

# Notes on Colossians

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## Chapter 1:1–14

### **God's hope and will by which we may live**

When the Colossians heard the gospel of God's grace they were filled with hope. Grace and peace had come to them as a promise for the future (1:23, 27). We have been created in God's image to be about his will and to see it accomplished. Without the promise of grace to take us forward, the past would prevent us from facing the present and the future be too uncertain to be a guide. Things do not get better by themselves in this world. A future and a hope must come from God.

Through hearing the message of Christ and the future of which he is the Guarantor, the Colossians had come to believe in God and their hope in God was expressed in a new found love for one another. The image of God was being restored. The hope God proclaims to us is laid up in heaven (more on this in chapter 3) where it cannot be threatened. So now, across the world, the gospel is bearing the fruit of faith, hope and love. This love is actually the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul was writing to people renewed in their whole being. What could he pray for them? He saw their need for a wise and deep grasp of the will of God (as did Epaphras—4:12). The will of God includes Christ dying for our sins (Gal. 1:4), Paul being an apostle (Eph. 1:1), and us being God's sons and daughters (Eph. 1:5). It is God accomplishing his purpose for us (Eph. 1:11) and us no longer doing our own will (Eph. 2:3) or being foolish (Eph. 5:17) but doing God's will from the heart (Eph. 6:6). God's will is that we be sanctified and thankful (I Thess. 4:3; 5:18).

It is by knowing God's will, not just the 'what' but the love of it, that we grow in good deeds and in knowledge of God himself. The doing of such a will requires strength from God because it goes against the tide of human affairs and inclinations. God's will is oriented to the future that God is making and it requires that we have the patience of love and the joy of a promised future.

In order to live such a life, we have been transferred to the kingdom or reign of the Son of God's love—the Son on whom the Father's love is focussed and in whom it is fully expressed. While the full revelation of this kingdom is still to come, we are already sharing in it as those who are forgiven and redeemed. Because Jesus Christ reigns until every enemy is destroyed (I Cor. 15:25–28), we can be sure that we will inherit all that God has promised.

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### Prayer

Lord God, can it really be that you have a future and a hope for me? What grounds do I have in this unfaithful world to be sure of anything? Yet I call you 'Father!' I call you the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. He is all the reason I need to be sure of anything. He is the Son of your love and, in him, your love has lighted on me. So, my faith is in you. Your love is in me, and all is well. Thanks be to you Lord God, and to your Son in whose name I now lift my voice to you. Amen.

### Chapter 1:15–23

#### God's fullness in Christ, and peace through him

God's Son has the pre-eminent position in the creation, to reconcile everything to his Father. The people who have been transferred to his kingdom benefit from this new state of affairs and live as God's holy children. Who is this Christ?

In the whole creation, he is God's image, his 'firstborn', not because of a literal birth but because everything, seen and unseen, was made in and through and for him. God made all of mankind to be his image, but here, Jesus is the image. He is the 'Man' that God always had in mind when he made us. We can only be the image of God in Christ (3:10). In knowing him who is the true humanity, we know and can be ourselves. The alternative is the myths we create about ourselves and our world and all the religious mumbling which must be offered to maintain them.

Paul has taken Gen. 1:27 and applied it to Christ rather than to ourselves (as he does in I Cor. 11:7).

What of this present evil world, the one in which we die? Jesus Christ entered it and embraced it in his own death. He bore its sins and its judgment. God raised him from the dead. So Christ is also the 'firstborn' from the dead, so that he can come to have pre-eminence in everything, even in this world where death had reigned. God has revealed the pre-eminence of his Son by raising him from the dead, but he always had this first place in the creation.

In our sinfulness, we had refused to acknowledge the Creator, but now, through Christ who has come to remake us, we can walk away from our fortresses and confess what we really are. We can be profoundly simple and helplessly strong. We have 'come home' to this world's Father. (Compare Isa. 40:9–17.) Only the Creator could restore this world to its true nature. God in Christ has reconciled the world to himself as only a Creator could do.

Now, we have peace through the blood of Christ's cross. We were hostile to God but are now holy before him. Christ's blood has removed all need for us to maintain our rage. Because we have access to our Father, hostility, not only with God but with our neighbour, has been abolished (Eph. 2:16). How will the nations be taught to lay down their weapons? How will combatants learn to let wrath be turned away with a soft answer (Prov. 15:1)? How will we learn to do good to those who spitefully use us (Matt. 5:44)? All this may happen through the blood of the cross. The effects of a person who is reconciled to God are profound. Cf. Prov. 16:7; James 3:17–18.

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### Prayer

Father, I thank you that you have transferred me to the kingdom of your Son. By your love revealed in him and by the power of his resurrection, I have a future as a child of your own making. Forgive the anxious caring for myself that does not bring glory to you. Keep me trusting in your Son, and may the truth of his pre-eminence be boldly proclaimed in this entire world, for the sake of your mercy. Amen.

### Chapter 1:24–2:5

#### Declaring God's mystery: Christ, and him in us

The church is a remarkable body of people. Christ died for it. Now Paul says he gladly suffered for it. The service he had to render was to speak God's word, and this was a glorious mystery: Christ had come to indwell Gentiles. By this message, Gentiles could be assured of an inheritance as God had promised his people the Jews. The inheritance would be the whole earth filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. Nothing of who God was would be unknown and nothing of his purpose for what he had made would be unfulfilled. For such a future, Paul spared no effort to have people established in the truth.

This was no light matter for Paul. He could see the Colossians and their neighbours the Laodiceans threatened by a false knowledge and glory. Christ is God's mystery. We need no other than that. Paul was confident that the Colossians remained steady in faith and that they would be helped by his warnings.

### Chapter 2:6–23

#### Life comes through Christ, not by regulations

The best guard against false teaching, next to the true teaching that Paul has given, is gratefulness to God. Christ has brought us to life; therefore, we should be determined to be fully established in this fact.

The truth in Colossae was being contested by those who wanted to rely on a human tradition (as in Matt. 7: 1–13 and Gal. 1:14), or a system of teaching based on this world rather than on Christ. It was Israel's religion as the revelation of God in the Old Testament but separated from the God who gave it, and unwilling to acknowledge the fullness of Jesus Christ. It was confused with other mystical and ascetic elements. Paul said: 'In Jesus Christ, we have had God present to us. We have fullness of life as a gift rather than something we can accomplish—life from him who is head over all authority. The starting point and continuing point of our life is what happened to him, and happened to us also because he did what he did in our place. We have been circumcised (separated from all evil), buried (judged) and are raised from the dead (alive to God).'

The 'written code' or law of God, which the false teachers seemed to think was the way of progress, was, in fact, against them, a certificate of debt. When we think law is the way forward, it ties us up in ourselves and blinds us to our hypocrisy. While we

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pride ourselves in our knowledge of the truth, it stands ready to damn us at God's judgment seat. Christ nailed it to his cross. What an evil scheme Satan hatched to get us away from Christ and his amazing cross: a tradition with its stabilising mellowness and appeal to nobility and culture. Its true colours were shown in the red of Christ's blood.

But the same cross revealed the sureness of God's victory: Christ was circumcised for us; the evil of our flesh was cut off there; he cancelled the written code against us; he disarmed evil principalities and powers that ruled by their accusations. 'Therefore', says Paul, 'do not live at the level of regulations, celebrations, self-humiliation and reliance on angels, which glorify human ego rather than rely on Christ. Rather, live in Christ who causes his whole church to grow vibrantly.'

### Prayer

Father, how could I have thought that there was any hope for an amendment of life in my own practices? I give thanks to you that Christ has brought fullness of life to me now—life which is your own presence and grace and power, life which flows from the cross of your Son where the wiles and wickedness of Satan were defeated forever. Grant strength to all your servants to live and proclaim this truth all our days, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

## Chapter 3:1–17

### **Christ is your life. 'Kill off' what is old. 'Put on' what God is renewing**

Here is how we may participate in the new life Christ has given to us. Our past is in him who was crucified. Our present is in him who is at God's right hand. Our future, the revelation of who we really are, is in him who will be revealed in his coming again. 'Seek these things! Set your mind on these things!' How could we give our affections to this world? Our life is with Christ; so is our future glory.

'Kill off what has no part in this new life you have! You stripped off your old humanity and its deeds in baptism (Rom. 6:1–11) and got dressed in the new humanity of Christ.' This is not something we do alone because our new life is being renewed constantly by God—it is Christ's life being formed in us. It knows no distinctions (distinctions which were often the scene of former sins).

God made the whole creation to reflect his own generous care and restoring gentleness, so these are the things God is forming in us and things we must choose. The whole goodness of God is now the command of God to those who are chosen holy and beloved. It is not a requirement for salvation, for that would make it a saving grace. It is not a perfectionist standard that we may demand it of one another. It is always and only the command of God who loves us and has chosen us and who has sanctified us.

The love of God that binds everything together is nothing less than the reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ. It is the peace of Christ but ruling in our hearts, or Christ himself as prince of peace ruling in our hearts. It is he who makes us tranquil, dependent on his word and ready with something to share by way of wisdom and

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teaching and fervent praise for God. Nothing is in our own name. Everything arises from the great name of Jesus Christ and from the Father to whom we give thanks.

### Prayer

Father, you have purposed that we should be like yourself, your own image. I thank you that the person I made of myself has been crucified with Christ and that my life is now what you have made me and are making me in your Son. Grant that I may not be terrified by your commands but welcome them as your daily summoning to participate in the new life I have in him. May the meekness and gentleness of Christ himself be formed in me. Thanks be to you Lord God that such fullness of life has been given to me now. Thanks be to you Lord Jesus Christ that my life will be revealed with yours at your coming. Amen.

### Chapter 3:18–4:6

#### **Live everyday 'in the Lord'. Pray and live so that the word will go to the world**

These commands are not an ethic so much as the way of life that we have put on. Christ himself is being renewed in us, so the commands do not begin with the other person and how we relate to them but with Christ who is above and what he has won for us.

The themes, which are mentioned here, are opened up in other articles by the author. See 'The Story of Marriage' and 'Christian Parents and their Children' and 'A Christian view of Work and Vocation'. All are listed on this web site.

A wife who is subject to her husband, or a helper suited to him, expresses her confidence that Christ's reign is good. A husband who loves his wife and treats her gently will witness to Christ's meekness and gentleness and particularly to his faithful love. He will better understand the strength of the love of Christ and be more conformed to it.

Under the reign of Christ, a child who obeys its parents will please the Lord. He or she will grow up being converted to God and will be tutored for a life of obedient faith. A father who avoids provoking his children knows the Father of Jesus Christ and represents this Father to his children truly. Such children are not likely to lose their ardour for life.

A slave who eagerly obeys his or her master understands that above their owner is the true Lord, Christ. He will amply repay them for their service in the creation and so they should have him in mind rather than their immediate circumstances. The frequent injustices they suffer will not be unnoticed by the Judge of the earth. A master who treats his slaves with justice and fairness is not just ruling but is a living witness to the Lord in heaven who showers his goodness on all alike.

To say that we must remain attentive to prayer (as Jesus also said—Matt. 26:41) with thanksgiving is to say that the life of Christ which we now share is the context for everything and that we call on God constantly to keep us in his will. The content of

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our prayer is that the word of Christ in which we live will continue to prevail. If our life before the unbelieving world is wise and gracious and we take opportunity as it comes, we will know how to speak for their up building—that is, in the same truth in which we ourselves live.

### Prayer

Father, save me from living by sight and impulse. Your Son is now my life and he has life enough for us all. Grant that I may be content in the relations in which you have placed me, and eager to witness to your Son's saving health. May your word prosper in the mouth of those who preach and teach, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Chapter 4:7–18

### About us and you

Paul's final greetings are a mine of information about the practical life of a Christian and the gathered church. He knew that in sharing what had happened to him, the Colossians would be encouraged because the story of his life was the story of what God does for a sinner and what God does for a needy world. Seeing what Paul now thought of Mark, who had let Paul down earlier, would help them. He was now to be received as though nothing had been amiss. The company of fellow Jews who trusted in their Messiah would remind him of the faithfulness of God to his ancient people. They were still God's beloved (Rom. 9:1–5). Epaphras and Luke were men whose lives moved in the loving will of God for the nations. What was said to one church would be a help to others because, while separated by distance, the church is one living people. Archippus needed encouragement, and Paul needed the encouragement of his friends at Colossae.

### Prayer

Holy Father, how rich you are to us all! How good you have been to give us your Son! What grace you have shown in creating a church where your love for each one and your purpose for the nations can be shared! Continue to fashion our hearts that they may beat with yours and that we may abound in hope for all your people. May the churches in all places stand fully assured in your will and ever give thanks to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.