Colossians.

It is not that God permitted the Colossians to believe or to love (God is glorious energy; He is never passive). It was not that He helped or enabled them to do so. Whatever the reason for Paul's thanksgiving, it was something for which God deserved to be thanked because He was the one who did it. Whatever part the Colossians played in believing and loving, the ultimate determining factor was God, not the Colossians. God's grace moved the Colossians to respond as they ought. That is why the apostle thanked God for what the Colossians did. This is the Paul's first denigration in this letter of human effort. Grace removes all grounds for human boasting, all confidence in human abilities.

Paul knew God as only a Christian can know Him, as "the Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ." Whatever else the title "Father" represents, it certainly represents a relationship identified by two main features. First, that in some way the Father is the origin of the Christ. This is an indication of Christ's deity, strengthened by yet another title Paul accorded Jesus in this passage: "Lord." Christ is divine. He is the Son of the Father and partakes of the same nature with the Father, just as a son partakes of his father's human nature. God is the Creator of the world in which we live. But He is the Father of the Lord Jesus.

Second, Christ is the object of the Father's affection. He is the "beloved," not because of anything he has done, but by necessity, by nature, by virtue of who both He and the Father are. The Father loves the Son as fathers inevitably, naturally, necessarily love their sons, only infinitely more so. The Father and the Son, two of the three glorious persons of the Trinity, love one another. They are a happy fellowship of holy, eternally unconditional affection.

The beloved one is also Lord. In this context, the title (*kurios* in Greek) indicates rule, sovereignty, mastery, power, and authority. Of course, the title was also used in those days much as we would use the term *Mister*. But Christ is not merely a Mister. Being God, He is Lord in the fullest sense of the term. He rules the universe. He rules history. He rules mankind and, in a particular, saving way, He rules those who put their trust in Him for salvation. He is the Master of their destiny, the Ruler of their lives, the faithful Preserver of their souls. His will is their law. His commandment is their duty. *Lord* implies kingship.

That is why Paul made sure to describe Christ as "our Lord." Jesus is Lord over a particular people, whose boast is in Him and whose allegiance is given to Him. Lordship is never abstract, and Christ's lordship is not contingent on man's agreement. His mastership is not derived. No

one makes Him Lord; He is such because He is what He is, and modern evangelical parlance, which speaks of “making Jesus Lord of our lives,” is less than biblical. Jesus rules because it is in the nature of His divine being. He extends His saving rule over whomever He wishes, and no one can limit His powers.

Conversion is ultimately an act of Christ, laying hold of rebels and changing the direction of their wills, begetting them anew by the power of his Spirit, enlightening their eyes, moving their hearts, convincing them of sin, driving them to repentance, granting them forgiveness, blessing them with assurance, motivating them to holiness, and transforming them still further, ever further, until they are glorified and once again bear the image of the God who created and redeemed them. Salvation is an act of God, an act of “our Lord Jesus the Christ.”

This Lord, this Christ, so strong to save, is none other but Jesus. It is amazing how much theology Paul packed into these few words. Jesus is the name of a man, born of a woman, who has a birthday, who ate and slept, coughed and perspired, laughed and wept as He walked on earth. He had a real body, a distinct voice, and a number of brothers and sisters. His birth was real. His pain was real. His death was real. His resurrection was as real as anything else that could be said of Him.

Note, it is not that Jesus was a man and is no longer such. He was not a man who achieved deification, nor can deity be earned or otherwise made one’s possession. He did not shed His human name when He rose. Enthroned at the right hand of God, He is still called Jesus. He was God at the same time that He was man, and continues to be man at the same time He is God. He rose bodily, as the man Christ Jesus, and ascended to sit at the right hand of God. He is human today, just as He is God, and He is Jesus today, just as He is Lord and Christ.

We concluded that Paul thanked God for one of two reasons, or (most likely) for both:

1. “Having heard of your faith in the Christ Jesus” and
2. Having heard “the love you have for all the consecrated ones.”

We’ve also noted that God was the author of the Colossians’ faith. Now we learn that their faith was directed toward “the Christ Jesus.” Of course, faith of the saving kind should be directed toward God, because only God saves. So here we have another indication of the deity of Christ. What does it mean to have faith in Him for salvation? It means to trust

Him, to confidently believe that He is capable of saving, and to entrust Him with our eternal destiny.

Could we trust anyone but God with such a treasure? Is Jesus worthy of such trust? Can He bear its weight? Or is He liable to give up on us at some stage or otherwise fail to do what is necessary for our salvation? The Colossians had faith in the Christ, and so should we as we go through the trials of life. When our conscience strikes us, we should turn to Jesus. When we fail, become confused, frightened, or just plain despondent, we should turn to Him. He is human—one of us. He is divine—able to save.

The second reason why Paul gave God thanks as he prayed was that the Colossians had a love “for all the consecrated ones.” The important word here is the word *all*, often misunderstood, as if Paul simply said he had heard merely of their love for fellow believers. *All* here, as in most cases in Scripture, means “without distinction.” The Colossians’ love was inclusive. It included Jews and Gentiles, men and women, people from any social status. It was a love that did not distinguish, it realized and therefore demonstrated that, in Christ, there is no difference (Romans 3:22; 10:12; Galatians 2:6). Distinctions that were so much part of the fabric of Roman society and of Israel’s thinking had no relevance in the church.

Yes, culture has its valid place, but where culture runs contrary to the gospel it is to be contradicted. Rome could not exist apart from the social structure it created and that sustained daily life. But from Paul’s point of view, Rome had no right to exist if it was so thoroughly committed to ungodly concepts that it was incapable of changing. Rodney Starks’s fascinating little book on the early church, *The Rise of Christianity*, demonstrates how the early Christians’ inclusive, practical love amazed and challenged the Roman world.⁴ The oft-quoted text, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:36), says as much.

This was a major issue in Paul’s mind because Christian inclusiveness constituted a denial of all distinctions and thereby implied the grace of the gospel. Grace implied the sufficiency of Christ’s achievement over and above human merit or failure. It further implied the primacy of Christ in the Christian life, including the life of the church.

The Colossians were not to be satisfied merely with believing the truth; they were to practice it. Grace was to be the foundation of all they

⁴ Philippi was in Greece. Colossae was across the sea and to the south, in Asia Minor.