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1

INTRODUCTION OF THE EPISTLE

1:1-14

GREETING TO THE CHURCH (1:1-2)

IN THE MATTER OF FORM, the apostle's letters show considerable similarity to secular communications of a personal sort from that era; but even so they include a Christian note (v. 2) that sets them apart from ordinary letters.

To his name Paul adds his position in the church of Christ. Yet his rank of *apostle* was not bestowed by the church or by any individual (Gal 1:1). He was called into the service of the Lord *by the will of God* (cf. 1 Co 1:1; 2 Co 1:1), which rules out any suggestion that he himself had aspired to this place of leadership. His reference to apostleship does not necessarily indicate that any challenge to his standing had been raised at Colosse, but rather he wishes to make known at the very beginning that he is Christ's representative and as such is fully qualified to deal with matters discussed in the body of the letter.

His designation of the Saviour as "Christ Jesus" (the reading of the leading manuscripts) may be understood as a deliberate effort to emphasize at the very outset the

present exalted position of the risen Lord over against a system of thought which tended to rob Him of His full majesty. Paul does not use the name *Jesus* alone in this letter.

“Timothy our brother” is included in the greeting. This is true of all the captivity letters except Ephesians, where all mention of other individuals is omitted, presumably because of the general or encyclical nature of the communication. In fact, the name of this close companion and valued helper appears, joined with Paul’s, in most of the apostle’s writings. *Brother* never ceased to be richly meaningful to Paul since the day he heard it coupled with his own name and spoken by a man he had intended to persecute (Ac 9:17).

The recipients of the letter are noted as being in residence at Colosse but also as being *in Christ*, a far more significant position than their location on the map. In their relation to God they are *saints*, or “set-apart ones,” belonging to Him who called them and therefore charged with reflecting His holy character in their lives. In their relation to each other they are *brethren* who can also be called *faithful*. Although this latter term can mean “believing” (full of faith), to render it so here would be virtually meaningless, since *brethren* implies a believing relationship to Christ. By pronouncing his readers “faithful,” Paul may be expressing his confidence that, when he has shown them the peril of being influenced by wrong teaching, they will turn away from it. The simple reminder that they are “in Christ” should serve to spur their fidelity to the One who has become the center of their lives and their hope for the age to come. As a help to them they have also

an example of faithfulness in the ministry of Epaphras (Col 1:7).

Instead of extending a conventional greeting such as an unbeliever might use, Paul desires for his readers a fresh supply of divine "grace and peace" and a fresh realization of what these mean. *Grace* naturally has the priority, for apart from grace no acceptance with God would be possible. When grace meets with the response of faith, peace results. The sinner is no longer at enmity with God, and his life takes on wholeness and soundness as he rests in the assurance of divine favor.

THANKSGIVING FOR THE COLOSSIAN CHRISTIANS (1:3-8)

Such a thanksgiving is usual in Paul's letters to churches, although the "blessed be God" formula is used in 2 Corinthians and Ephesians. No thanksgiving appears in Galatians, where Paul pours out instead his anguish and disappointment over the defection of some of his converts.

Having given expression here in Colossians to his own gratitude to God, the apostle rightfully can call upon his readers to have the same response; and this he does repeatedly (Col 1:12; 2:7; 3:15, 17; 4:2).

"We give thanks to God." Is Timothy being included here? Probably so, in view of the contrast with Philippians 1:3, where Paul does not use the plural, even though Timothy's name is joined with his at the beginning. Prayer for these Christians at Colosse must be accompanied with gratitude to God on every occasion, for the reason that the primary virtues of *faith* and *love* are not lacking in them. *Faith* belongs to them in the sphere of Christ Jesus. It focused on Him at the inception of their spiritual ex-

perience, and now it permeates their entire relationship to God. Faith is the root of Christian life, and love is the fruit. In this case Paul is thankful that love is not concentrated on a few but reaches out to include "all the saints," which at the very least must mean all believers in Colosse and conceivably could mean Christians everywhere (cf. Eph 3:18). In several of Paul's writings, faith and love occur in coordination (1 Th 3:6; 2 Th 1:3; Phile 5; cf. Eph 6:23).

At times *hope* is added as the third of the primary virtues (1 Th 1:3; 1 Co 13:13). Such might seem to be the case here, since hope is included almost immediately (Col 1:5). Yet it stands somewhat apart; and the whole statement is difficult to grasp, especially in the King James Version.* Even the rendering, "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven" (Revised Standard Version†) calls for explanation. It is probably best understood as looking back to the faith and love. What is so astonishing is the suggestion that faith and love, which are exercised here and now, are dependent on the hope which relates to the future. But hope creates an anticipation in the heart that has a powerful effect upon present attitudes. The prospect of being with other believers in the presence of Christ for all eternity makes the fellowship of love in this life all the more meaningful. Paul goes on to say that hope is part of the gospel message and that the Colossians are familiar with the glorious inheritance awaiting the saints (cf. 1:12).

The word of the truth of the gospel is closely parallel to a similar statement in Ephesians 1:13. If the gospel were not

*Hereafter cited as KJV.

†Hereafter cited as RSV.

true, it would not be good news but only cruel deception. It is just possible that here the apostle is glancing by way of contrast at the error which is current at Colosse, which he is soon to attack openly in his letter. In his other controversial epistle he twice refers to the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:5, 14). The best way to deal with error is to hold it up to the light of truth which God has revealed.

Since his readers have heard the message before, he does not have to spell out the gospel, though he will refer to aspects of it from time to time in his exposition. Here he is content to make the point that the very same message which has come to the people in Colosse has reached to others "in all the world" (Col 1:6). Paul had personally carried it to both east and west. But this language is not intended as a missionary boast. J. B. Lightfoot is helpful here: "More lurks under these words than appears on the surface. The true Gospel, the Apostle seems to say, proclaims its truth by its universality. The false gospels are the outgrowths of local circumstances, of special idiosyncrasies; the true Gospel is the same everywhere. The false gospels address themselves to limited circles; the true Gospel proclaims itself boldly throughout the world. Heresies are at best ethnic; truth is essentially catholic."¹

But Paul is not content to appeal only to the widespread reception of the truth, as though numbers of adherents could be construed as a guarantee of the truth of the message. He passes to a second consideration. The gospel invites comparison from the standpoint of its effectiveness—"bearing fruit and increasing" (American Standard Version*). The truth makes a difference; it transforms lives.

*Hereafter cited as ASV.

By these two observations the apostle adroitly prepares the way for his frontal assault on the Colossian heresy. He is suggesting that true Christianity carries credentials which false teaching cannot equal.

However, the apostle has not quite finished his initial preparation. He reserves to the last the great distinctive of the gospel: the fact that it enshrines the *grace of God*. All other religions proceed on the assumption that man must commend himself to God, or, as in the case of the Galatian error, that a mixture of human effort with divine grace is required. By a simple mention of God's grace this early in the letter, coupled with the reminder that his readers have come to know the meaning of that grace as a reality in their lives, Paul is already laying the axe to the root of legalism that he will tear out later and cast aside before the eyes of the Colossians (Col 2:16-23).

In these preliminary observations the apostle sounds an optimistic note, for he comments that the gospel is producing fruit among his readers (Col 1:6) as truly as elsewhere. This suggests his confidence, based on the information he has, that the bulk of the Christian community remains sound. They are not a diseased plant. Their fruit testifies to their spiritual health.

Now, at the close of the paragraph, Epaphras comes into view, presented from two standpoints: first as the one who has faithfully taught the gospel in Colosse (v. 7), and then as the source of Paul's information about believers in that city. In fact, we must go back to the close of verse 6 to pick up the two words *in truth* in order to follow Paul's train of thought. From the lips of this man who founded the church, nothing was heard but the pure gospel. Believ-

ers were started along the right path. Paul states the relationship of this brother to himself in terms of a "dear fellow-servant," and his relationship to Christ as a "faithful minister." Should a Christian worker desire any higher commendation?

An interesting problem is bound up with these words of praise. According to the KJV, Paul describes Epaphras as one "who is for you a faithful minister of Christ." This reads well and makes sense. But there is good manuscript authority for a slightly different wording—*us* instead of *you*. If this be accepted as the true text—and it strongly commends itself—then the thought is that Paul regards Epaphras as his substitute, his alter ego, who has carried out a mission which Paul would have delighted to accomplish but was unable to carry out. As the leading apostle to the Gentiles, he considered Colosse a legitimate part of his mission field; but since he could not go everywhere, he was glad to send men who knew the Word and would declare it faithfully.

So much for what Epaphras has told the Colossians. But what has he told Paul, now that he has come to him at Rome? He has reported their "love in the Spirit." Doubtless in the first instance this means love for one another, but it would naturally include Paul, the teacher of the one who had come to mean so much to them. Yet Paul, with his usual delicacy, will not lay claim to any special consideration. This solitary reference to the Spirit in this book is highly appropriate, for love is the primary fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). Paul is talking, then, about something more than a merely human sentiment. It is the love

of Christ reproduced by the Spirit in the lives of His people.

PRAYER FOR THE READERS (1:9-14)

The prayer follows commendation of a high order. Faith and love are present, and Paul has given thanks for this. Evidently, then, it is not because the believers are deficient in such matters that Paul now prays for them. The prayer itself provides the answer. As Bishop Moule remarks, "The state in which they are has inevitably, with its blessings, its risks also. It is the very state in which a lack of direction may bring loss, if not disaster. The sails are set so full that the need of compass and rudder is the more pressing."² This comment is sustained by the way the apostle introduces his prayer: "for this cause," which looks backward to the thanksgiving.

Paul's prayer life never ceases to amaze us. Here he affirms that he has not ceased to pray for the Colossians since he heard of their spiritual state. Let it not be said that the explanation can be found in his situation—a prisoner with time on his hands. Even when he was busily engaged in ministering to the growing church in Corinth, he could write to the Thessalonians that he was remembering them in unceasing prayer (1 Th 1:3). Perhaps there is a relationship between the time devoted to prayer and the quality of the prayer that results. In Colossians and the other epistles of the captivity in Rome the apostle's prayers have ripened to their full maturity and are fully abreast of the exalted teaching with which they are interspersed.

Knowledge seems to be the key thought of this prayer (vv. 9-10). In this respect it closely resembles the prayer

in Ephesians 1:17-19. It is in the area of spiritual perception that the Colossians stand in need of help. Without it they can easily be victimized by a system of thought that could devitalize their whole Christian experience. Their precarious condition is the reason why the apostle is not content to say simply that he is praying for these people. He wants them to know *what* he is praying for.

His concern is not different from that of Epaphras (Col 4:12). It has to do with the knowledge of God's *will* and a life lived in accordance with that will. As we know, Jesus was supremely concerned with the will of God (Jn 4:34; 6:38; Lk 22:42). Paul's conversion and mission revolved around the same thing (Ac 22:14-15). God's will centers in His plan of salvation for the children of men and all that is involved in executing that plan.

The knowledge of God's will requires "all wisdom and spiritual understanding." These are not to be thought of as man's native capacities but as gifts of the Spirit, as the word *spiritual* clearly indicates (cf. v. 8). Wisdom is referred to six times in this epistle, which means a heavy emphasis, considering the brevity of the writing, and is to be understood in the light of the problem facing the church. Divine enlightenment is needed to separate truth from error. False teaching may have an appearance of wisdom and yet be quite contrary to divine revelation. It is especially at the focal point of the cross that human and divine wisdom show their great divergence (1 Co 1:23-24). The biblical idea of wisdom links it closely with goodness; so that, when this is lacking, the word takes on an ironical twist. So, for example, the word *philosophy*, which Paul uses in Colossians 2:8 with reference to false teaching,

sounds quite harmless when it is translated literally as "love of wisdom." But it easily degenerates into a passion to know something for the sake of knowing it; and when this knowledge is regarded as superior to what the rank and file possess, it inevitably leads to pride.

The kind of wisdom Paul seeks for the Colossians is transcendently practical, for it is intended to enable the child of God to "walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing" (v. 10). This combination of walking and pleasing brings to mind the case of Enoch, the man who walked with God and who, before being taken to be with Him, was attested as being pleasing to Him (Heb 11:5). *Walking* implies both direction and progress—knowing the will of God and increasing in the performance of it. If Paul had any ambition that topped any other, it was this, that he might be well pleasing to the Lord Christ (2 Co 5:9). What he desired for himself he desired also for his Christian friends.

The life that pleases the Lord is the fruitful life, abounding "in every good work." Without cultivation there can be no harvest. We are accustomed to think of future reward in connection with work done for the Lord, and this is true enough; but the great surprise is the present reward—"increasing in the knowledge of God." Here is the sequence: seeking to be well pleasing to the Lord, demonstrating this desire in active fruitbearing, receiving the result of increased knowledge of God. In other words, the way to extend our knowledge of God is to seek to please Him by working out in practice what is revealed to us as His will. The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him and obey Him.

Just as there is need of wisdom for the walk, so there is

need of *power* for the endurance of the believer in situations which call for more than human resources can supply. *Patience* (Endurance, RSV) means bearing up under trial, refusing to buckle under the pressure. *Longsuffering* is the patient spirit that takes all the abuse without blowing up. It is to the glory of God to make this kind of power available to His people, so that they are victorious under trial, as Jesus was in the days of His flesh. Endurance and longsuffering are tremendous assets; but when they are accompanied by *joyfulness*, they reveal their supernatural character. Again it is the life of Christ lived over again in His people that comes shining through (cf. Heb 12:2).

Joyfulness and thankfulness are partners (Col 1:12). It is hard to conceive of one without the other. If there is joy in the midst of suffering, there is also thankfulness for the privilege of enduring for Christ's sake. Incidentally, error has very little chance of making inroads upon a life that is gratefully exuberant in Christ (*see* Phil 3:1-3).

The expression of thanksgiving extends over three verses (Col 1:12-14). In the first, thanksgiving is directed to the Father; in the second, both Father and Son are mentioned; in the third, the Son alone. God the Father, as the sovereign Lord of history, had wrought mightily in behalf of His chosen people Israel, providing them an inheritance in the land of Canaan and giving the tribes their individual portions by lot. The whole procedure was calculated to remind them that they were dependent on His power and loving-kindness for everything. So with the Christian. God has sufficed us to have a share with other saints in the heavenly inheritance which awaits us. Paul could trace this truth about an "inheritance of the saints" to his call from the

risen Lord (Ac 26:18). What has been reserved for believers is a realm of *light* (see Rev 22:5).

It is possible that the Old Testament background continues to influence the thought as the thanksgiving takes in deliverance from the power of darkness (Col 1:13). One of the plagues visited on Egypt, the house of bondage, was darkness (Ex 10:21-23); and the pillar of cloud was darkness to the Egyptian hosts and light to the children of Israel (Ex 14:20). It was only God's power that *delivered* His people from their plight. As He transferred them into Canaan, so has He *translated* believers into the kingdom of the Son of His love. This *kingdom* has a present reality for New Testament saints, for the transfer has taken place already. It is described by Paul elsewhere as meaning "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Ro 14:17). Jesus was obliged to come under the power of darkness in the very process of delivering us from it (Lk 22:53).

We would be entirely unfit for the kingdom were it not for the *redemption* procured for us at the cross by God's Son. The initial benefit of this redemption is the *forgiveness of sins*. As the parallel passage in Ephesians 1:7 reminds us, this blessed result was made possible through the blood of Christ shed in behalf of sinners. In the day of Christ, at His coming, redemption will be provided for the body (Ro 8:23), which will complete our salvation (Phil 3:20-21). It is then that saints will enter upon their inheritance about which Paul has spoken in verse 12, and the difference between the darkness of Satan's kingdom and the heavenly kingdom of light and righteousness will become fully manifest.