Colossians - Commentaries by Clarence Esme Stuart

Commentary on the Epistles of Paul, Colossians 1:1-10

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The epistle to the Colossians, as that to the Ephesians, was sent on its way by the hand of Tychicus, who was accompanied on his journey to Colosse by Onesimus. (Col. 4:7-9) We may suppose, then, these epistles to have been written at the same time. In both the apostle desires the prayers of the saints on his own behalf, that he might open his mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, as he writes in that to the Ephesians (6:19), and the mystery of the Christ, as he tells the Colossians (4:3, 4) It may be, as has been very generally believed, that the epistle to the Philippians was written at a subsequent time, when his imprisonment was drawing to a close; though when the apostle wrote to Philemon (22) he was evidently expecting his liberty at no distant date. The exact date of these letters it may be difficult to fix; but all may see that the letter to the Colossians is in some respects a counterpart of that to the Ephesians, and therefore may fitly be studied in connection with it. In the latter the Body of Christ is treated of at some length; in that to the Colossians, the fullness in Christ, who is the Head of the body, for all who are His is prominently set forth. Thus they go well together. And though for the most part in the ancient arrangement of the epistles of Paul that to the Philippians comes between them, in one uncial MS., the Codex Claromontanus, the epistle to the Colossians precedes that to the Philippians.

In common with that to the Romans, this letter was addressed to saints in a place in which Paul had not worked. (2:1) The Church at Colosse-or Colasse, as some MSS. exhibit the name-was not founded by the apostle, but the instrument, it would seem, chosen of God to evangelize them was Epaphras, one of them, a servant of Christ (4:12), Paul's beloved fellow-servant, and their1 faithful minister of Christ. (1:7) To us this is not only interesting, but especially instructive; for these saints, as Paul writes of them, are illustrations of the results that were to follow from the apostle's ministry, as detailed to him by the Lord Jesus Christ on the day of his conversion. Paul was to open eyes to turn people from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God, that such might receive forgiveness of sins, and an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith in Christ. (Acts 26:18) The condition in which he would find God's elect, and especially those of them among the Gentiles, with the blessings in which they were to share; viz., forgiveness of sins and the inheritance, this is the order of thought in which his ministry in the gospel is sketched out for him.

Addressing the Colossians, who had learned of Epaphras, Paul acknowledged that they fully answered to this, as he invited them to give thanks in common with himself and Timothy "to the Father, who has made us meet," he writes, "to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light:who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption, even the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:12-14) What results, then, should flow from the truth taught by Paul, and ministered to souls by others, are here displayed to us. We have not Paul in person amongst us. It is profitable therefore, and encouraging, to see how in apostolic days the truth, heard from him, servants of Christ could communicate to others, in whom in their turn it produced its right fruit. The reader may remark the change of order in the thoughts here expressed by the apostle from that in which the Lord Jesus Christ had communicated to him His purpose. The Lord spoke to Paul of souls as He then saw them. Paul writes as he could afterward describe them.

Turning to this epistle we find it treats of the Christ who is also the Lord, and keeps these truths prominently before the saints (1:10; 2:6; 3:17, 18, 20, 23, 24); and dwelling on the fullness in Christ, the Head, for every member of His Body, it is chiefly hortatory in character, whilst bringing out teaching for the saints, as the apostle impresses on them that which was needful to be put and kept before them. From 2:6 to 4:6 inclusive, we have exhortation after exhortation. For, as he tells them, God willed to make known to His saints what is the wealth of the glory of the mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in them the hope of glory, whom Paul preached, admonishing every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that he might present every man perfect; i.e. full-grown in Christ (2:27-29) A ministry with such an object must necessarily deal in exhortations, though only as founded on the doctrine of the Christ, which must therefore be set before souls.

Commencing as an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, just as he had done when writing his letter to the Ephesians, Paul here joins Timothy with him as a brother in his salutation to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ in Colosse. In no two epistles does he begin in quite the same way. Evidently with him there was no conventional form nor set phraseology. He wrote as guided of God, the penman of the Holy Ghost. An evidence of this we have in the form of his apostolic greeting, which in this one only of all his epistles is from God the Father without the addition, though scribes have appended it, of the "Lord Jesus Christ."2

At the outset he gives thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom he prayed always for them, for the hope laid up for them in the heavens, of which they had before heard in the word of the truth of the gospel, which had come to them as in all the world, and was bringing forth fruit and increasing, as also in them, since the day they heard and knew the grace of God in truth. The gospel had produced fruit in them, evidenced by their faith in Christ Jesus, and love to all the saints. For the Spirit, who dwells in all true Christians, does draw out the affections of the new man to all those who are God's. Here it was seen, and Paul discerned in their faith and love undoubted evidences of their real conversion, of which he had learned from Epaphras, who had also manifested to him their love in the Spirit. Informed thus about them, his heart was drawn out in prayer on their behalf; for nothing short of their being filled with the full knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding could satisfy his desires for them. What these were he tells them. Praying thus for them in his prison at Rome, he wished them to know what he felt they needed, and what he asked of God on their behalf. By this means they might come to discern dangers to which they were exposed, and the wants which an apostle's eye could see were then requisite to be supplied. In what a gracious way does he instruct them? Who would be repulsed by it? Who would be chilled by it? Who would be offended at it? Paul in Rome, owning the common tie between them and him, thus prayed for those to whom he had not directly ministered the gospel of God. He was not content with telling them what he thought they lacked. He prayed for them first about it; and long ere his letter had reached them, his prayer had gone up to the throne of grace, that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will to walk worthy of the Lord' unto all-pleasing. The disciples of Christ they were. Paul would have them walk worthy of Him who is in glory. Now this would be shown in increased fruitfulness

and in endurance.

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In increased fruitfulness, if in every good work they were bringing forth fruit, and increasing by the full knowledge of God. In endurance, as they should be strengthened with all might according to the power of God's glory unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness. Full certainly were his desires for them. A Christian who answered to them would be a saint indeed. What attainment does he put before them? But what were the antecedents of these people? An answer to that question is furnished in verses 12-14, to which we have already referred. Formerly under the power of darkness, these saints were now set in the kingdom of the Son of God's love, in whom they had redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The One who died for us has then a kingdom, and believers 'are translated into it by the Father. Beneficial results o£ the Lord's death thus introduced, truth about His Person is next dwelt on, and that at some length. First, as to what He is in relation to all intelligent creatures, and to creation likewise; next, what He is in relation to the Church. Then what dwells in Him who walked on earth as a man; and what all fullness has effected and will effect by Him (vss. 15-22)

He by whom we have redemption, the Son of God's love, is the image of the invisible One representing Him to His creatures, and He is the firstborn of all creation, a position and dignity thus independent of priority in time. And the reason assigned for His place in the universe as man is, that by Him all things were created in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things were created by Him, and for Him, and He is before all things, and by Him all things consist. Such is His place in relation to creation; such, too, is His history in relation to it in the past, the present, and the future. By Him all things were created. By Him all things consist. He upholds all things by the word of His power. For Him too they were all created. So one can understand that the Creator and upholder of all things, and He who is before all things, should not enter the ranks of His creatures and become a man without having the position in creation and the title of the Firstborn. Next we learn of another Headship with which He is invested. He is the Head of the Body the Church, who is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence. His place as Firstborn in the ranks of creatures tells us of His incarnation. His title as Firstborn from the dead reminds us necessarily of His cross and resurrection. As risen He is in the relationship of Head of the Body the Church, the beginning too of a new order of things, of which those redeemed by His blood form part, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence, and this pre-eminence He must have, because in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell.

The Firstborn then, in a double sense, Firstborn of all creation and Firstborn from the dead, before all, upholding all, and in all things to have the pre-eminence, such is the One into whose kingdom we are translated, and who has redeemed us by dying on the cross. He to whom this pre-eminence belongs has entered the ranks of creatures. But in what condition was creation found? In what condition were men proved to be when He became incarnate? Things in heaven and things on earth needed to be brought into order. Men needed to have the enmity of the heart removed. Both these are effected by His cross. All the fullness is pleased to reconcile all things to itself, things in heaven and things on earth, having made peace by the blood of His cross. This we wait to see effected by the exercise of sovereign power. Men, however, have been reconciled to God in the body of Christ's flesh through death. Of this the Colossian saints were an illustration, and such will be presented holy, unblameable, and unreproveable in God's sight, if they continue in the faith, grounded and settled, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which those saints had heard, and which was preached in the whole creation under heaven, of which Paul was made a minister.

The necessity for the Lord's incarnation and death is thus clearly brought out. Creation as well as man is concerned in it, though as yet the former has reaped no beneficial results from it. But saints in Christ Jesus are already reconciled to God, and have forgiveness of their sins, with the sure prospect of sharing in the kingdom when it shall be established in power. A ministry therefore was needed to proclaim the gospel, and to teach saints full Christian truth; for continuance in the faith, grounded and settled, is what is pressed on all. Now such a ministry God provided, and Paul was an example of it. He was a minister of the gospel, and a minister of the Church to complete the word of God, by bringing out the mystery hid from ages and generations, but now made manifest to God's saints, to whom He would make known what is the wealth of the glory of it among the Gentiles, even. Christ in them the hope of glory, whom Paul preached, admonishing every man, and teaching every man, in all wisdom, that he might present every man perfect; i.e. full-grown in Christ. Hence he addresses the Colossian saints, and ministers of Christ to them, desiring that they in common with all believers should have their hearts encouraged, they being knit together in love, and unto all the wealth of the full assurance of understanding to the full knowledge of the mystery of God,'1 in which are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Nothing then can surpass in knowledge what this mystery unfolds. 'It tells us of Christ, of God's counsels about Him as Head over all things, the whole inheritance put under Him, and a Body provided for Him, which is the Church of the living God.

Now lest any should beguile them with enticing words, he earnestly exhorts them, that as they had received the Christ, Jesus the Lord, so they would walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith as they had been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. (2:6, 7) Various devices of the enemy to corrupt the faith the apostle was acquainted with. Some of them he will specify; but before, doing that he makes very plain that he knew no theory of development which, commencing with Christ, would perfect saints by something else above and beyond Him. The Colossians were to be both rooted and built up in Him, and firmly settled in the faith as they had been taught; for all the faith was now revealed, since the word of God was completed. Now this does not mean that revelation was exhausted, but that the outline of God's revealed mind for His people was now completed since the mystery of God was now disclosed. And further, taught about Christ, thanksgivings should characterize them. In each chapter is this insisted on. (1:12; 3:15, 16; 4:2)

The apostle now specifies certain snares to which the saints were exposed, opposed to full Christian teaching, and ruinous to souls; viz., philosophy (8), Judaizing teaching (16), and Gnostic reveries (18), the touchstone for the detection of each of them being teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. That applied, the evil would be discerned. Philosophy was according to the traditions of men, according to the elements or rudiments of the world; i.e. principles on which the world was sought to be ordered. This was not after Christ. A short but forcible statement which would readily put godly souls on their guard. Would philosophy hold out the hope of its votaries attaining to a fullness of understanding to which ordinary men were strangers? Would it allure them by the hope of soaring to heights, otherwise incapable of being reached, and

which left the crowd far below them? All such delusive prospects only manifested most clearly that it was not after Christ; “for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily,” and Christians “are filled full in Him, who is the Head of all principality and power.” (10) Simple truth as to His person, and as to His position, would effectually guard obedient hearts from being ensnared by such delusions.

Would the airy, dreamy speculations of men, the workings of the human mind, unenlightened by or certainly not in subjection to divine revelation, hold out promises of deliverance from sin and from the world? Christians had in, and with Christ, but a Christ who had died and had risen, what met their condition, and provided a position before God and the world, and a standing too before God. All that they wanted they had already. As to their condition, they were in Christ circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. (11) As to their position, they were buried with Him in baptism, wherein also they were raised with Him through faith of the operation of God, who raised Him from the dead. (12) As regards their standing, formerly dead in offenses and the uncircumcision of their flesh, they were quickened together with Christ, and all their offenses forgiven. Further, by His cross the full need of the Jew was met as much as that of the Gentile. Principalities and powers too, stripped of their prey, were led in triumph, proofs of His complete and abiding victory. What could philosophy, even if allied with Judaism, offer in comparison with all this? It might promise a great deal, but only on condition of its adherents sedulously pursuing the study of it. Christianity left it far in the background. The student of philosophy might hope to acquire much by effort and protracted labor. The Christian, as in Christ, and as associated with Him, had all that has passed before us. What fullness could philosophy open up compared with the truth about Him in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily? On what heights could it plant its votaries, as compared with Christians being in Christ, who is the head of all principality and power? To state this should be enough for a subject mind Would Judaism prove a snare, bringing into bondage to its observances those who were never put by God under law? A religion of ordinances is often attractive. Now it was true that the injunctions about new moons and sabbaths, and regulations about meats and drinks, were from God, and were really shadows of things to come. The body however, of which they were true shadows is of Christ. Correct then as they were as shadows, delineating truth about Him who has come, they could not even foreshadow all that He is. Judaism could never present to those who were nurtured in it the full truth about Christ. “The body is of Christ.” How souls would lose if they turned to that! There is in Christ what is positive, substantial, and ‘full; and since Judaism could present but the shadow of things to come, why turn to the shadow after the substance has appeared?

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