

Shepherding Notes

Colossians

By Dillon McKeon

In the year 60–62 A.D., Paul is in a Roman prison and will soon stand before Caesar, who will decide his case. It is in this circumstance that the founding pastor of the Colossian church, Epaphras, arrives from Colossae at Paul's house. Epaphras has traveled over 1,000 miles to Rome to seek Paul's counsel and to tell him about the church, because some trouble is brewing in the young congregation. There are false teachers and new philosophy coming into the church that will become known as the Colossian heresy.

Paul begins by saying: "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."

Thankfulness for Their Faith, Love, and Hope

This triad of spiritual virtues is how Paul identifies a great church — one he commends and gives thanks to God for. Faith, hope, and love are central to Paul's understanding of the Christian life. This isn't the only time Paul singles out these virtues. It is a pattern for him — the same three things appear in 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Paul is really giving credit and thanking God for His work in this church.

The faith Paul commends is characterized by a total commitment of all that you are to all that He is. At the heart of the word "faith" is the word "obedience" — they come from the same root word. All true faith is obedient faith. It is more than just intellectual agreement or checking off a list of things you believe cognitively. There is a heart persuasion of the reality of that truth, and action.

Paul commends them for faith proven by tangible demonstrations of love for all the saints. It makes sense that Paul puts these two together, because wherever you have true saving faith, there is always love for the brethren. To not have a genuine love and affection for the saints is like saying you love me but then hating my wife — that can't coexist. We can say we love Jesus, and likewise we must have a growing love for His bride: the church.

In verse 5, we notice that the Colossians have faith and love because of the hope laid up for them in heaven. Faith is grounded in hope and in the certainty of what the gospel promises. Hope here does not refer to wishful thinking or a desire for something that may or may not happen. Instead, hope refers to that which is certain but not yet fully seen or experienced. It means to wait with confidence — trusting God in what He has

promised to do but we have not yet experienced Him doing. The second coming of Christ is the blessed hope; it isn't the blessed wish. Theologians call this the tension of the "already, not yet." But it is as sure to happen because He is faithful. Saints, do you know that if you are in Christ, your best days are not behind you but ahead of you?

The Exact Imprint of His Nature

The whole message of the book of Colossians is this: if you have Jesus Christ, you have everything you need. You do not need to try to keep the Old Testament ceremonial law, you do not need mysticism or man's philosophy. Anything you try to add to the Christian life as a means of being accepted before God is a denial of Jesus Christ.

Paul combats this Colossian heresy by proclaiming that Christ is supreme. Our Redeemer has all authority in heaven and on earth and in the church. He lacks nothing, and in Him we lack nothing.

Paul says that He is "the image of the invisible God" — a clear statement of the absolute deity of Jesus Christ. God is invisible; we have not seen Him with our eyes. However, in Christ, God becomes visible. If you see Jesus, you can see what the Father is like. The author of Hebrews puts it this way: "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Hebrews 1:3)

Jesus is not who the Colossians thought He was. Jesus is not a supplement or an angelic helper from God, or someone who is spiritually close to God. He is God. Verse 19 says, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Jesus is given equality with the other persons of the Trinity. John 10:30: "I and the Father are one." He was fully God and fully man.

Jesus had to be both fully God and fully man to accomplish what He did on the cross. If He were only a man, that death would have been finite and had no value — but because He was God, His death has infinite value. Jesus is God. He is worthy of our worship.

"If you have Jesus Christ, you have everything you need. Since the supremacy of Christ is the purpose of the universe, making Christ supreme should be the purpose of your life. That is why you exist."

Knowing a Mystery

At the end of chapter 1 and throughout chapter 2, notice that Paul mentions the term "mystery" three times. His aim is for the Colossians to know this mystery — we are stewards of it. Back in chapter 1, verse 26, he explains the purpose of his God-given ministry: to make a mystery known. In verse 27, the Gentiles now know the mystery.

When Paul talks about a mystery, it isn't because he is trying to explain something no one understands. The mystery here is the opposite — it is intended to be known and understood, known everywhere, for all the saints of God, and for all who have believed the gospel. This mystery is an open secret.

The term "mystery" means: something that was once concealed but is now revealed. What was once concealed in the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. The mystery is God's plan of salvation in Christ. How could sinful children of Adam be redeemed from the consequences of sin? That mystery was finally solved — not by man but by God Himself — in the death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Keep Walking with Him

Remember Paul is writing to a church weakened by spiritual inadequacy: Is Christ really enough? Maybe we need a little mysticism, rules made by man, maybe we need rituals and angels to come help us — to give us a sense of spiritual security.

Paul responds to this by exhorting the Colossians: "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." In the Bible, our walk refers to the way we live. The word "walk" is used about 30 times in Paul's letters, and it always refers to the way you live your life. Paul means living a life that is in submission to His Lordship. The way you receive Him initially as sovereign Lord is the way you should live. Since the Colossians are bound to Christ the Lord, they are also bound to be obedient to Him.

"Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him." — 1 John 2:4

If we love Him, if we have love for God poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5), we will keep His commandments, which are not burdensome. Our Savior calls us to obedience — not that we might earn our salvation but that we may display our gratitude for His grace.

In verse 4, Paul says: "I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." He is concerned that the Colossians might be satisfied with subtle new ideas — ideas that make little of the gospel foundation. What Paul is saying is: stay with the true Jesus. Don't let anyone teach you a false Jesus. Only a true Jesus is sufficient for the Christian life.

Be Established in the Faith

We are to be established in the faith, just as we were taught. The term "established in the faith" means to be grounded. Those who are rooted and built up will be grounded in their faith. In order to continue in the faith, we must be grounded in sound doctrine. Christianity is a doctrinal religion — with a set of doctrines that you must believe in order to be saved.

Some professing Christians will say, "Doctrine divides — it doesn't matter what you believe, it's about loving Jesus." But let me ask you: which Jesus are they talking about? Is it the real Jesus? The Jesus of the Bible? Or another Jesus? Of course, our faith is more than doctrine — we should love Jesus and live lives worthy of Him. Faith is more than doctrine, but it can't be less than doctrine. Jesus taught doctrine. The apostles taught doctrine. Our salvation depends on our beliefs about God, sin, the person and work of Christ, and the means of salvation. To depart from sound doctrine is to depart from Jesus altogether.

"It is not enough to continue and walk with a Jesus — you have to continue with the Jesus. The Jesus of the Bible."

In Colossians 3, the Apostle Paul exhorts believers to live out their union with Christ. Flowing from the doctrinal richness of chapters 1 and 2 — especially Christ's preeminence and sufficiency — Paul now turns to how the gospel transforms the believer's life practically. He ends chapter 2 by talking about what does not have the power to stop the indulgence of the flesh, and now he will share what does have that power to sanctify.

Hidden and Seeking

He begins by lifting our gaze to Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God, reminding us that our lives are "hidden with Christ in God." Because we have died with Christ (definitive sanctification) and are being renewed (progressive sanctification), we are to put off the old self and put on the new. Paul then applies these gospel realities to community life and to the household, showing that the grace which saved us also shapes every sphere of our lives.

Paul begins with an indicative: you have been raised. The believer's identity is rooted in their union with Christ. We have been crucified with Him, raised with Him, and hidden in Him. The command to "seek the things above" flows from our new identity — not as a means to earn favor, but as a result of God's electing love.

Mortify Sin, Live in the Spirit

Paul says, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you." Here is a clear call to mortification of our sin. John Owen famously said, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." By the Spirit (Romans 8:13), we put to death the deeds of the flesh. Since we are already accepted by God and unified with Christ, these deeds are not acceptable in our lives. Paul lists sins of desire (vs. 5) and sins of division (vs. 8), showing how sin corrupts both personal holiness and communal unity.

But the greater problem with this sin is that "on account of these the wrath of God is coming" (vs. 6). What makes this list of sins wicked is not only its horizontal element — affecting the body of Christ — but its vertical element: rebellion against God and the kindling of His wrath.

New Creation, New Clothes

After Paul gives us a list of sins to put off, he tells us how a believer should conduct themselves. In light of the fact that we were chosen by God, made holy and righteous, covered in the blood of Christ, and beloved of the Father, we should look like our Lord and wear His Christlike virtues. (vs. 12–17)

Note the language of election: we are chosen, holy, and beloved before we put on anything. Our identity comes first; our behavior follows. These virtues — compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, and love — flow from hearts that have been regenerated by grace.

Working for Christ: The Gospel in the Home and Workplace

Paul applies gospel truth to household roles, showing that Christ's Lordship governs every relationship. Wives: submit as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands: love sacrificially. Children: obey their parents in everything. Fathers: nurture without provoking. Servants: work sincerely, not for eye-service, but "as for the Lord."

These roles are not arbitrary or cultural, but rooted in God's design. As believers, we live *coram Deo* — before the face of God. Even mundane labor becomes worship when done unto Christ. Paul reminds us that we will receive an inheritance. 1 Peter tells us that this inheritance is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."

Colossians 3 calls us to remember who we are: the elect of God, redeemed by sovereign grace, hidden in Christ, and destined for glory. Remember who you are in Christ — let your homes reflect heaven, let your work honor Christ, and let every relationship show that Jesus is Lord.

"Be killing sin or it will be killing you." — John Owen. By the Spirit, we put to death the deeds of the flesh. Our identity comes first; our behavior follows.

Paul concludes his epistle by addressing the Christian household (vs. 1), encouraging steadfast prayer (vs. 2–4), and instructing believers to walk wisely toward outsiders (vs. 5–6). He then lists and commends various co-laborers, showing the gospel's global reach and the church (vs. 7–18). Paul's final words remind the Colossians to fulfill their ministry with faithfulness and grace.

Our Master in Heaven

Paul continues his instruction to the household (see Colossians 3:18–25), calling masters to reflect the justice and fairness of Christ, "knowing that you also have a Master in heaven." This affirms God's impartial judgment and the equality of all in Christ. We should treat all people justly and fairly, especially those we find ourselves in authority over. We are under the authority of God, and God treats us not only fairly, but graciously. We are bondservants — slaves to Christ — and He is the most benevolent Master in existence. Are you a parent or do you find yourself in authority over other people? Treat them as you would want to be treated, knowing God deals graciously with you.

Devotion to Prayer

Paul calls believers to "continue steadfastly in prayer," with vigilance and thanksgiving. Prayer is not an afterthought but the lifeblood of spiritual vitality. God's sovereignty in salvation heightens our dependence on Him in prayer — it does not diminish it.

In a world full of busyness and noise, Paul invites us into the quiet, powerful work of prayer. May we see prayer not as a twisting of God's arm, but as aligning our hearts with His sovereign will. We pray not to awaken a reluctant God but to commune with the One who ordains all things for His glory and our good.

Paul asks for prayer that he might boldly proclaim the mystery of Christ. Though God ordains the ends (salvation), He also ordains the means (preaching and prayer). This is an intertwining of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. James 5:16 says, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Paul uses the term "watchful" in prayer with "thanksgiving" — evoking imagery of the watchmen on the wall in an ancient city. We have great enemies, and we need to be fervent in prayer, that we would not be sifted and that we would be faithful. How amazing is it that the God of all eternity bends His ear to hear our prayers, and uses them for the benefit of our souls, the church, and the salvation of souls? We should be thankful.

Paul then shifts our focus outward — walk wisely, speak graciously, and redeem the time. Your neighbors, coworkers, and even critics are watching. What do they see? Is your speech gentle yet theologically rich? Do your words point to a hope outside yourself?

Final Greetings and Exhortations

Paul mentions a diverse team of co-laborers — Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Luke, Epaphras, and others. God is using ordinary saints in the spreading of the gospel. Some teach and preach. Some show hospitality. Some were slaves. Some, like Epaphras, were pastors. Paul honors Epaphras, who "struggles in prayer" for the church. Prayer is not passive — it is gospel work. Never underestimate prayer for the saints.

He also exhorts Archippus to "fulfill the ministry" (vs. 17). We all have a ministry to the Lord, but this is a reminder that pastoral ministry is a calling of serious and sacred stewardship.

The book of Colossians was written to a church that doubted the adequacy of Christ, asking themselves, "Is Christ really enough?" Paul wrote it to reveal the truth of an all-sufficient and sovereign God: the Lord Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God. "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." (Colossians 1:28)

"Speech seasoned with salt is filled with the truth about God and the gospel. Salt preserves decay in the way that truth preserves the decay of this fallen world."