

# “Colossians”

## Summer Series 1

### Lesson 2

## “Colossians 1:9-29”

**Objective:** To understand the message that Paul meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis on application.

**Materials:** I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Colossians, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, and any other sources along with the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding for our contextual situation.

#### **Procedures**

- 1.** We will begin by translating the text from Greek into English. I do not here give you that full translation here, though there are excerpts.
- 2.** We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural and social settings in order to understand the message Paul intended and that God still intends for us.
- 3.** From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the calling that Paul has for the early disciples to our modern contextual framework in order to do our very best to live as disciples of Christ in our modern era.
- 4.** We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

As we come to lesson 2 in this series we come to the second part of Paul's extended thanksgiving, which continues in verses 9-14. Notice the plural "we" with reference to the prayer that is being given on behalf of the Colossians. This certainly includes at least Paul and Timothy.<sup>1</sup> Paul begins this section by noting his constant concern for the Colossian Christians, indeed since the day they heard of them. The thought here of not ceasing to pray for them parallels "always" in verse 3 and refers to his deep concern for them. Once again here, it probably carries the meaning of regularity and may refer to Paul's remembering them in his regular prayer time.<sup>2</sup> Verses 9-23 are a single unit, which is essentially a reported prayer. Many scholars overlook this fact due to failing to recognize that verses 13-23 build onto the final elements of Paul's thanksgiving from the previous section. Paul prays in verse 9 asking that they may be filled with the knowledge of God's will, live worthy lives, that they may bear fruit (verse 10),

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<sup>1</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, in *The New International Greek Commentary series* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2012), p. 68.

that they may be made strong, and be prepared to endure with patience and joy (verse 11) while being continually thankful.<sup>3</sup>

This is the content and the hope of his prayer for them. Certainly it is the case that Paul would like for the people of Colossae to do all that they can to bring these things about, but this is what he asks for from God most importantly. This is something that will come into being through God's power and through His agency. There are places where Paul will admonish the people themselves and certainly veiled in this prayer there is the hope and expectation that these things will be part and parcel of the lives of the believers. Paul, though is not simply asking them, in their own power, strength, and determination to do these things: instead He calls upon a higher power a more effective force to bring them into reality.

Paul begins this prayer by connecting it with the words of thanksgiving that he began in verses 3-8. It is important to notice how much emphasis Paul places on thanksgiving and praise. The phrase, "For this reason" points back to the report of Epaphras concerning the Colossians (4-8). The conjunctive, (*καί* - *kai*)

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<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series, vol. 12 (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 1986), p. 60.

“also,” refers back to Paul and Timothy here who are not merely giving thanks but interceding on behalf of the Colossians. It should also be noted that elsewhere when Paul uses the phrase “For this reason” (*Διὰ τοῦτο* - *dia touto*) is used to point to the introduction of a new act (cf. Romans 13:6; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 3:5). Paul’s expectation is that they would remain strongly grounded in the Gospel, which they had already accepted. Based on what they had already experienced since receiving that Gospel, he wants them to continue to make progress. In this way Paul not only challenges the teachings of the False Teachers, but also he challenges them with the evidence already demonstrated in their own lives.<sup>4</sup>

Verse 9 – Paul here lifts up his praise while at the same time continuing to plead to God that the members of this young church will be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. He clearly understands the nature of human beings to pursue their own will and this call returns the focus to the place that all humans were in fact intended to focus upon from the beginning, upon God and His will. Human tendency is to continually readjust this focus and

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<sup>4</sup> David W. Pao, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p. 68.



center it upon the creation, or upon self, rather than upon the creator. Paul clearly recognizes that without divine intervention this church and all churches are destined for failure. He calls upon God to give great gifts to the Colossians; spiritual wisdom, and spiritual understanding.

Verse 10 – Paul then goes on to highlight the reasoning behind requesting these gifts. These gifts are given in order that the Colossians may live lives that are worthy of “God”. This concept of being “worthy” is a powerful concept that is far more than to just giving meaning and purpose to life, it is more along the lines of to fulfill the purpose for which God created humanity in the very beginning. This concept of being worthy was an

important one as is picked up by John in Revelation 5:2ff.<sup>5</sup> The Lord Jesus Christ provided in His life and in His death an example of the standard for worthiness.<sup>6</sup> Paul consistently makes reference to this concept of “worthiness” (Philippians 1:27;<sup>7</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:12;<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:1;<sup>9</sup> cf. Romans 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 1 Corinthians 7:17; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 5:16).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I saw a powerful angel, who proclaimed in a loud voice, “Who is **worthy** to open the scroll and break its seals?” <sup>3</sup> But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or look inside it. <sup>4</sup> So I began to weep and weep, because no one was found **worthy** to open the scroll or to look inside it. <sup>5</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, “Don’t weep. Look! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has emerged victorious so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” <sup>5:6</sup> Then, in between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain. It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are God’s seven spirits, sent out into the whole earth. <sup>7</sup> He came forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. <sup>8</sup> When he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each held a harp and gold bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. <sup>5:9</sup> They took up a new song, saying, “You are **worthy** to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain, and by your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation. <sup>10</sup> You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will rule on earth.” <sup>5:11</sup> Then I looked, and I heard the sound of many angels surrounding the throne, the living creatures, and the elders. They numbered in the millions—thousands upon thousands. <sup>5:12</sup> They said in a loud voice, “**Worthy** is the slaughtered Lamb to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and might, and honor, glory, and blessing.” <sup>5:13</sup> And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea—I heard everything everywhere say, “Blessing, honor, glory, and power belong to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb forever and always.” <sup>5:14</sup> Then the four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshipped. CEB.

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> **Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ’s gospel. Do this, whether I come and see you or I’m absent and hear about you. Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel.** CEB.

<sup>8</sup> **We appealed to you, encouraged you, and pleaded with you to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom and glory.** CEB.

<sup>9</sup> **Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God.** CEB.

<sup>10</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 71.

Repeatedly, God tells us that he is “well pleased” with Jesus (Matthew 3:17; 12:18; 17:5; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; 2 Peter 1:17). Paul calls upon the Colossians to emulate this trait of Jesus and to live lives that are “pleasing” (ἀρεσκεία - *apeskeia*) to God, lives that seek God’s favor rather than seeking after our own selfish desires, or after the favor of men. The word that Paul uses here for “pleasing” occurs only here in the New Testament (in the Septuagint only in Proverbs 31:30) and in wider Greek usage usually carries a negative connotation (obsequiousness<sup>11</sup>), but it is also used a number of times by Philo who specifically uses it in reference to “pleasing” God. Paul also uses the verbal form of this word in terms of “pleasing” God or others (Romans 15:1-2; 1 Corinthians 10:33-11:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:1).<sup>12</sup>

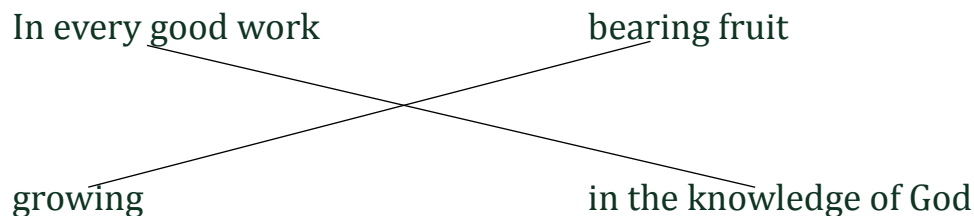
It should be noted that Paul does not just leave us to guess or fill in the blank as to what is pleasing to God, but he defines it more specifically as bearing fruit in every good work as they continue to grow in knowledge. “Growing in the knowledge of

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<sup>11</sup> Obedient or attentive to an excessive or servile degree.

<sup>12</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 72.

God” completes the chiastic<sup>13</sup> arrangement that ties this clause to the previous clause.



On the basis of this structure, some have suggested that “in every good work” and “in the knowledge of God” modify both participles (“bearing fruit” and “growing”). This concept receives further impetus from the verse 6 where “growing” and “bearing fruit” form a hendiadys.<sup>14</sup> Despite all of this, in light of verses 11 and 12, where the participles are used in alternate positions in relation to their modifiers, they should probably be seen as separate clauses conveying distinct ideas,<sup>15</sup> though this could easily be debated.

Verse 11 – Paul continues his prayer requesting that the Colossians may be made strong with the strength that comes from the “glorious power” of God. God is regularly seen in the Old

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<sup>13</sup> Having or denoting a structure in which words are repeated in reverse order.

<sup>14</sup> The expression of a single idea by two words connected with “and,” e.g., nice and warm, when one could be used to modify the other, as in nicely warm.

<sup>15</sup> David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 71.



Testament as the powerful God, the sovereign creator, who through his mighty arm rescued Israel from Egypt. The great power of this almighty God is now unleashed through the Gospel (cf. Romans 1:16-17; 1 Corinthians 1:24) and is continually at work in God's people so that they may be able to endure "everything with patience".<sup>16</sup> Paul realizes the tremendous value of patience and he knows that it is crucial for the disciple of Jesus Christ to develop this character trait in order to more and more be like Jesus. Certainly, in the modern world, we often not only do not value patience we often see it as a weakness. We demand instant gratification rather than enduring in patience.

Verse 12 – Very often the break in verses comes at a place that is far from ideal. Here the concept from verse 11 begins with the words "while joyfully" and continues, "giving thanks to the Father". The patience that Paul calls for from his audience is not one that is sullen or even Stoic, but one that is marked by joyful thanksgiving to God. The basis for this attitude of thankfulness is based in the fact that God has enabled them to share in the great inheritance of his "holy ones" who are characterized as being in

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<sup>16</sup> N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon, p. 63.

the “light”. Paul will contrast the light and the darkness (verse 13) and here the “light” clearly is a reference to the location of the great inheritance that resides there. It resides in the light of God’s presence and not in the darkness that characterizes the selfish and petty domain of self and Satan.<sup>17</sup>

We all know, or have known people that retain a joyful demeanor no matter the circumstances. Their attitude is not determined by their environment. Their environment is effected by their attitude. Such people are often seen as a breath of fresh air, a light in the darkness, whenever they walk into a room. Is that how people perceive you? Do you think this is the way Jesus would have been perceived? How does such a person change your perception of circumstances? Jesus came into this world to change things; those that are His disciples will continue that mission. We are to reflect the attitude and countenance of Jesus. When people see you do they think about Jesus?

Verse 13 – The Colossians have been rescued (ῥύομαι - *ruomai*), along with others that Paul designates along with the Colossians by using the term “us”, from the “power of darkness”.

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<sup>17</sup> Douglas J. Moo, The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, in The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), p. 102.

There is likely an allusion here to the Exodus where the Children of Israel exchanged the harsh rule of Pharaoh for the wise and enlightening rule of the wise sovereignty of God's son (cf. Romans 5:21; 6:16 ff.). Paul shares the belief, along with other New Testament writers, and Jesus himself; the belief in the existence of a dark power to whom the human race, and the world has been subjected to because of sin.<sup>18</sup>

Verse 14 – It is in the “beloved Son” that the Colossians have “redemption” (ἀπολύτρωσις - *apolutrosis*). We have been freed from the slavery of a dark and terrible tyrant who sought his own gratification and his own agenda at the expense of his slaves. This verse once again would have likely marked an allusion to the Exodus for the Jew who would have likely seen in it the echoes of slavery to Pharaoh. God continues with His purpose of building a people for Himself that would be a part of His plan to completely eradicate the taint of evil from the creation. This great plan has now been initiated and is at work in the Colossians<sup>19</sup> (and it is still at work in the disciples of Jesus Christ of today).

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<sup>18</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>19</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 67.

Verse 15 – These next 6 verses of Colossians are quite often, and rightly so, considered to be among the most important Christological passages in the New Testament. It is also generally agreed that at this point Paul included an already formed hymn. There are a number of hymnic or poetic marks. It is however possible that Paul became lyrical or poetic himself at this point at the thought of all that Christians owed Christ (1:13-14)<sup>20</sup> and composed this himself. Whatever the circumstances may have been, we are left with a beautiful and powerful set of poetic lines that praise Christ in virtually immeasurable ways. The Christology here is some of the highest in all of the New Testament and ranks alongside some of that recounted by the Apostle John in his Gospel account and in the Apocalypse.<sup>21</sup>

The focus switches here from God to Jesus, who is the “image” (εἰκὼν - *icon*) of the “invisible” (ἀόρατος - *aoptos*) God. God is spoken of in terms of being “invisible” three other times in

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<sup>20</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>21</sup> There is likely a powerful allusion here to Proverbs 8:12-31.

the New Testament (Romans 1:20;<sup>22</sup> 1 Timothy 1:17;<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 11:27<sup>24</sup>). The immediate question then is how do we come to knowledge of this invisible God? In the ancient world the concept of “icon” was a common way for information of invisible, higher world concepts that were inaccessible to the senses, to be conveyed. The thought of “man” as being the “icon” of the invisible God was also one that was familiar to Paul’s audience. It is probable that none of this is actually in mind here. Something else is going on here.<sup>25</sup>

It is likely that the concept here comes from Hellenistic Judaism, which thought of divine wisdom as the image of the invisible God. The invisible God makes himself visible in and through his divine wisdom, which is Jesus. The importance of this concept within Hellenistic Judaism was that it could bridge the otherwise unbridgeable gulf between the invisible world and God

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<sup>22</sup> **Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities—God’s eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So humans are without excuse.** CEB.

<sup>23</sup> **Now to the king of the ages, to the immortal, invisible, and only God, may honor and glory be given to him forever and always! Amen.** CEB.

<sup>24</sup> **By faith he left Egypt without being afraid of the king’s anger. He kept on going as if he could see what is invisible.** CEB.

<sup>25</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 87-88.


on the one side and the visible world on the other.<sup>26</sup> Wright wrote of this section, “The doctrine of incarnation which flows from this cannot, by definition, squeeze either ‘divinity’ or ‘humanity’ out of shape. Indeed, it is only in Jesus Christ that we understand what ‘divinity’ and ‘humanity’ really mean: without him we lapse into sub-Christian, or even pagan categories of thought, and then wonder why the doctrine of incarnation causes us so much difficulty. Paul’s way of expressing the doctrine is to say, poetically, that the man Jesus fulfills the purposes which God had marked out both for himself and for humanity.”<sup>27</sup>

To put it quite simply, if you want to know what God is like then look at Jesus: Jesus conveys the very the essence of God in every aspect. Jesus is unique in the realm where sight cannot form any real concept of that which is from the higher world of invisible spirit. He is one of a kind, and the only other of his same kind is God. Jesus fulfills the original destiny of humankind in being “the” image of God. This concept is an evocation of Genesis 1:27. There is however a difference in meaning from Genesis 1:27 in that mankind was only ever intended to reflect in a partial way

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<sup>26</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 74-75.




the image of God: Jesus, however, reflects the full image in a unique way that cannot be the purview of any other in the cosmos.<sup>28</sup>

The wisdom parallel is extended into the second phrase in this verse (“firstborn of all creation”). This phrase has been the source of a great deal of controversy in the course of Christian history due to its inherent ambiguity. It is precisely this ambiguity, along with that of the first phrase (the image of the invisible God) that allows for the bridge to be formed between the visible and the invisible world.<sup>29</sup> Our tendency is to clarify and define this adjective, but in doing so we strip their power to bridge the gap; this is describing something that is by nature not possible for us to define in concrete terms. This invisible God is beyond anything in our field of perception, or even wildest imaginings, and it is at this point that Paul seeks to create this bridge that will allow us to “begin” to perceive that which is beyond the understanding of our fallen nature. It is in this beginning of perception, that we are drawn to this invisible God, perhaps through some innate memory of our origin, but also because of

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<sup>28</sup> David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 90.



being drawn by the tremendous power of God's love for us. The irresistible power of God's love.

Verse 16 - Paul does not stop here in describing the nature of this visible icon (image) of the invisible God; though in this verse we are informed that not only was the visible realm created through him and for him: Paul makes it clear that he is not a part of the created realm; since it is "through" and "for" Him that they came into being. There is no sense that He is a part of creation. Paul then goes on to prescribe that even the (perhaps the political and) angelic realms were created through and for Him. For Paul there was no distinction between these elements, and without going into tremendous detail here what is being described represents elements of a complex metaphysical system that will have been well known, especially among the Hellenistic Jewish segment of his audience.<sup>30</sup> This was how the universe was structured, in their thought world.

Though some take this list to be reference to both earthly and spiritual realm powers Moo disagrees, and considers all four of these words to refer to the "invisible" powers, i.e. spiritual

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<sup>30</sup> N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon, pp. 75-77.



beings.<sup>31</sup> Arnold comes to the same conclusion describing them as angelic powers. He points out that the powers specifically enumerated here, and then referred to a number of other times throughout the work as part of creation (as part of creation, verse 15b; “all things under heaven, verse 16a, c; 17a, b; 20a; the “invisible” verse 16b and the things “in heaven” verse 20c), are “spiritual in nature.”<sup>32</sup> Even though Arnold may be correct in his overall assessment he seems to cut the cord too thin in specifying so distinctly each of these other references as being spiritual beings. At least some of these are highly debatable and very possibly not referring to angelic beings such as “all things under heaven” which seems a more general term for all of creation and not perhaps a reference to these beings.

What is clear is that Paul is making a powerful point that specifies that no matter what it may be, whether physical, or spiritual, there is no comparison to Christ in authority, power or primacy. They were all created “through” (*διά - dia*) him and “for” (*εἰς - eis*). Many connect these to the concept of wisdom here and perceive the roots of this style of teaching in these concepts.

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<sup>31</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996), p. 251

While it seems probable that the assertion of Christ's relationship owes something to the wisdom tradition it is important to note that the concept is not very tightly bound by this tradition.<sup>33</sup> Some would say this passage in Colossians teaches nothing about the preexistence of Christ while Dunn believes that Paul does provide teaching regarding a preexistent Christ and he uses this specific reference as indicative of this teaching.<sup>34</sup> The indication here is clearly on the primacy of Jesus as being an active part of creation, which is also highlighted in John 1. Here Jesus is linked powerfully with the concept of wisdom, which pervades the realm of creation.<sup>35</sup>

Verse 17 – In this verse Paul indicates that Jesus is “before” (*πρό - pro*) “all things”. The question here is whether Paul is trying to highlight a temporal aspect, a sense of primacy, or some

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<sup>33</sup> cf. Proverbs 8:22-31 **The LORD created me at the beginning of his way, before his deeds long in the past. 23 I was formed in ancient times, at the beginning, before the earth was. 24 When there were no watery depths, I was brought forth, when there were no springs flowing with water. 25 Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth 26 before God made the earth and the fields or the first of the dry land. 27 I was there when he established the heavens, when he marked out the horizon on the deep sea, 28 when he thickened the clouds above, when he secured the fountains of the deep, 29 when he set a limit for the sea, so the water couldn't go beyond his command, when he marked out the earth's foundations. 30 I was beside him as a master of crafts. I was having fun, smiling before him all the time, 31 frolicking with his inhabited earth and delighting in the human race.** CEB.

<sup>34</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), pp. 277-279; 292-293.

<sup>35</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1998), pp. 272-277.

other meaning? If we accept the linking of Jesus to concepts of wisdom then it seems natural to look to these concepts for an answer. In Sirach 1:4-5,<sup>36</sup> there would seem to be a concept of temporality. It must however be noted that Paul is using poetic language and to apply clinical precision to this type of language is to do it harm and injustice. Paul's language is more ethereal here and not intended to bind itself too tightly to a personification of Christ.<sup>37</sup> It must be remembered that Jesus was a part of creation before His incarnation and that it was not something that was bestowed upon Him after the fact. Time, in a sense, is not as relevant here as are function and reality. In reality, Christ was before all things and in primacy and in power it is "in" (*έν - en*) him that all things "hold together" (*συνίστημι - sunistemi*).<sup>38</sup>

Dunn highlights the fact that the emphasis here is upon Jesus in which the wisdom of the world can be seen more clearly

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<sup>36</sup> **Wisdom was created before everything else. Right understanding is as old as eternity. 6 To whom was Wisdom's root revealed? Who knew her wonderful feats?** CEB.

<sup>37</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>38</sup> **συνίστημι** or **συνιστάνω**: to bring together or hold together something in its proper or appropriate place or relationship—'to hold together.' τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν 'in him all things hold together' Col 1:17. In Col 1:17 it may not be easy to indicate clearly the relationship of the phrase 'in him' to the rest of the expression, namely, 'all things hold together.' Some translations have expanded the expression 'in him' to 'in union with him' or 'in view of the fact that we are joined together with him.' It is also possible to understand ἐν αὐτῷ as indicating agent, so that this expression in Col 1:17 may mean 'by means of him all things hold together.' - Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (613). New York: United Bible Societies.

than at any other place in the universe because He is the source, the fountain from which that river flows.<sup>39</sup> This will mean among other things that the fundamental rationale behind the creation and sustenance of the world is “caught” more in the generous outpouring of sacrificial, redemptive love (1:14) than in the greed and grasping that are characteristics of the realm of darkness (1:12).<sup>40</sup>

Verse 18 - Paul now moves on in his recitation of the attributes and position of Jesus as being the head of the “body” which is the church. This is so often today a forgotten concept as we have made Jesus so distant, ethereal, and confined to the future, that we emphasize earthly leadership beyond the living and active leadership of a risen Jesus who in reality surrounds us and sustains us as the “source” and reason for “creation.” “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” He is the beginning of a new creative phase in God’s plan for the universe. Here, Paul highlights the primacy of Christ in the first phase of creation, but also His active participation and involvement as the source of this

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<sup>39</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, pp. 272-277.

<sup>40</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 93-94.

new phase of creation in being the first human being to rise from the dead. **He is first in everything.**


Verse 19 – The assertion that began in 18b is further elaborated here in this verse. The completeness of God’s self-revelation is contained in Jesus. The full interaction of God with the universe is summed up in Jesus. The divine fullness is expressed here in the highest possible terms.<sup>41</sup> Once again we find the expression that God was not only “pleased” with Him but He was “pleased to dwell” in all His fullness in Him.

Verse 20 – It is through him that God was “pleased” to “reconcile” (*ἀποκαταλλάσσω - apokatallasso*) to himself all things. This statement presupposes that there was a rift between God and creation and there is a necessity for mankind to be reconciled in order to continue to be a part of God’s plan and His creation. Just as mankind was the source of this rift he has a part to play in the reconciliation of that creation: Jesus fulfills that role too. It is in this passage that Paul demonstrates this reconciliation in terms of the cosmic Jesus being at the crux of merging both “factions” by “making peace” (*εἰρηνοποιέω - eirenopoiew*)<sup>42</sup> through the “blood

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<sup>41</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 99-102.

<sup>42</sup> cf. Matthew 5:9 **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”** NRSV.



of his cross". The shameful death of Jesus has cosmic consequences that powerfully and dramatically convey the love of God and his tremendous, overwhelming, desire for "reconciliation."<sup>43</sup>

Verse 21 – Paul then moves on from this point to how this impacts the Colossians. Before the coming of the gospel message they were "estranged" from God and indeed even hostile in mind, which led to a life of doing "evil deeds". This was their state before the preaching of the gospel and it should be noted that Paul does not make a distinction here between Jew and Gentile this was the state of all humanity, irrespective of race, beliefs, or religion.

Verse 22 – This Jesus, who has been described in terms beyond imagination, with regard to power and position, is the source of their reconciliation. Through His body of flesh, through His death, He has now reconciled humanity to God. He has healed the rift and not only that; He has transformed those characterized by hostility and evil into a state of holiness, blamelessness, and irreproachability before God. The relationship is restored, the rift healed.

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<sup>43</sup> David W. Pao, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, pp. 102-105.

Verse 23 – In this verse, Paul returns once again to his reason for writing to them in the first place. This is the purpose for his correspondence and his reason for explaining the deep things of the cosmos to them. There is danger that confronts them if they do not continue to reside in the security and steadfastness of their faith. They are to reside in the hope that is promised by the gospel message that they heard and which has been proclaimed to every “creature” (κτίσις - *ktisis* – literally “creation”) under heaven. The emphasis here seems to be that Christ is the source of reconciliation for all of creation through the gospel that has been in fact already proclaimed to the Colossians. Paul then highlights the fact that it is to “this gospel” (good news) that Paul became a servant.

Verse 24 – Paul then highlights his position with relation to both the gospel and to the Colossians. His attitude has been transformed and now he rejoices in the sufferings that he endures for their sake, for the sake, in truth, of all recipients of the gospel message. Paul stands his ground against those who would silence, distort, or in any way taint, the pure message of the gospel. Paul then moves to a controversial statement (24b), which has been


misused by some. Two ideas from Paul's Jewish understanding of God's purposes will help clarify Paul's meaning here. First, there is the concept of "corporate Christology" that is expressed in the last half of this verse by the concept of the church as Christ's body. That which is true of Christ is also true of his body the church, they are destined to suffer just as Christ suffered.<sup>44</sup> So often we in the church today see suffering as only inclusive of persecution, or martyrdom, when in reality this concept is much broader than this and can include all the ways that Christians suffer because they do not demand their personal rights, or personal justice for themselves from others. It can mean a wife, or husband, forgiving their spouse for small things all the way up to huge things like infidelity. It can also mean forgiving, especially those who do not deserve it, which was once in fact all of us, because we Christians follow Christ as His disciples: we seek to replicate His life in the way we live and interact with others each moment of each day.

Secondly, there is the concept of the "Messianic woes" which Paul alludes to in Romans 8:18-25. There was a development that was especially prominent in the intertestamental and Rabbinic

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<sup>44</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 91-92.






writings that indicated that when the moment arrived for the present era to move into the new age there would be travail and tribulations in much the way that the birth of a child brings suffering to a mother: the birth of this new era will bring suffering to those who are a part of this new era. Sufferings are to be the accompaniment, or foreshadowing, of the new era that is coming. Paul reuses these Jewish ideas and reshapes them; taking into consideration the facts that surround the gospel.<sup>45</sup>

Verse 25 – Paul became the servant of this Gospel not out of his own will or his own desire, but due to the commission of God Himself. Paul was called into his role as an apostle. This is what this word, or title means. Here Paul indicates to his audience his credentials as validation of his authority to deliver to them this stern, yet beautiful, warning with regard to those who bring them a false gospel. It is Paul's task to make the word (*λόγος - logos*) of God fully known.

Verse 26 – This is a mystery that was hidden beforehand, but has only now been revealed and it has been revealed to the saints, the recipients of this Gospel message. It is in the saints that

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<sup>45</sup> N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon, p. 92.



this mystery resides and not in any other group whether it be the Jews, or some other group claiming to have additional information that will unlock the fullness of this mystery. That is the place of Paul; it is His task to elaborate the mystery of God, and he is passing that along to those to whom he ministers.

Verse 27 – It was the choice of God to make known this mystery and to make it known among the Gentiles through Paul. For Paul, the mystery is not a timetable of events, it is vested fully in a person, in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the manifestation of the mystery of God.<sup>46</sup> A powerful part of this mystery is not simply the tremendous source of this power, but that this power takes up residence in its recipients and they become a genuine part of the body of Christ continuing His mission of acting as agents of transformation of the world and reconciling the world to God. Hope in the promises of God for something greater, better, and more enduring, provides the fuel for the continued endurance of hardship, pain, and ridicule from the old creation that is in truth passing away, and in its death throes.

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<sup>46</sup> N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon, p. 95.

Verse 28 – Paul makes it very clear that the mystery that is revealed is indeed Jesus Christ. They not only “proclaim” Christ they also seek to “warn” (νουθετέω - *nouthetew*) “all men” and to teach them “in all wisdom” so that “all men” may be presented in maturity to Christ. The quest is not simply to warn and move on, but to bring them to maturity in Christ; to help them to reflect the nature and image of Christ.

Verse 29 – It is for this purpose that Paul is driven by the inspiration, or inward working of God, to continue to toil and struggle in order to bring about the will of God to spread the gospel effectively to all humanity. As Jeremiah said **If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”**<sup>47</sup>

Paul sets out here in this first chapter his credentials, the credentials of Christ, and what drives him on. As he does this he sets the stage for what will follow, as he will seek to admonish the Colossian Christians to continue on the path that they began when they received the gospel from Epaphras. He calls them into full-

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<sup>47</sup> Jeremiah 20:9 NRSV.


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discipleship, full replication of Christ in their actions, their hearts,  
in their motives.

# Synopsis

In the beginning of this section Paul continues the prayer that he began for the Colossians in the previous section and expresses the desires he has for them in terms of this prayer to God. He desires for them to be filled with knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. He desires this not simply for the sake of these things in some existential way, but in order that they may live lives that are worthy of the calling; to live lives that are “pleasing” to God. This “pleasing” life will be characterized fruits of good works. The strength and patience to bring about these good works will come from God and should be brought forth joyfully, giving thanks to the Father who has enabled them to have an inheritance in the light. They have been rescued from the tyranny and slavery of darkness and transported into the reality of the kingdom of His Son where redemption and forgiveness are the hallmarks.

Paul then lays out for them the credentials of this Christ of whom Paul speaks and He transports them into the realm of light. This Jesus represents the wisdom of the invisible God in physical



form. He is the source of and the sustaining force for all that has been created and both in heaven and on earth. He is the first from the dead and in Him the fullness of God was “pleased” to dwell. It is through Him that the reconciliation of the world back to God will take place and this is demonstrated in the giving of his blood and the suffering of the cross.

For those who once were hostile and separated from God reconciliation has now taken place through the death of Jesus. This has come about through the act of Jesus and allows those who accept the Gospel to be holy, blameless and irreproachable before God. It is of this Gospel that Paul is a servant.

Paul now expresses, starting at verse 24, his interest in the Colossians. He conveys to them teaching regarding the body of Christ and how his suffering is a continuation of that which Jesus suffered while on earth. Since he is a part of the body of Christ his sufferings are in fact to be viewed as a continuation of Christ’s sufferings and he rejoices in them as a mark of his connection to Christ and as a continuation of Christ’s willingness to suffer for others. It is through Christ that the mystery of God is revealed and

Paul is an instrument in that revelation to the Gentiles. Paul is empowered for this mission by God Himself.

## Main Points

- ◆ Christians are called upon to live lives that are “pleasing” to God and are therefore “worthy”.
- ◆ Christians have been rescued from the tyranny of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Jesus where redemption and forgiveness are the hallmarks.
- ◆ Jesus is the physical manifestation of the spiritual reality of God, a mystery revealed in him.
- ◆ God was pleased to reconcile the world through Jesus.
- ◆ Christians become a part of the body of Christ and continue the mission of Christ, which includes his suffering.

# Questions

1. Why do you think Paul tells the Colossians what he has been praying for them?
2. What is spiritual wisdom?
3. What does it mean to “please” God?
4. How can we live lives that are “worthy” of the Lord?
5. What is the power of darkness?
6. Where is the Kingdom of Jesus, and when is it?
7. What does God look like?
8. Where is the position of Christ in relation to creation?
9. What does it mean for all things to hold together in Christ?
10. How are the Colossians to continue to be blameless, holy, and irreproachable before God?
11. What is faith?
12. What is the hope promised by the Gospel?
13. How do Paul’s sufferings complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions?
14. What is the mystery of God?
15. What does it mean to be mature in Christ?
16. What traits will characterize the person who is mature in Christ?



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17. What drives Paul on to continue the struggle to proclaim the gospel?

18. What does this section of Colossians challenge you to change in your daily routine of life?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that Jesus is, has been, and always will be a central, crucial part of God's plan for creation. He is not an after-thought, nor a plug to fill an unanticipated hole or gap. Just as at the beginning of creation Jesus was there and a part of that creation so is He still. That creation continues and this creation is not a painless, or cerebral exercise for God. He is personally and emotionally connected. What are some things to which you are emotionally and personally connected?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these words of Paul revealing His deep plans and His dreams for creation. Unlike us, nothing will stand against the plans and dreams of God. Despite the illusion that things may not be going according to God's plans Paul calls his readers to reach out with their souls to trust God and His good news. Paul is God's agent of grace and truth, seeking to convey that God is at heart a "peacemaker." What are some ways that you seek to replicate the heart of God and act as a "peacemaker?"

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

The challenge of these words of Paul are to live life in the light of the understanding he imparts; to trust, and to believe that each of us as one who accepts the message of the Gospel is a participant in God's "new creation. In this understanding lies a new way of understanding everything, living our lives and interacting with others. We are called to be agents of redemption. How do you see your daily choices being changed by this understanding?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

The word of God is calling us to be like Jesus, to take up our cross and to follow Him. This means looking at the needs of the kingdom above my own desires, aspirations and agenda. Such a perspective challenges me to be inconvenienced for others, to be willing to put aside myself for the benefit of someone else. This race is a marathon and not a sprint, so those who follow Christ must run the race all the way to the end of their life. What are some ways that you feel called to demonstrate Christ in your daily life?