

03. Colossians 1:5-20



Colossians 1:5-6

^{5b}You have heard of this hope before in the word of the **truth**, the gospel that has come to you. ⁶Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and comprehended the **true** grace of God.

In describing the gospel here as ‘**the word of the truth**’, Paul is preparing his readers for the contrast which he is about to make between the truth concerning the real God and what God has revealed in Jesus, and the untruths perpetrated by the religious movements which threaten the faith of the Christian community in Colossae. He makes the same point when he speaks in verse six of the ‘**true grace of God**’. His focus is on the fact that what they have learnt is the true grace which God is offering. This is in contrast with the false promises made by the religious cults that are attempting to attract them away from the gospel. He will go on to declare that these have only an ‘appearance of wisdom’ (2:23).

Notice in verse five how Paul stresses the initiative of God. It is not we who discover the gospel; it comes to us as a grace. In verse six Paul highlights further dimensions of the gospel; it is for everyone, and it bears fruit (see 1:10). In highlighting the fact that the gospel is ‘bearing fruit and growing in the whole world’ (compare 1 Corinthians 1:2), Paul is reminding the Colossians of the communion which they have with other faith-communities. Besides being an encouragement, this helps provide a powerful safeguard against self-deception. Paul is aware of the danger of a local community going its own way, without reference to other communities. The ‘fruit’ which the Colossians have experienced in their lives (compare Galatians 5:22) is further proof of the authenticity of the gospel they have received.

Colossians 1:7

This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave. He is a faithful minister of the Messiah on our behalf

Epaphras (see also 4:12-13), the missionary who brought the gospel to them, is a 'fellow slave' (συνδούλος), for, like Paul (see Galatians 1:10; Romans 1:1), he has followed the example of the suffering servant, Jesus himself, in giving his whole life over to the service of God. In his letter to Philemon, which accompanies this letter, Paul says that Epaphras was sharing imprisonment with him (see Philemon verse twenty-three).

Epaphras is also a ‘**minister** (διάκονος) **of the Messiah**’, faithfully carry out his commission. By assuring the Colossians that he does so ‘**on our behalf**’, Paul is asserting that the gospel proclaimed to them by Epaphras is the same gospel that is proclaimed by Paul and Timothy. The Colossians can be confident of its authenticity. Fidelity to the tradition which they have learned through Epaphras will be a good safeguard against the untruths of the religious movements which are tempting them away from Jesus.

Colossians 1:8

and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

It is this same Epaphras who has brought Paul the news about their **love** – not any kind of love, but the love which they have ‘**in the Spirit**’. The love which they reflect in their lives is the love of Jesus himself for God and for the world with all the power to save that comes from the Spirit.

Colossians 1:9-10

⁹For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work, as you grow in the knowledge of God

Besides his constant prayer of thanks for the life of grace lived by the community in Colossae (1:3-8), Paul continues to pray that they will grow in this grace and attain to the fullness of life which God is offering them. They are experiencing the attractions of a pagan cult which promises them profound '**knowledge**' and enlightenment concerning how they are to live. It promises them esoteric '**wisdom**', the experience of visions and understanding of 'mysteries'.

It is Jesus, however, who is the only true mediator of these gifts. It is through the gospel, through the life of communion which we share with the risen Jesus, that we will ‘**be filled with the knowledge of God’s will**’. Paul’s prayer is encouraged by the words of Jesus who said: ‘everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened’ (Luke 11:10). This is especially true when we are asking for the gift of God’s Spirit: ‘how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’ (Luke 11:13). Paul is speaking of knowledge that flows from ‘**spiritual wisdom**’ and leads to decision and to a life that is worthy of Christ and pleasing to God.

Paul is obviously not one to allow himself or others to settle for mediocrity. Notice how he speaks of being ‘filled with the knowledge of God’s will’, of being ‘fully pleasing to God’ , and of living a life worthy of the Lord by ‘bearing fruit in every good work’.

He is not suggesting that this fruit comes as a result of what we do from our own energy or determination. We must cooperate by welcoming God’s grace, but the fruit is the fruit of grace which reveals the power of God that is at work in those who believe. We are also to grow in knowledge of God, knowing God as God knows us, through the intimate communion of mutual love.

Colossians 1:11

As you are made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, being prepared to endure everything with patience.

Paul has already mentioned two ways in which we are to 'lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him' (1:10): we are to 'bear fruit in every good work', and we are to 'grow in the knowledge of God'.

This is the third: we are to be made strong in endurance by welcoming the grace of 'God who gives power and strength to his people' (Psalm 68:35).

Paul does not want us to be distracted from Jesus who alone mediates to us the power of God the Father. Receiving this power does not mean that we will be free from suffering or the adversities that are part of the human condition. We will, however, like Jesus the suffering servant, have the power to be able to continue to radiate the glory of God by being faithful to love in the midst of our sufferings. Paul speaks of ‘**endurance**’ (ὑπομονή), for we need God’s strength to endure against external pressure and temptation. He speaks also of ‘**patience**’ (μακροθυμία), for we also need to continue loving in a magnanimous way while we endure.

Colossians 1:12

while joyfully, giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

Verse twelve speaks of a fourth way of pleasing God: the way of joy-filled gratitude in whatever situation we find ourselves.

The various religious cults that surround them in Colossae promise them many things. Paul reminds them in verse twelve of the amazing grace from God for which they should be grateful.

This amazing grace is that through the gospel in which we have believed, God has promised us a ‘share in the inheritance of the saints in the light’. We are children of God our Father, because we already share the life of ‘his Beloved Son’ (1:13). However, as Paul has already said, there is a hope laid up for us in heaven (1:5), and if we are children, then we are heirs ‘heirs of God and joint heirs with the Messiah – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him’ (Romans 8:17).

Colossians 1:13-14

God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Here we have a further reason for gratitude. Paul seems to be quoting from a baptismal formula. We are reminded of Jesus' words to Paul on the road to Damascus: 'I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me' (Acts 26:17-18).

¹³God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Paul speaks of what we have been saved *from* by Jesus ‘who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father’ (Galatians 1:4). We have been rescued ‘from the wrath that is coming’ (1 Thessalonians 1:10), and ‘from wicked and evil people’ (2 Thessalonians 3:2)

Paul also speaks of what we have been rescued *for*: a new life of communion with God in love in the ‘**kingdom of God’s beloved Son**’. When Paul speaks of the ‘kingdom of God’ he is referring to the goal of history, when all forms of evil have been finally and definitively conquered by love. In the meantime, we are part of the kingdom of God’s Son, for the real power that is working in our world is the power of the risen Jesus, the power of his love. When all evil has been conquered ‘then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father ... so that God may be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:24,28).

Jesus is our ‘**redemption**’, for he ‘died for our sins’ (1 Corinthians 15:3). We have ‘all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’, but we are now ‘justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in the Messiah Jesus’ (Romans 3:23-24). We recall Peter’s words to the high priest: ‘God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins’ (Acts 5:31).

Paul is reminding the Colossians of the gospel which they have received (see 1:6-7), and of the hope to which they are looking forward (see 1:5). He is reminding them of their present growth and of the fruit that is already in their lives (see 1:6). He is reminding them of the fullness of forgiveness, power, life, wisdom, knowledge and understanding that they are now experiencing because of the reign of God’s beloved Son (1:13). In this way he hopes to encourage them to resist the enticements of pagan cult.

Colossians 1:5-8

Before we move to the poem upon which Paul is going to comment, let us re-read what he has written to this point.

You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and comprehended the true grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Colossians 1:9-14

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work, as you grow in the knowledge of God, as you are made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, being prepared to endure everything with patience, ¹²while joyfully, giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:15-17

[Stanza 1 - God's Beloved Son and Creation]

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;

for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or powers—

all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:18-20

[Stanza 2 - God's Beloved Son and Redemption]

He is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.

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

Being a hymn, this passage is to be received as one receives poetry. We are not to look for the kind of precision that satisfies the logical mind. It is the language of the heart, which aims to lift us to insights that the inquiring mind cannot fathom. If the poetry is good, the richness of evocative suggestion more than compensates for the lack in logical definition.

The Hebrew scriptures constantly speak of God as Creator and Redeemer. This hymn stands in this tradition, except that here the focus is on ‘**God’s Beloved Son**’ (1:13).

Through reflection on the unique intimacy that exists between Jesus and God, Christians came to think of the one and only God, not as existing in isolated individuality, but as one because of perfect love-communion. While retaining strict monotheism, and while upholding the obvious truth of the distinction between Jesus and the God whom he addressed as 'my Father', they could no longer use the word 'God' without including Jesus whose words, whose actions, whose face and whose heart revealed the true God to them. It is this insight that finds expression in this hymn, which contrasts God's Beloved Son with all created things and states that 'he himself is before all things'. This hymn speaks of Jesus as the manifestation in time of a Son who is eternal, not created. It is an early example of what Pliny, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus, wrote c.112AD to the Emperor Trajan informing him that Christians sang hymns to Christ 'as to a god' (*Epistles* 10.96).

We are all the richer for the penetrating insights that have come from the contemplation of Christian theologians whose love and prayer has taken them beyond the paths that we are accustomed to walk. While we learn from them and are grateful for the grace to share their faith and their insights, theological reflection on the divinity of Christ is perhaps best pursued by theologians who are mystics. It seems to me that the hymn can be appreciated at a level which, if not as profound as that just mentioned, nevertheless draws us close to the heart of Jesus, ‘**God’s Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins**’ (I:14). Leaving the mountain peaks to your own contemplation, this commentary will attempt to describe only the lower slopes.

It is a hymn about Jesus, ‘**God’s Beloved Son**’ (1:13), of whom Paul wrote: ‘when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman’ (Galatians 4:4). It is a hymn about Jesus ‘the image of God’ (2Corinthians 4:4), through whom God brought about a new creation: ‘if anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!’ (2Corinthians 5:17). It is a hymn about Jesus through whom God revealed his redeeming love to the whole world, when Jesus gave himself in love even to pouring out his life’s blood on the cross. Through Jesus God chose to draw to himself the whole of creation and all people, ‘reconciling us to himself’ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20); ‘and if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life’ (Romans 5:10).

It is a hymn about the risen, exalted and glorified Jesus, the 'first fruits of those who have died' (1 Corinthians 15:20). It celebrates the new creation, the final great eschatological event in which God grants the gift of his life-giving Spirit in its fullness. Paul wants the Colossians to know that the full outpouring of God's grace is not to be found in strange, occult, pagan cults with their esoteric taboos and rituals. God's loving action is for the liberation of all and is to be found in Jesus and in the communion of love that is to be found in the Christian church. As he writes to the Romans: 'The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now ... It will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:22 and 21).

The labour pains reached their climax in the death of Jesus on the cross, and found their resolution when God raised his Beloved Son from death to life. Sin has lost its power to deceive, and death has given way to life. This is what God is offering to the whole human race and to the whole of the created universe. It is now possible for peace to reign everywhere. There is no need to fear death. There is no need to fear the effects of sin. There is no need to live in fear of the mysterious cosmic powers that are said to hold sway over people's minds and hearts. Everything that is true (real) is offered to us in Jesus and can be enjoyed in the divine communion of love that comes through faith in him.

Let us examine the text of the hymn more closely.