

Pentecost +6
Colossians 1
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Paul is in prison. He writes a letter to the church at Colossae. He did not plant the church at Colossae. He has never visited them, but he has not ceased to pray for them since the day Epaphras told him about them. In some ways, the letter to the Colossians might be considered an overflow of Paul's prayers for this community.

Paul, the great missionary who traveled across the empire with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is imprisoned. He can no longer travel like he did, so his ministry has shifted to prayer and letter writing.

As we face the changes in life, all of us may go through seasons or new chapters in life when we can no longer do the things we did before. Our limitations may open new vistas that we had not considered previously. This does not mean our fruitfulness decreases. It simply means that we must adjust our efforts and trust the Lord to bring fruit. A season of active ministry may yield to a season of quiet prayer, but both can be effectual in the goodness and grace of God.

Paul has been praying that the saints at Colossae might mature in Christ through knowledge and wisdom that takes fruit in their lives, bringing glory to God. Or as Paul says in Colossians 2:6-7, "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."¹ Paul is praying, struggling, and suffering on behalf of the Colossians that the mystery of Christ Jesus might be fully unveiled in them.

Paul is praying and writing to a people who are surrounded by siren songs that would lead them astray. On the one hand, they hear the call of the pagan world where they came from. On the other hand, they hear the call of a strict ascetic lifestyle.

The pagan world is deeply religious. Very spiritual. And no moral obligations. It offers all sorts of spiritual experiences while condoning and even supporting all sorts of sexual perversion. One can offer incense and prayers and participate in rituals while also enjoying the violence of the arena, the sexualized worship of the pagan Temple, and the network of friends who can help establish you in business.

The saints at Colossae were rescued from this world in the same way the ancient Hebrews were rescued from slavery in Egypt. This world may seem appealing with all sorts of pleasures for the flesh, but it is slavery and death. Paul reminds the people that we have been "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."²

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:6–7.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 1:13–14.

“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, Jesus has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.”³ Jesus called them out of the old pagan ways into a life of beauty, characterized by faith, hope and love in their relations toward God and one another.

In addition to the temptations of returning to the ancient ways that indulge the flesh in immoral behaviors, the saints at Colossae face another temptation: the voices of those Christians who have chosen an intense ascetism to demonstrate the depth of their commitment. This ascetism includes but is not limited to circumcision, intense fasting, observance of certain festivals, angel worship, and visions. All these appear godly, but they do not bear the fruit of righteousness that only comes from Christ Jesus.

God’s people are often caught in between two experiences. Temptations and indulgences of the flesh on the one hand and extreme deprivations of the flesh on the other hand. Neither of these ways is the way of glory, the way of beauty, the way of Jesus. We follow Christ and Christ alone. In Him we are rooted and established as a holy priesthood, as the trees of righteousness, bearing fruit for the healing of the nations.

Paul is praying, struggling and even suffering on behalf of the Colossians that they might truly behold Jesus Christ and walk in Him. These other paths of indulgence or self-righteousness lead us away from the simple faith in Jesus Christ. Walking in the way of Jesus Christ might be likened to entering a house that is larger on the inside than it is on the outside. From the outside the house may appear like a small cottage. Once we enter in this cottage, we discover a castle with untold treasures.

The way of Jesus Christ continues to open more gloriously throughout our lives. Paul gives us some wondrous glimpses of Christ in this letter. A short homily cannot do justice to the magnificent heights of glory that Paul introduces. We are told that Jesus Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 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.”⁴

As we behold Jesus Christ, we behold the invisible God. Jesus reveals the Father. He is the very icon of God. There is no secret God behind Jesus. In Jesus Christ, we behold the generosity of God, the mercy of God, the holiness of God, the goodness of God in the land of the living. In Jesus Christ, we come to see how the Father is reconciling us to himself, reconciling the world to Himself. In Jesus Christ, we have hope for the healing of our own broken relations as well as the healing the world.

This hope is also rooted in Paul’s affirmation that by Jesus Christ “all things were created.” Paul mentions the things of this earth as well as the things of heaven. The things we can see and the things we cannot see. The spiritual powers and authorities. As we look upon this world, we may see oppressive powers in governments around the world, but we also see that Christ will

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 1:21–22.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 1:15–17.

eventually bring all these powers in submission to him. All creation will be restored in Christ Jesus.

How is He going to be about such a glorious reconciliation? His glorious plan of redemption is unfolding in the saints of God. We are His secret weapon. As Paul says that he was given the privilege of unveiling this mystery that had been hidden for ages. What is this mystery? “God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”⁵

The people of God are being reconciled to God in Christ. We are growing up in Christ. We are learning to walk in Christ, to live in Christ, to love in Christ. In the midst of a world turned away from God, we are revealing the beauty of the Lord in our lives, in our words, in our deeds. What does this look like?

Faith, Hope and Love.

We are a people who have faith in Christ Jesus and live in the faithfulness of Christ Jesus. This faith expresses itself as love for all the saints. We are becoming lovers, learning how to lay down our lives for one another even to the point of suffering for one another. The very life of Christ is being made manifest in us. That we might love and live as Christ. This kind of life is rooted in an unshakeable hope in heaven: that is an unshakeable hope that the Lord will put all things to right. His goodness and justice will ultimately be made manifest and all will acknowledge that He is the just and true King.

With this unshakeable hope, we can look into the darkness that often surrounds us with His light, His love, His grace for the world. In so doing, we walk and live and love as images of His promise for this world, bringing hope where there is no hope, and a promise of reconciliation to God in and through Christ Jesus.

Let us lift up our heads and rejoice, for Christ in His faithfulness is raising us up as His images for the life of the world.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 1:27.