

Colossians 1:1-20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Colossians chapter 1 verses 1 to 20 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.

He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

[1 : 35] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or rulers or authorities. All things were created through him and for him.

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The book of Colossians is addressed to Christians in the city of Colossae, in Phrygia, part of Asia Minor in modern-day Turkey, near to Laodicea and Hierapolis, both cities that Epaphras is said to have worked in alongside Colossae in chapter 4.

In that chapter, the Colossians were also instructed to pass on the letter to the church in Laodicea, when it had been read by them. Colossians is classed among Paul's prison letters, along with Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon, on account of the reference to imprisonment in chapter 4 verse 3.

[2 : 42] The epistle has the familiar form of introduction that one finds in most of Paul's letters. Paul introduces himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus, and includes Timothy with him as his and their brother.

Timothy was Paul's closest co-worker, his son in the ministry in many ways. Timothy shared in Paul's apostolic authority as a plenipotentiary emissary on occasions, with authorisation to act in Paul's name.

Paul includes Timothy alongside himself as the sender of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and also Philemon. He addresses the Colossian Christians as the saints and faithful brothers.

They are saints, holy on account of God setting them apart by his grace. They have been steadfast and loyal in their commitment to Christ, and so he also describes them as faithful. They are described as being in Christ.

This is the primary location of all Christians who live in union with Christ, living out from his life. After his introductory greetings, Paul typically places an expression of thanksgiving to God for the addressees in the preamble to his letters.

[3 : 48] Colossians is no exception in this regard. Paul does not seem to have known the Colossians firsthand, although they were very clearly within the orbit of his missionary associates. Paul speaks of Epaphras, who was with him at the time of writing this epistle, as his fellow prisoner in Philemon 23.

Epaphras was likely the primary source of Paul's news about the Colossians, but in chapter 4, several people tying Paul with the Colossian church are mentioned. As we typically see in the New Testament, the world of the early church was a small one, with a lot of missionaries moving around, and a robust network in which news and ministry was constantly being circulated, and everyone was no more than one or two steps removed from everyone else.

Paul expresses his thanksgiving for the reports that he had heard of the Colossians' faith, hope and love. This triad of theological virtues is so frequently employed by Paul that it seems clear that together faith, hope and love define Christian's posture within the world for him.

The following are a few instances of Paul's use of this particular triad. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 13. So now faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.

1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 2 to 3. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[5 : 13] 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 8. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.

Galatians chapter 5 verses 5 to 6. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 to 6. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of your calling, to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

Several other examples could be given. One thing that should be observed is that Paul seldom just lists faith, hope, and love, without elaborating upon their interrelationship, the way that they are tied up with the character and work of God, and the way that they are functioning in practice.

[6 : 27] The same thing could be observed of the Trinitarian character of so many of Paul's statements, where it becomes clear that undergirding Paul's understanding of salvation throughout is the reality and work of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

That Trinitarian reality is also apparent here, as Paul refers to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, moves to speak of Christ Jesus, before concluding with a reference to their love in the Spirit.

Father, Son, Spirit, like faith, hope, love, is part of the fundamental grammar of the Gospel for Paul. Paul here speaks of the Gospel as something that is at work within the world, acting in God's power, actively bearing fruit among the Colossians, as it is elsewhere.

We could perhaps connect the three theological virtues with the Trinitarian reality of salvation in this passage in some ways. Paul speaks of faith, hope, and love in ways that ground them in the triune God and his work.

Their faith, in verse 4, is described as being faith not of Jesus Christ, as we see in places such as Romans and Galatians, or even towards Jesus Christ, as we see in Philemon verses 4 and 5, but in Christ Jesus.

[7 : 39] It seems likely to me that Scott McKnight is correct in reading this as a reference not so much to the faith of the Colossians being directed towards Christ, but to their faith being sustained as they live in Christ.

Our faith isn't just directed towards Christ as its object, but it is built and grounded upon him so that we persevere in our faith as we abide in him, as we live out of his life.

This is important to recognise because it makes clear that as a theological virtue, faith is founded upon something firmer than the wavering ground of our own hearts. Faith grows and flourishes in the soil of Christ's life.

A similar point should be made about hope. Although Paul clearly thinks of hope as a subjectively exercised Christian virtue, here he highlights its objective correlate, the hope laid up for us in heaven by God the Father.

Our hope isn't just wishful thinking or optimism. It relates to the objective reality of the future that God has prepared for us as his people. Finally, love also has a grounding outside of ourselves, in the person and work of the Spirit.

[8 : 48] Our love is love in the Spirit, who is the personal bond of love in which Father and Son dwell in unity and by which Christ is bound to his people. As a theological virtue then, love isn't just a human affection, but is a manifestation of the Spirit's own work in God's people.

Following his opening thanksgiving, Paul moves into a prayer, a prayer for the Colossians' growth to maturity in Christ, that they would bear the fruit of salvation that the Father intends for those in his Son.

This prayer follows from the opening thanksgiving. Because God has acted in the way that he has in bringing the Colossians into a knowledge of Christ, Paul can confidently pray that they will rise to the full stature of faith.

He desires for them to be filled with the knowledge of his will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Although Paul does have a knowledge of God's moral will, God's desire for the ethical behaviour of human beings in mind here, he has a great deal more in view too.

He wants the Colossians to understand more fully how they fit into God's big picture. God's great saving purpose in Christ is about far more than making people moral and upstanding.

[10 : 00] It's about consummating all of the cosmos in Christ, overcoming the works of the devil and reconciling the world to himself. As the Colossians grow in their understanding of all of this, he desires that they will also be strengthened and equipped for endurance and joyful patience.

God has delivered his people from the kingdom of darkness, like Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt, and he has, by his grace in Christ, qualified us to share in a new inheritance, redeeming us for himself and freely forgiving us all of our sins.

Verses 15 to 20 are one of the most important passages in the entirety of Paul, and indeed the New Testament. They are a glorious hymn or poem concerning Christ, expressing his glory in the most startling and arresting of terms.

N.T. Wright, developing an argument from C.F. Burney, suggests that the poem unpacks the various possible meanings of the Hebrew term Bereshit, the term with which the book of Genesis and the scripture as a whole begins, in the beginning.

This term enjoys added significance by virtue of the implied identification of Bereshit with wisdom in Proverbs 8, verse 22. The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

[11 : 20] Wright summarises the poem's development of its Bereshit theme as follows. First, he is the image, like wisdom herself, evoking Genesis 1, verse 26.

Second, he is the firstborn, like wisdom herself, the first meaning of Bereshit. Third, he is supreme, the second meaning of Bereshit. Fourth, he is the head, the third meaning of Bereshit.

Fifth, he is the beginning, the fourth and climactic meaning of Bereshit. And sixth, he is the firstborn, this time from the dead, like wisdom again, but now firmly as a human being.

So Paul takes this opening statement of the Bible, in the beginning, and he unpacks it, connecting the beginning with Christ as firstborn, as supreme, as the head, and as the beginning.

And then he looks at the preposition, and it's explored in each of its principal aspects, in him, through him, to him, in verses 16 and 19 to 20.

[12 : 19] In its unpacking of the term Bereshit, in the beginning, its reference to the image of God, and in its expansive cosmic sweep, Colossians 1, verses 15 to 20, evokes the creation account, and situates Jesus as the Son, at the very heart of its meaning.

Christ the Son is the firstborn, an archetypal image of God. He's the one who represents and symbolizes God's rule in his world. He is the one in whom, through whom, and for whom, all things were created.

Whatever has been created, all things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or rulers or powers, exist on account of him, and for his sake.

He is supreme over all. He enjoys the prominence, the preeminence, and the priority of the head. He's the source and the first principle of all things. Implicit in this poem is a re-reading of the opening chapters of Genesis.

Veiled in the varied language of Genesis chapter 1, Paul discovers the incomparable majesty of the risen Christ, the one who has always been there, yet only now, in the fullness of time, is disclosed.

[13 : 27] In this, he's doing something very similar to what the Gospel of John does in its first chapter. Within this triumphant poem, one of the most fundamental and familiar scriptural passages of all, Genesis chapter 1, reveals a transfigured aspect, as from its words, the light of the glory of Christ shines forth.

The prominence and glory of the firstborn son is revealed through his great act of reconciliation, with which the second half, verses 18 to 20, of the bipartite poem, is concerned.

Christ's status as the firstborn in creation is reaffirmed and secured in his status in its redemption as the firstborn from the dead, whereby the once alienated creation is restored to its rightful ruler, its heir and its source.

The Christology of Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 to 20, is an incredibly high one. Christ is presented as integral to the origin, constitution, and destiny of God's creation in a manner that implies his divine identity in a striking and powerful manner.

Christ isn't just part of the creation. He is the one through whom all was made. He is the intermediary of the creation in both creation and redemption. Paul also brings creation and new creation into the very clearest of parallels.

[14 : 44] Indeed, the very weight placed upon prepositions in, by, for, through, etc. in assigning the single act of creation to Christ might hint at some sort of proto-Trinitarian account of inseparable operations and appropriation.

Christ's activity and place in creation is divine, in unity with the Father and the Spirit, and inseparable, yet it is personally distinct. The entirety of the unitary act of creation, both bringing it into and sustaining it within being, is related to his agency, yet in a particular way, one roughly hinted at in the specific prepositions that are employed.

This is consistent with the assignation of the entire act to the Father in another respect. The same creative action, the single action of creation, constantly arises from the origination of the Father, from the Father, the instrumentality, the establishing, and the upholding of the Son, through, for, and by the Son, and the animation and perfecting of the Spirit, in the Spirit.

Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 to 20 is a stunning articulation of a Christological monotheism. The one God, the Creator above all creation, is known in his Son.

The intensity of the Creator's authority is concentrated in him, and the cosmic scope of the poem corresponds to this. If Christ's role in the creation is as the poem describes it, there is nothing that falls outside of his authority.

[16 : 16] This is something that has direct implications for all rule and authority in the creation. Verse 16 declares that all thrones or dominions or rulers or powers have been created through him and for him.

Implied in verse 20 is the fact that all such authorities are reconciled to God by Christ in his cross. The Son is the firstborn of all creation.

He's supreme in all things. He sums all things up in himself. He's the head. He's the beginning. He's the source. He's the purpose of everything. He's the reconciler and the ruler of the cosmos.

The Gospel declaration must provide the starting point for all Christian thought and reflection. Without such a starting point, our thinking would cease to be truly evangelical.

That is, it would abandon the authoritative Gospel proclamation that should provide its heart. Just as Paul argues in the verses following this poem in our passage, the heart of the Christian message is not some teaching that Christ taught nor some moral example that he set, important though both of those things are, but Christ himself and the unique work that he has done.

[17 : 23] As Paul will say in verse 28, him we proclaim. It is the uniqueness of Christ and his status within the creation that grounds the absolute authority of his message and example.

Only with him as our starting point will everything else come into focus. A question to consider. If you were to build a case for the deity of Christ from Colossians chapter 1, how would you go about it?

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