

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 14--COLOSSIANS, PHILEMON, AND EPHESIANS

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

Generations of scholars have debated over the authorship of Colossians, i.e., whether or not Paul actually wrote it. The arguments against Paul's authorship, however, are unconvincing. Colossians differs somewhat in syntax and literary style from the undisputed letters of Paul. However, under the influence of an altered state of consciousness, a writer can be expected to produce such changes. The changes we find in Colossians, e.g., a shift from temporal imagery to spatial imagery, are precisely what one would expect, given the expansion of Paul's consciousness between 57 and 60-62 A.D.

The central focus of Colossians is the presence and power of the Indwelling Christ. The Christ Spirit is no longer viewed as local and limited. "The riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory," (1:27) is omnipresent, cosmic Principle. Focalized in the individual, the Christ is the inherent law of our being, i.e., "throughout the ages and generations." (1:26) This realization is available to all: "It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ." (1:28)

Colossae was located in Asia Minor, in the Lycus Valley. Paul had not personally founded the work there. This had been done by Epaphras, who had traveled all the way to Rome to consult Paul about the local situation. As things stood, certain Christians in the Lycus Valley had brought in teachings that differed with his and Paul's views of the Gospel. Paul dealt with Epaphras's problem by placing it in a new context: the inward reality of the Christ.

The Colossian dissenters evidently assumed that an "advanced" teaching must be more complex than an elementary one. It is a trait of the personal self, when dissociated from the Christ Self, to take what is simple and make it complicated. This, however, does not bring clarity but increases confusion. In contrast, expanded awareness clarifies and simplifies one's approach to Divine Reality. It is more advanced to rely directly upon the one Presence, Mind, Power than to attempt a complex adjustment to multiple factors.

We cannot know with certainty what the specific theology of Paul's opponents was in Colossae, for we have no writings representing their position. We can, however, ascertain their basic mind-set, which is more significant for our purposes. Basically, the Colossian dissent reflects a fear of approaching too close to God. Feeling unworthy to contact God directly, they rationalized their own sense of fear and guilt by positing a set of intermediate spirits. (These were probably astral spirits, believed to have ruled the sun, the moon, and the planets.) In addition, they incorporated their negative attitudes into a system of religious practices.

Against this web of illusions, Paul brought the teaching of the Cosmic Christ which is All-in-all (3:11). Reality, the Divine Order, is One. Through the Christ, all have direct access to God, and thereby to all good. "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority." (2:9-10)

BRIEF OUTLINE OF MATERIAL IN COLOSSIANS

- 1:1-2 - Words of greeting.
- 1:3-8 - Thanksgiving. Those who have the true view of Christ in Colossae are bearing practical fruit among themselves. (By implication, those with a contrary view are not bearing fruit.)
- 1:9-14 - Paul's prayer for the Colossians. The Father has delivered them from the dominion of darkness, into that of the Christ. This refers to a paradigm shift, to be realized here and now.
- 1:15-20- Paul quotes an ancient hymn, adding two interpolations--1:18, and "by making peace through the blood of his cross" in 1:20. The hymn affirms that the I AM or Cosmic Christ (1) is the exact image of the invisible God; (2) has created everything invisible and visible; (3) holds all things in an inseparable unity; and (4) is working to reconcile all things, on all planes, with His wholeness and perfection. This is the high goal of humanity and of all creation.
- 1:21-29- Christ in you, the true mystery. Paul's opponents thought of themselves as possessing certain secret teachings or "mysteries." Paul himself assumes this role, as the proclaimer of the Christ within. But all, not merely a few, are to become mature [teleios] in Christ.
- 2:1-5 - In "Christ himself... are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (2:3) Through the Christ, Paul is with them in spirit.
- 2:6-19 - A spiritual life based on the Indwelling Christ, vs. one based on false speculations. The whole fullness of Omnipresence dwells within us, and we are full and complete in the One. Hold fast to the Head, the Universal Christ, and you will unfold spiritually from within.
- 2:20-23- Traits of the false teachers at Colossae: An appearance of wisdom, without its reality; a self-imposed piety that is a human invention; false humility toward that which is less than God; severe treatment of the body.
- 3:1-4 - New life in Christ: We have been raised with Christ in consciousness. Set your attention upon true understanding, not upon error. Christ is our life now, revealed in us as light (glory).
- 3:5-11 - To claim this vision of life, we need to put off false qualities, and to put on the new garment of spiritual consciousness. "Have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (3:10-11)
- 3:12-17- The new garment motif continues. Clothe yourselves with positive qualities. Forgive each other. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (3:14)
- 3:18-4:1- Guidelines for wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. Two-thirds of this section actually applies to slaves and masters. Paul's real purpose, in composing this section, was apparently to aid in obtaining the freedom of a young slave, Onesimus. See the commentary on Philemon for further information.
- 4:2-6 - Counsel in prayer and wise behavior. The thanksgiving that Paul calls for is an attitude of universal praise, which attunes us to the Allness of God and to the divine order and harmony that indwells all.

- 4:7-18 - Final greetings, with specific people mentioned. This letter is also to be read publicly to the church in Laodicea, and the one sent to Laodicea (probably Philemon) is to be read publicly to the church in Colossae.

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

Philemon, in form, is a personal letter. More likely, however, it was intended to be read to the Christian group in Laodicea, near Colossae. A young slave, Onesimus, had run away from his master and probably stolen money from him as well. According to the letter itself, his master could have been either Philemon or Archippus, although Philemon is more likely. In either case, however, Onesimus had fled to Rome, where he met Paul and became a convert. Later, after Paul had begun taking a fatherly interest in him, he discovered the youth's status as a runaway slave.

Paul wanted Onesimus to be legally freed. At the same time, because slavery was so deeply entrenched in the Roman Empire--and Paul himself was awaiting an appeal to the Emperor on the charge of insurrection--he gave lip service to it. Also, the early Christians already appeared dubious in the public eye, because of their refusal to worship the Emperor. In addition in the Roman Empire only the Essenes dared to openly oppose slavery; and Paul had been associated with Essene converts to Christianity after his own conversion in Damascus.

On the surface, then, Paul asked Philemon merely to take back the young runaway without punishment. What he earnestly hoped, however, was that Onesimus would be legally freed, so that he could return to Rome as his assistant. Paul probably got his way. The best argument that his request was granted is the fact that the letter survived at all

Paul arranged that this letter would be read in public, specifically to the churches in Laodicea and Colossae. (Colossians 4:16) Also, he implies to Archippus, probably the Christian leader in Laodicea, that he should support his request that Onesimus be freed. "And say to Archippus, 'See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.'" (Colossians 4:17)

The section in Colossians 3:18-4:1 has to do with the mutual obligations of wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. Paul would not have included it at all, except as part of a subtle and astute strategy to get Onesimus legally freed. Ostensibly it endorses slavery, and thus removes any suspicion from himself. At the same time, it subtly attacks the institution of slavery by affirming that wives and husbands, children and parents, have valid obligations toward one another. This does not, of course, apply to slaves. Slave marriages are not legally recognized. Also, both parents and children are beholden to their masters who can, if they choose, split families by selling some family members and not others.

A close reading of the Letter to Philemon shows how subtle Paul could be in promoting a just outcome. Note that Paul offered to repay Philemon in full for any debts, theft, or other of Onesimus's wrongdoing. (v. 18) In fact, Paul gave his signature in a form that legally obligated him to pay. (v. 19)

Onesimus was not saved by anything he did outwardly. The fact that he willingly returned to Philemon helped his case. He could have easily run away again and made Paul look like a fool, but he did not do so. Also, Paul "held all the cards," as this most persuasive letter

shows. Philemon's wife (Apphia), his minister (Archippus), and the entire Christian congregation in Colossae would have backed the Apostle Paul in his request.

Nevertheless, Onesimus was not saved by anything he did outwardly. According to Roman law, Philemon still held the power of life and death over him. Human beings have the ability to act capriciously, contrary to all outside pressures, and on occasion they do so. Paul greatly helped Onesimus's chances to be freed, but he could not guarantee him anything. For instance, Philemon might have rashly decided to sell Onesimus as a gladiator, and to send Paul a bill. He was saved, rather, by grace--through the inward renewal that God's Spirit had, with his own willingness, wrought in his soul.

An enduring message of this letter is implied in its closing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." (v. 25) The key term here is grace. We can get into various kinds of bondage through wrong thinking and wrong habits. These are subconscious as well as conscious. And, the story of Onesimus typifies a basic fact: We can't run away from our problems, because our problems are not really in the outer world. They are within our own consciousness. The grace of God, however, can cancel the negative and establish the positive in its place.

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians is one of the great spiritual classics. This becomes especially apparent by reading it in the original Greek. Yet its name is a misnomer; the earliest manuscripts do not mention Ephesus at all. Also, the letter does not refer to specific local situations, as do the other letters attributed to Paul. Therefore, it is likely that Paul intended the epistle as a statement for general circulation among the Christian groups in western Asia Minor. Given its resemblance in many ways to Colossians, he must have written it within a few days of Colossians and Philemon. In the creative consciousness of the author, Colossians would have served as an initial draft, which would have been followed by a period of incubation during which ideas and images continued to develop, with Ephesians as the finished product.

The issue of authorship, with respect to Ephesians, has long been debated in the scholarly community. In this course, we have set out to briefly review the creative process as it worked in and through Paul's own consciousness, and as it contributed to his own spiritual unfoldment and personal development. Many scholars have made a literary analysis of Ephesians, but none, until now, have given adequate consideration to the creative process itself. As such, and in light of modern neuroscience and its data about hemispheric brain functions, most of the arguments against Paul's authorship have serious flaws. Rather than viewing Ephesians as a summary statement prepared by an unknown or uncertain author, then, we can now view it as the crowning achievement of Paul's literary voice.

Some scholars are unable to place Ephesians in any meaningful historical context within Paul's lifetime. Paul addressed himself in his other letters, it is true, to specific problems in local churches, which called for specific solutions. An adequate motive for writing Ephesians however, can be seen in his expanded view of the Second Coming. The need being general rather than local, he wrote in general terms. He now knew that the Kingdom of universal health, wisdom, abundance, and peace would not become manifest on earth suddenly, with the reappearance of Jesus. He now understood the Second Coming as an inner awakening,

individually and collectively, of humanity to its own essential oneness with, and in, the Cosmic Christ.

What Paul now earnestly sought was the establishment of a network of meditators, to work spiritually to bring forth the Kingdom of God on earth. This he spoke of metaphorically as the Church or the Body of Christ. He did not seek to build a church hierarchy, but rather, a network of meditators who would receive God's love, wisdom, and peace into their consciousness, and thus extend the Kingdom in a practical sense. The illumined individual, joined with others of like mind, is the Church. Those who work spiritually in this way, in our own times, are thus working in the spirit of Ephesians and, in the words of Jesus, "in spirit and truth."

BRIEF OUTLINE OF MATERIAL IN EPHESIANS

- 1:1-2 - Greeting. Without "in Ephesus," an apparent interpolation, the letter is addressed to "the set apart ones who are." This affirms the I AM or Cosmic Christ as the readers' spiritual Identity. The readers are set apart from error, and established within God Mind.
- 1:3-14 - An extraordinary lyrical benediction. An entirely new text, inspired by the Cosmic Christ. In the original Greek, its verses are grouped in 12 stanzas. Its central affirmation: "With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (1:8-10)
- 1:15-23- Paul's prayer for his readers. He affirms "the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might.11 (1:19, RSV) The same energy that raised Jesus from the dead is now functioning in and through us. The section closes by affirming "the fullness of him who fills all in all." (1:23)
- 2:1-10 - New life in Christ. The "dead" and the "reborn" are here people who are currently living on earth. Paul paints a basic contrast between "you/we were dead," and "you/we have been made alive in Christ."
- 2:11-22- The oneness of humanity in the Heavenly Man, the Cosmic Christ. We are one with God and with all people. "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." (2:14, RSV) "In him the whole structure [realization of universal oneness] is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.11 (2:21-22)
- 3:1-13 - Paul is the revealer of the mystery of Christ to the Gentiles. Yet the mystery of Christ is a realization open to all, from the depths of their own being.
- 3:14-21- Paul's great prayer, that his readers may "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (3:19) Through the power at work within us, the Christ is able to do immeasurably more than all that we can claim or visualize. The results of grace exceed those of mental cause and effect.
- 4:1-6 - God is All, but is not limited by any created thing. Paul affirms "one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (4:6)
- 4:7-16 - Declaring the Truth in love, we shall become mature and complete in every way, as the Christ in expression. The true goal is that "all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the

- full stature of Christ." (4:13) Then we are also united with each other, metaphorically as a body, and work for the common good.
- 4:17-24- The "old" and "new" natures. Strip yourself of the old self-concept, which is corrupt and beaded toward disintegration. Be renewed from the God Mind within, and "Clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (4:24) In Greek, kata theon, "according to what God is in His own nature and being." God is thinking, living, and empowering not only in us, but as us after the pattern of His own infinite ideas. This inner action shows itself forth in tangible ways, according to the Divine Law of Expression.
- 4:25-32- Put away falsehood; declare the Truth. Forgive one another; God in Christ has forgiven all error. "We are members of one another." (4:25)
- 5:1-2 - Be mimics of God (Paul alludes to the Greek theatre). As we consciously express the qualities of God, we consciously become God in action.
- 5:3-20 - Christians must renounce pagan ways, and think and live from the Inner Light. "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light--for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." (5:8-9)
- 5:21-32- Relationships of wives and husbands. Wives are told to be subject to their husbands, and this reflects a patriarchal culture. However, Paul is at least equally demanding on husbands in relation to their wives. This text also has an allegorical sense: the husband (conscious mind) is to rule the wife (subconscious mind); the husband (conscious mind) is also to love the wife (subconscious mind), but both are subject to the Christ. The conscious mind makes the subconscious whole by cleansing it with the Word. (5:26)
- 6:1-4 - Children are to obey their parents, but fathers are not to exasperate their children.
- 6:5-9 - Slaves are to obey their masters, and masters are to be just with slaves. But if slaves obeyed their earthly masters "in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ," (6:5) as Paul advises, it would change their consciousness and tend to undermine the institution of slavery.
- 6:10-20- Paul's Allegory of the Spiritual Warrior. We are told metaphorically to "Put on the whole armor of God." (6:11) "Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." 6:17)
- 6:21-24- Tychicus will give you a report on how I am doing. The undying love to which Paul refers, in Greek means "love in incorruptibility."

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

Read Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the mind-sets of Paul and his opponents differ in the Colossian controversy?
2. How does Colossians affirm the Omnipresence of God?
3. What is the enduring message of Paul's Letter to Philemon?
4. What purpose did Paul seek to fulfill in writing Ephesians?