

# **A Cosmic-sized Salvation**

*Three Studies in Colossians*

*David Gooding*

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## [The Cosmic Rebellion and You](#)

To introduce our study, let us read some famous verses from chapter 1 of the Epistle to the Colossians.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 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. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (vv. 1–12)

God give us good understanding of his holy word.

The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians is literally ablaze with the glories of Jesus Christ our Lord, and as such it is a brilliant example of the fulfilment of the promise that he made to his disciples before he left them. According to John 16:7–15, our Lord was explaining to the apostles that he would send the Holy Spirit to them: ‘if I do not go away,’ he said, ‘the [Holy Spirit] will not come to you . . . And when he comes, [amongst other things] . . . He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.’ And then, by way of explanation, he added a clause or two saying, ‘You know, when I said just now “he will take what is mine”, I would have you understand, gentlemen, that *all that the Father has is mine.*’

That must have sounded staggering in the ears of those humble men of Galilee. They had known him as the carpenter of Nazareth, and had come to perceive that he was the Messiah—the Son of God, in that sense. But now what extraordinarily vast claims he was making, ‘all that the Father has is mine.’

In those pre-scientific days their minds might not have imagined what an immense universe we live in. They could only see a few thousand stars but, even so, it must have been a magnificent concept in their ears, 'all that the Father has is mine.' From every creature that moves on the face of the earth; to our sun and its planetary system, to our galaxy and all the other galaxies that whirl in space; to the vast principalities and powers, might and dominions to whom God has delegated the running of a great deal of the universe; and all else besides, imaginable and unimaginable—'all that the Father has is mine,' he said. What wonderful words they are, and we pause in awestruck reverence before them, even at this moment.

It is a remarkable thing that, according to John, in those last hours before Calvary, our Lord was heard to repeat those words to the Father more than once, 'All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them' (17:10). As they stripped him bare of his clothing and nailed him to the cruel cross, who knows but what in the darkness of those moments in that extreme desolation, he comforted his divine and human heart by that often repeated phrase, 'all that the Father has is mine.'

So it was the second of the major purposes of the coming of the Holy Spirit that he should take all these things of the Father that belonged to the Saviour, and manifest them to us—the first that he should glorify the Son.

### **Exactly who is this Jesus Christ?**

I suppose that would have got the apostles thinking, wouldn't it? Even if the Holy Spirit hadn't come, it would have got them thinking about who Jesus Christ must be. If his death was a sacrifice as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the whole world, who must Jesus be? What is his relationship to this world? If he were now ascended into glory, what would his relationship be with the created universe?

When the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, his prime objective was to open the eyes of men and women to see that 'God has made him,' said Peter, 'both Lord [in the highest possible sense of that term] and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (see Acts 2:36)

So here, in the writings of Paul, the Holy Spirit is at his delightful task, explaining to us just exactly who Jesus is; his relationship to God and his relationship to the vast universe around us. This glorification of Christ fills the centre part of each of the three sections of Paul's writing to the Colossians (see [Appendix](#)).

#### **Christ first and supreme**

Elevated as the language is, none of it is merely repetitious. In column one and part two, Paul expounds the glories of the Lord Jesus. He is *first and supreme*; in him all of creation had its beginning. He is *firstborn*, says the Spirit, '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' (v. 16).

He is not only first in creation; he is supreme in redemption. 'Firstborn from the dead,' he is head of all that great development that is going on: the population of the heavens by this new and wonderful thing, the creation of the body of Christ, the church (v. 18). So, our Lord

is first and supreme. Firstborn of creation, firstborn in resurrection, 'that in everything he might be pre-eminent.'

### **Christ sufficient and triumphant**

It is not repetitious, therefore, when in column two and part two Paul returns to the question of the glories of the Lord Jesus and pronounces Christ now to be, not merely first and supreme, but *sufficient and triumphant*. 'In [him] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:3), and you are 'complete in him' (v. 10 KJV). At his cross, when principalities and powers invested him like a besieging army in his apparent weakness, he stripped them of their weapons (v. 15) and strode in divine majesty to the throne of God where now he sits triumphant.

### **Christ: all, and in all**

And, similarly, in column three and part two Paul brings us once more to the person of the Lord Jesus and pronounces that *Christ is all, and in all* (3:11). But you will notice that, inseparably related and connected with those grand statements of Christ's glory, there is the statement about ourselves. We cannot understand ourselves properly and truly unless we first understand who Jesus Christ is. We shall not even understand our sin unless we diagnose it in the light of our relationship with him.

In column one we are told that 'all things were created through him and for him', and if you would understand the nature of our sin as human beings, you must read it in the light of that grand statement. Whereas we, along with all other things, were made for him, we too have been caught up in *the cosmic rebellion* against our blessed Lord Jesus Christ and have become enemies of his will, adding our perversities to the creation of the world. We have rebelled against the very reason for our existence, being alienated and enemies in our minds (1:21).

Neither shall we understand the goal of our redemption unless we relate it to who Jesus is. 'He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead' (1:18). The goal of our redemption is not merely to save us from the awkward consequences and penalties of our sin; it is to conform us, reconcile us, and make us fit into the grand schemes that God has devised for the pleasure of his great Son in the eternity that is to be (2:10).

While we are on the way to being glorified with Christ, the whole of our lifestyle now as believers is designed to be controlled in all its aspects by Jesus Christ our Lord. He is to be the pattern of our forgiveness, 'bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive' (3:13). His peace is to rule in our hearts as an umpire rules in a game. The word of Christ is constantly to be in our hearts and in our minds; it is to be the constant subject of our thoughts. It is his word that is our motivation, as in the joy of our salvation our hearts respond to God in singing his praise. Every activity is to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. Wives are to submit to their husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands are to love their wives, and not be harsh

with them. Children are to obey their parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord (vv. 15–20).

‘Whatever you do,’ says Paul to the slaves, ‘work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ’ (vv. 23–24). If our lifestyle is to conform to that of the new man that God is devising, its secret is this. Everything we do and everything in life’s relationships shall be done under the Lordship and Mastership of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ (4:1).

So the great middle sections of each part of the epistle are ablaze with the glory of the Lord Jesus; not merely as some exotic exercise to beguile for a few moments with its heavenly glories, but as linked to ourselves in our understanding of ourselves: our sin, our salvation, our redemption, our coming glory, and our present lifestyle.

Tonight we are going to consider the first of these great sections of the epistle, but let us spend just a few more moments noticing how each of the three major sections of the book has its jewels strung like a necklace upon a single major thread.

## Section 1—Hope

*Hope* is the thread that is used to string the great jewels of Paul’s doctrine on to the necklace that forms the first major part of this epistle.

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*. (1:3–5)

Having mentioned hope, he comes round to the topic again:

If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from *the hope of the gospel* that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (v. 23)

Then in verse 27:

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*.

## Section 2—Wisdom

We’ve changed over from the theme of hope to the theme of *wisdom*.

Paragraph 1: ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’ (2:3)

Paragraph 2: ‘See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy’. (v. 8)

Paragraph 3: ‘These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body’. (v. 23)

Philosophy is one long word in English, but in Greek it is two simple words meaning a love of wisdom. Here, of course, it is a false wisdom contrasted vividly with the wisdom of Jesus Christ our Lord. Divine wisdom and knowledge in paragraph one, false wisdom in paragraphs two and three.

### Section 3—Life

And finally, the theme is *life*.

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (3:3–4)

As we have already seen, the rest of that section will deal with the lifestyle of the new self that has been created after God in his knowledge and likeness.

Let that serve then for our introduction, so that we may now come to the detail of the first great section of the epistle. We're not going to get through the whole of the epistle in these three short studies, hence the value of the initial survey.

### Our Christian hope

But let's think now together for a while of this question of our Christian hope.

1. 'The hope laid up for you in heaven' (1:5). That, of course, is a reference to our blessed Lord Jesus. He is the ground of our hope, and our hope is in heaven.
2. 'The hope of the gospel' (v. 23). That turns out to be based on our Lord at Calvary who, by the blood of his cross, reconciles all things to God.
3. 'The hope of glory' (v. 27). That is not our Lord in heaven, nor our Lord at Calvary, but our blessed Lord within each one of us.

Christ in heaven, Christ at Calvary, Christ in you. This sums up our Christian hope. Now let's begin at the beginning.

#### 1. The hope that is laid up for you in heaven

My imagination is taken by the verb, 'the hope *laid up* for you,' and I like the word exceedingly. It reminds me of another place where that verb is used. It is in the famous parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13–21). The Lord Jesus told the story of this farmer who had prospered in his farming, and had such bumper harvests that he had a storage problem. Looking out the window, scratching his agricultural head, he said, 'What shall I do? My barns are too small to cope with all the stuff that I've acquired.' So he sat down and came to his conclusion.

'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry' (vv. 18–19). Can't you see him, looking out on all the goods that were stored up for many years to come, taking his ease, as he had told his soul to do?

What a consummate fool he was, for that very night his life was to be taken. He'd solved his storage problem in the most foolish of ways. He might have sent on his goods in advance to heaven and laid up a good foundation against the time to come, but he stored them here on earth, and when his life was required of him he had to say farewell to them for ever.

Forgive the diversion, but I do like the verb. I'm not going to ask you to be rich fools, of course not. But I'm now going to suggest that you might care to relax for a moment from the heat and pressures of the day, and indulge yourselves just a little bit. It's good for the soul sometimes, to sit back a minute and look out through the window of God's word and contemplate the hope that is laid up for you in the heavens. Count on your fingers, if you've got enough fingers to count, the hope that is laid up for you in the heavens for a great while yet to come.

You say, 'What is the hope laid up for me'?

The wonderful news is this. If you have been reconciled to God through the death of his Son, God has joined you to his Son forever. In consequence, because your Saviour has been raised to the right hand of God and is the head of all principality, might, power, and dominion, you have a hope laid up in the heavens.

Consider him for a moment: 'He 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' (1:15–17).

### **The firstborn of all creation**

He is the firstborn of all creation, heir of it all, and even our little planet with all its history and all its progress finds its consummation in Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the heir of all things, and he is your Saviour and Lord.

Ponder it again: 'By him all things were created.' The very first words in the Bible are, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' Perhaps its major meaning is a time reference: in the beginning, when all things started, God created the heavens and the earth. If that is what Genesis means there is an earlier beginning, for our Lord Jesus Christ declared himself to be 'the beginning of God's creation' (Rev 3:14). Our blessed Lord is the beginning of the vast creation around us.

If I were to come to a great factory, and ask, 'Where did this factory have its beginning?', you could reply, 'It had its beginning when they dug the foundations and laid the concrete.' That would be one beginning, but be assured there was another beginning before that. The factory began in the mind of its owner, who decided that he needed a factory for his purposes. So it had its beginning, not when the foundations were dug, but in the mind of the owner.

The Bible tells us here that the vast universe had its beginning in Christ. It was in his mind; his was the idea and the thought behind it all. Your factory may have begun in the mind of the owner, but it was not carried out through him. He hired an architect and a builder so that the factory might be built through them. Not so with creation. It had its origin in the Lord Jesus and the whole thing was brought into being through him. It was in him and it was through him. Not only did he begin it, not only was he the agent in its creation, but the Bible



says this next superb thing, it was made *for him*. Every tiny little bit of it, from the slenderest blade of grass to the tiniest cell that composes our bodies, was made for him.

I came from Perth across to Sydney by your famous Nullarbor railway. One of its many delights and wonders was at night time when the sky was dark and clear—such as we never have it in my country at home. You could wake up in the middle of the night and look out of the train window and see such a spectacle as left one breathless. One night, I vividly remember the great Milky Way coming down like a cataract of fiery light from heaven to earth. There were the constellations; far more of them down here in the south than we could ever see in the north. As I gazed at them, awed by their wonder and brilliance, the thought came again, as it has many times to my heart, what's it all for? Why all these vast millions: what are they for?

I am a backyard astronomer, and sometimes I go out at night in our part of the world and look at the Andromeda galaxy. I remember what the astronomers say, 'It's only a tiny little galaxy; it only has fifty billion suns in it.' I say to myself, 'What is it all for?' I hope, incidentally, if it's not all been changed when we get home to heaven, I shall get some time off singing in the choir to go and investigate these things, to see what they're really doing up there.

But in the meantime we're told what they're for. They are for the Lord Jesus; they were made 'for him', says Scripture. Not only so, but it is said here that he is 'before all things' (v. 17). He was before them, in the sense that he existed before they existed; but we have learned that this universe of ours is relative. Something happens in Australia, and they don't know in Britain until the news is flashed across by telephone or radio. Something happens on the sun and the news doesn't get here until eight minutes afterwards. Some things happen on remote galaxies, but they won't get here for thousands and thousands of years. The light travels before it reaches us.

Even in life's little circumstances, there's a man going home from work. He's involved in an accident and seriously injured, and they've taken him to hospital. It's going to be a desperate shock, but the news hasn't got to his wife yet. She's still preparing his dinner, expecting him to come home. We tiny creatures are very often after the event, but Christ is always before every event. Nothing takes him by surprise. He is before all things and holds everything together at this present moment.

Sit back, my brother and sister, and think of the hope that is laid up for you in heaven (1:5). If he is the rightful heir of all things, the Bible assures you, as a believer, that you are an heir of God and a fellow heir with Christ (see Rom 8:17). Oh, what will it be to get above and inherit with Christ all the vast unimaginable glories and wonders that there are in store for him in the eternal world.

### **The firstborn from the dead**

He's not only the firstborn of all creation; he is the firstborn from the dead (v. 18). He is the head of the church, which is his body. Here we come upon a breathtaking marvel. Christ is not only going to restore the original creation to its pristine glory, he has already begun to add something that the greatest saint on earth in past ages never dreamed of. There is a new thing in the universe that was not there before Pentecost, but since that day it has been in process of

forming. It is a new kind of humanity, formed of multi-millions of human beings, each an individual redeemed personality, but now so constructed that they are not merely individual personalities, but wonderfully joined together in a common life so that they constitute one body.

It is God's solution to the problem of personality. I daresay you have noticed through hard experience what a problem human personality is, even since we have been saved. More troubles come into churches through personality clashes than perhaps from any other cause.

Human personality is a wonderful thing, but in human history it has proved to be very costly and dangerous. God has his answer to the matter. The great new heavens and new earth will not be cursed by the difficulty of human personality. With all the wealth of individual personalities, not one shall duplicate another, 'for star differs from star in glory' (1 Cor 15:41). The difficulty is going to be solved by the creation and perfecting of this great new organism in the heavens that is the very body of Christ.

Sit back a moment and consider the hope that is laid up for you in heaven. As we think of that, we ought to move on now to the second strand in our Christian hope.

## **2. The hope of the gospel**

Not merely the hope laid up for us in heaven, as Paul puts it, but the hope of the gospel. Let us consider first of all the background of our gospel, the background of our hope, and why there was any need for a gospel in the first place. Here we come to the matter expressed in the title of tonight's talk. We need a gospel, and we need a hope attached to that gospel, because there has been a cosmic rebellion against God and his Christ.

Mention is made in these verses that our Lord Jesus was creator not only of our planet and the universe around it; he is the creator of these thrones, dominions, rulers and authorities, to which the power of organization and administration of the vast universe of God was originally delegated.

Some of those principalities and powers have apparently remained loyal to the Most High; others of them have rebelled against him. We have to take the words of holy Scripture seriously. I know that some theologians in modern times have said that we mustn't take these words as though they applied to some heavenly spirit beings, they were Paul's way of referring to what we should call the 'difficulties inherent in the structures of human life.' These theologians have argued that there is a certain built-in evil in the political and economic structures of our world. Not necessarily the personal responsibility of all those who are engaged in politics, economics, or whatever, but by the very fact that these economic and political structures are built by fallen men and women. Evil forces are at work in the very structures of life, to the distress and impoverishment, and sometimes the imprisonment and death, of men and women. They say that these verses tell us that Christ is our hope, and one day he will rid earth of all the evil in its structures; the principalities and powers are simply a poetic way of talking about these things.

It is certain, of course, that when the Lord Jesus comes he will put down all evil in earth's politics, economics, commerce, law, and in every other field. But such demythologizing of the words of Scripture is not enough to satisfy Paul's plain intention, for, in talking about

principalities and powers, holy Scripture includes his satanic majesty himself. The Bible teaches that he is a personal being of immense wonder and original glory; so high indeed that he was not ashamed or unable to challenge the authority of almighty God himself.

The Bible indicates that not only has Satan rebelled against God, but he has led a great array of high intelligences against God: against his government, against his rule, and against his Christ. If we are to understand the position of our world and the dimensions of our gospel, we must take into account the serious and awesome facts of holy Scripture. I know, of course, that it is smiled upon by many a modern man and woman.

'You're not asking us to believe in angels, are you? How can we possibly believe in angels?' they say.

But when they've forgotten what the Bible says about angels, then presently they will tell you that people like Carl Sagan, the great cosmologist in America, is convinced that there are intelligent beings within the universe around us. Thousands upon thousands of dollars are spent annually, tracking the signals that come in from outer space, in the hope that one day their hearing devices will capture codes that indicate messages from intelligent beings. Because he is an evolutionist, many a scientist is convinced these days that, if evolution has brought humans into this planet as intelligent beings, statistically the likelihood is that there will be intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe. If they are intelligent, maybe they're trying to get in touch with us, though, if they were, perhaps you might doubt their intelligence! Why would they wish to do that? That is the theory, and the curious thing is that, when the scientists do it, multitudes of men and women say, 'Oh, yes, we can see that it is a theoretical possibility and worth spending millions of dollars to try and establish contact with these beings.'

God has been saying it for centuries, of course. These principalities, powers, might and dominions are creatures, and therefore they are within the great Creation. They may not necessarily be in our universe, but they have access to it. That is the plain statement of holy Scripture. And not only have they had access and knowledge of our universe, they have interfered in it, and with catastrophic results. Those that are not loyal to God have not only rebelled against him themselves, they have involved our planet in that rebellion.

### **'And you'—alienated, now reconciled**

The Apostle Paul now begins to express the need for our gospel. Not only has there been a cosmic rebellion in high places, 'you too have been involved in this cosmic rebellion,' says Paul. It is not an exaggeration, ladies and gentlemen, to describe our human sin in cosmic terms, because the serious thing is that it runs clean counter to the whole reason why the vast universe was made. '*And you*, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled . . .' (v. 21–22). We too were enemies of God.

But, as we thought earlier, the whole universe was made not only *in* Christ and *through* Christ, but *for* Christ. We human beings have been involved in that cosmic and impertinent rebellion that has put us in the place of Christ: 'we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6).

I was travelling once on a train after the war, and opposite me sat a young gentleman. I shared my tea with him, he shared his sandwiches with me, and we got talking. In the course of the conversation, the topic of human sin came up, and the young gentleman expressed himself quite firmly on the point. He was not interested in sin; it wasn't an important concept with him. I said, 'Tell me, do you think you would be clever enough to make a motorcar?' He said that he thought he would.

I said, 'Tell me, if you made a motorcar, and five times out of ten it went where you wanted it to go, and the other five times, even though you sat behind the wheel and pulled it in this way and that way, it took no notice of you and went exactly where it wanted to go itself, what would you do?'

He said, 'I'd scrap it.'

I said, 'Yes, I thought you would. Tell me, if you made a motorcar, and nine times out of ten it went where you wanted it to go, and just once in ten it refused the guidance of your hand and still went where it wanted to go itself, what would you do?'

He said, 'I'd scrap the thing. If I made a motorcar, I should want it to go ten times out of ten where I wanted it to go.'

I said, 'I fancy God holds the same view too, for he tells us that the trouble with us is that "all we like sheep have gone astray". He made us to do his will, to go his way, to serve his purpose, and our sin is that we have turned to our own way in cosmic defiance of the very purpose for which the universe was made.' And I said, 'Young man, if you persist as you are, you want to be careful that God doesn't put you too on the scrapheap of eternity.'

We must take this diagnosis seriously, because sometimes, even after we get saved, it doesn't dawn on us how immensely sinful our sin was. If we are not careful we could misapprehend salvation in the same way, and imagine that salvation is geared to have us at the centre of it, and Jesus Christ is there to minister to us in our times of need.

Last year my doctor sent me to see a surgeon because he was worried about one of my big toes. The surgeon was explaining to me how good a surgeon he was, and what a marvellous operation he could do, and to encourage me he told me about one of his colleagues. He said, 'One of my colleagues let me do the operation the other month because his left toe had become very rigid, like yours. It was interfering with his golf swing. I did the operation for him, and now he's rejoicing because he can swing his golf club again!' I pondered the idea that the National Health Service was geared through the surgeon to putting right his colleague's rigid toe to facilitate his golf swing.

Sometimes we have that concept of Christ, don't we? When our marriages break down, Christ is there to fix them. When we get depressed, he's there to encourage us. If we fall into sin, he's there to forgive us. He's there and his salvation is there for us. If we're not careful we will continue in that same old egocentric attitude to life — hedonistic and pleasure-seeking — and feel that, when we get into trouble, Christ exists to put us right.

I've got an excellent garage man. My car, like me, is elderly and it gets into trouble, so I go and pester the garage man and he puts it right. I don't say to him, 'Please take my car and have it at your disposal; I'll drive it anywhere you want.' No, I think not. As soon as he's fixed

the car, I say, 'Goodbye garage man', and I forget all about him. It's only when the car needs fixing again that I go to him. As far as I'm concerned, the garage man exists just to fix my car.

We could be in danger of preaching a gospel to men and women today, which suggests that that's what Christ is. He's the universal 'fixer-up' of human beings when they get into difficulty. He exists for them, and that's the sum of the matter. To misrepresent the gospel like that would be what Chuck Colson calls a 'hedonistic blasphemy'. Christ doesn't exist in that sense for us, we were made for him; but the terrible fact is that we took our free will, rebelled against him, and went our own way. We must not interpret salvation as merely a 'fixing up job' that Christ does for us, to put us on our 'wheels' again.

## Reconciled to God

The gospel is that we need to be reconciled to God, brought back to him to fulfil the pleasure and purpose he had in all creation. The hope of the gospel is to be reconciled to God, made to 'square' with God's purpose. So far, our lives have been out of gear and we haven't been able to reconcile them, but it doesn't make sense if we don't live for God. The great purpose of the gospel is to reconcile our accounts so that they square with the purposes of God. That is the wonder of the gospel, and what God has ordained that Jesus Christ our Lord should do.

What lovely words: '*And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him*' (1:21-22). One day the blessed Lord Jesus will present us before the throne of God's glory with exceeding joy, perfectly reconciled to God by the death of his Son, and God himself shall be unable to find a blemish within us. Ponder for a moment not only the wonder of that fact, but the wonder of the method that God has chosen to accomplish it. He shall 'reconcile to himself all things . . . making peace by the blood of his cross' (v. 20).

The slander of the devil and all his hosts has been that, in making our world and all that is in it, God has laid down such conditions of life and stringent laws that show him to be an intolerable tyrant. The slander that God is a tyrant has gained the hearts and minds of multitudes of our fellow men and women. How will God reconcile the world to himself, if that is what is in their hearts? We've had it too, haven't we? Shall it be by some exhibition of power? No, of course not. There has never been any doubt in the universe who holds the ultimate power.

When he came to tempt our blessed Lord Jesus, even Satan himself said, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for *it has been delivered to me*, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours' (Luke 4:6-7). There speaks a creature who knows he is not almighty. It is by God's permission that he is allowed to continue with the power he has diverted from God's purpose.

There has never been any question as to who has ultimate power. The question has always been, who has the greatest claim to man's loyalty? Who really loves? You see, when we first sinned, God could have squashed us out of existence. But what would that have proved? It would have demonstrated that, while God was almighty to create and almighty to destroy, he

was not almighty in his love. A God who could not retain the loyalty and love of his creatures is a God who, in that sense, has failed.

God set out to reconcile all things to himself, so that all might come to know and acknowledge that he is not a tyrant. He is the God of almighty power and measureless love, and thus the method. To bring us rebels back to God, he ordained that in Christ should all the fullness dwell, and that Christ should die for us. We have been made for him. In our sin we had rebelled against him, and the divine decree was that he should die, not us. He, for whom we were made, should die for those who had rebelled against him.

There were moments as I passed through the Nullarbor, looking up at your fantastic sky, that I thought of it all. Why was it made? And the answer came ringing back: 'it was made for Christ.' Can I believe that he, for whom uncountable galaxies were created, would die for me, the rebel? Well, if God is like that, I can't fight him any more. If God will do that for me, then by his grace I will be his slave for ever.

When God eventually dismisses those who reject that love to an eternal perdition, no voice will be raised in the whole universe to say that God is a tyrant for doing so. God has demonstrated exactly what his heart's attitude is. It was his decree that his Son should die for the rebel. The hope of the gospel is that one day the blessed Lord Jesus shall take you, rebel though you were, and present you blameless before the presence of his Father's glory with great joy (see Jude v. 24). God will find you without blemish and without charge, perfectly and for ever acceptable to him through Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is just one more thing to add. The glorious statement, '[he shall] present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,' is followed by an 'if' — 'if indeed you continue' (v. 22–23). It will be our duty tomorrow to discuss together what is implied by that tremendous 'if', but for the moment may the Lord's grace fill our hearts as we contemplate the hope that is laid up for us, and the hope of the gospel.

## The Cosmic Christ and You

A very good evening to you. We are currently studying certain themes in the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, and tonight we can launch ourselves on our study by reading some verses, beginning in chapter 1.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. (vv. 9–13)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them 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. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (vv. 24–28)

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. (2:1–5)

And may God give us good understanding of his holy word.

Last night, when we came to the end of our study we were engaged in contemplating the topic of our Christian hope. We had considered in some detail the *hope that is laid up for us in the heavens*; and when we ended the study we were thinking of *the hope of the gospel*. Tonight, our

main task will be to proceed from that to consider the final element in our hope, which is *the hope of glory* (v. 27).

### **Paul's conditional 'if'**

Before we proceed, we have some unfinished business to complete. The hope of the gospel is the hope that one day our blessed Lord Jesus Christ will present us before the Father, 'holy and blameless and above reproach before him' (v. 22). But as we came to the end, we noticed that that great hope is conditional upon an 'if': 'if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister' (v. 23). Because that hope is so tremendous, are we not obliged to consider why Paul feels it necessary to add that condition?

I want immediately to suggest to you that the word Paul uses is a genuine 'if', and we should notice at once what it is concerned with. It is, 'If you continue in *the faith*,' and we only have to put the opposite to make ourselves see quite clearly the importance of the *if*. What is a man or woman who does *not* continue in the faith? Scholars will disagree among themselves as to whether you should translate the words 'continue in *the faith*,' or simply, 'continue in faith.' To continue in the faith would mean continuing steadfast in our belief of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian gospel, 'the faith' being the body of doctrine. Continuing in faith would mean continuing personally to believe. Actually, those two alternatives are two sides of one and the same coin. In order to continue in the faith, you must maintain your personal faith.

Ideas will immediately come to our minds, such as, 'doesn't the preacher believe in the eternal security of the believer?' I do, with all my heart; so let there be no doubt on that score, however confused my explanations may seem. But, if we talk about *the eternal security of the believer*, we are asking a very big question. The Bible says that every believer is eternally secure: 'whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life' (John 5:24). Of course the believer is eternally secure.

But what does holy Scripture say on the more fundamental matter? Is it true that, once you are a believer, you automatically remain a believer for ever, or can a believer cease to believe? You see, while Scripture assures us that all believers have eternal life, there is no Scripture known to me from Genesis to Revelation which says that the person who once believed has everlasting life, and if they ever cease to believe, never mind, they still have eternal life whether they believe or not. I haven't read it, and obviously it couldn't be in Scripture. There can be no salvation for those who do not believe.

### **What does Scripture say on the matter?**

If we continue in the faith, Christ is going to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before him. Therefore, I want to say at once, *the mark of the true believer is that they do continue*. It is the evidence, if you like, that they have eternal life. We must separate in our minds the difference between the *condition* of having eternal life and the *evidence* of having eternal life.



A little baby doesn't get its life by crying, but it's a bad thing if a newborn doesn't cry. The crying is not the means by which it got life, it is the evidence that it has life. If a mother went upstairs to the cot and saw her baby lying sinisterly still, and he was cold when she touched him, she might well try to get the baby to cry because she feared he might have suffered a cot death or something. She hopes the baby will cry to give evidence that he is alive. But if the baby has died it's no good telling him to cry, crying won't give him life. The only way to get life in those circumstances, would be if he could be born again.

So it is with Christian life. *Continuance* in the faith is a very necessary evidence that a person is truly a believer. The Gospel of John records our blessed Lord on this topic: 'So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"' (John 8:31-32).

John tells us that the Lord had been preaching and some of the Jews believed on him. I mustn't contradict what holy Scripture says, '[they] had believed in him' (v. 31). Continual abiding in his word is the evidence of genuine disciples, 'and the truth will set you free,' he said.

But as he said those words, a frown came over their faces. 'They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"' (v. 33). 'Free from what?'

He said, 'Free from sin. You see, everybody that continues to practise sin is a slave of sin' (see v. 34).

'We'll have you know that we are children of Abraham ourselves. Indeed, we're children of God. Don't you come here talking to us about being delivered from slavery to sin.'

Our blessed Lord had to point out to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did' (v. 39). And if they were children of God, they would love him, the Son of God: 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here' (v. 42).

So our blessed Lord was obliged to tell these Jews who had professed to believe on him, that, so far from being children of Abraham and children of God, 'you are of your father the devil' (v. 44).

What use is that kind of faith if it does not continue? It is, I say, the indispensable mark of the true believer that he or she continues in 'the faith', and is not moved away from the hope of the gospel.

### **Paul's concern for the Colossians**

Lurking behind these words in the Epistle to the Colossians is an obvious concern that had arisen in Paul's heart. Epaphras had visited Paul in prison and brought news of the believers at Colossae, and a great deal of the news was excellent (1:8). They were standing fast, and Paul rejoiced as, in his mind's eye, he saw those believers holding rank and standing steadfast. But Epaphras also had to tell him about some very strange and weird doctrines that were floating around that region, and liable to entice these believers into false ideas (2:8). If they really embraced these ideas, it would lead them far from the fundamental truths of the gospel. His apostolic warning that they should abide in the faith was necessary, because it is the only gospel that can present us at last without charge before God (v. 21).

## Paul's prayers for them

Paul tells them of his prayers for them (v. 9). Isn't it good when somebody says, 'I pray for you daily'? For those of us who preach publicly, that is a tremendous encouragement. It would be even more interesting to know what they pray for, but perhaps they think it wise to shield the exact details from us. Their prayers might run, 'Lord, deliver him from stupidity and vanity,' or something to that effect, and they might not want to tell us what they pray for.

But here Paul was concerned that these converts of Epaphras should know exactly what he was praying for. Let's go through the steps of the prayer that Paul constantly prayed for these believers.

### *Objective number one*

That they would 'be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding' (1:9).

The prayer is specific for the *means*; but what would you need in order to be filled with such knowledge and spiritual wisdom and understanding? What's the point of collecting knowledge like that? Paul gives the answer, 'so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him' (v. 10).

Right from the very start, when he sets himself to prayer, we notice that Paul is not wool-gathering; he's not letting his mind run all over the place, grasshopper fashion. He has in his mind certain very clear objectives to be prayed for. But as the objectives come into view, he's concerned about the means by which those objectives will be achieved. As a master workman he's not beating the air, he is focusing on the objectives and on the steps that must be taken towards those objectives.

### *Objective number two*

That they would be 'bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God' (v. 10).

But what would 'walking in a manner worthy of the Lord' involve? It's not just a vague term with Paul, it has specific content. It will involve bearing fruit, but what is the absolutely indispensable condition for bearing fruit? And the answer he gives comes in verse 11, 'all endurance and patience with joy'. Every gardener will know what Paul is talking about. How do your lovely fruit trees manage to bear fruit? Well, it's not an overnight job; there's nothing quick-fix about bearing fruit. The only secret for bearing fruit known to God or man involves endless patience.

I worked on a farm once, and at a certain time we grew sugar beet, which was mightily difficult to germinate and when they did germinate they didn't know how to take root in the soil. With so much money invested in the seed, my boss was naturally apprehensive. Day after day, he'd come down, poking around these tiny sugar beets to see if they were really taking root and going to bear fruit. Growing fruit is a long drawn-out process, and will require supreme endurance and patience. Come rain, sun, wind and drought, the plant has to learn to put up with it, and carry on carrying on.

We begin to perceive that Paul has already anticipated the need. We shall be presented before God without charge, being 'strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy' (v. 11). With a genuine pastor's heart, the

apostle is homing in on the vital thing in the whole process, praying God that these dear believers may *endure and continue in the faith*. And all who have a pastor's heart will pray likewise for those for whom they are responsible.

### **The knowledge of God's will**

Let's go over the details of the prayer in a little bit more detail before we move on. Paul starts by saying, 'that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him' (vv. 9–10).

The goal is to please the Lord and to behave worthily of him, but we need the *means* to do that, and the means is 'to be filled with the knowledge of his will.' We mustn't suppose that we start off by knowing what the will of God is. Scripture advises us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa 55:8–9). God is not going to change his, so we shall be obliged to change ours. In our Christian life, we must never take the view that if anything pleases us it's bound to be right.

Husbands wouldn't fall into that trap; I know you wouldn't. You're hurrying out the door one Monday morning and, just as you're about to disappear, your wife says, 'Do you know what day it is today?'

And you say, 'Yes, I do. I haven't forgotten that it's your birthday, my dear. What would you like for your birthday present? Would you like some chocolates?'

The dear lady says, 'Chocolates? Not really; but I would like some daffodils.'

So off you go to work, and at night time you come home with the present all tied up in pink ribbon.

'There you are,' you say, 'my birthday present to you, with my love.'

She looks at it and thinks to herself, 'that's a funny looking box of daffodils!' Anyway, she undoes the paper, and there is a box of chocolates. She says, 'Chocolates? Weren't there any daffodils?'

'Oh, yes,' you say, 'there were daffodils in plenty.'

'Then why have you brought chocolates? I thought I told you not chocolates but daffodils.'

'Yes you did, but I like chocolates,' you say.

You'll have to be careful that she doesn't throw the chocolates at you. You wouldn't do it, of course. Experience would teach you not to.

And what an impertinence it would be if we lived our lives on the principle that if it pleases us, it must be right. Our objective is to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, and for that reason we need to know what his sovereign and blessed will is.

I remember hearing Dr Laubach at a missionary breakfast. He was the great missionary pioneer who developed a means of teaching one-time savages to be able to read. He told us a touching story. He'd given the chief of a tribe some lessons, and now the chief could read. So grateful was he to Dr Laubach that he came and sat by his side, and put his arm around his neck. He said, 'Dr Laubach, I am so grateful to you for teaching me to read, I'd like to do you

a favour. Is there anybody around here I could kill for your sake?' He wanted to please the good doctor, but he hadn't learned what would please him!

So Paul prays that they may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.

'This will involve two things,' says Paul. It will involve good works; and in addition to good works it will always involve an increasing—with a snowball-like effect—knowledge of God. It is difficult for the Almighty to make himself known to us personally if we just carry on living in a way that displeases him. It is to those who please him that he can reveal himself more deeply.

If we are to bear fruit in every good work, we shall need this *endurance*. But now the great question arises: from where shall we get the strength, the moral and spiritual power, to carry on enduring? Paul gives us the delightful answer: '[being] strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might' (v. 11). That's where we shall get the strength from to endure.

Sit back for a moment and put these things together. The great future lies ahead when we shall be presented before the throne of God's glory without charge, 'if indeed you continue in the faith.' From where shall we get the power to continue? What if our own little strength isn't sufficient and adequate, and exhausts itself before life's race is won? Where shall we look to for strength? And the answer comes back, 'being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might.'

### **How shall we 'continue'?**

And now, perhaps, we shall begin to see another facet of the great passage that we attempted to study briefly last evening, dealing with the cosmic glories of the Lord Jesus. '[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' (1:13–14). We have been qualified by the Father to take our share in the inheritance of the saints in light (v. 12). Now comes the long distance race: 'if you continue' (v. 23). How shall we continue?

Consider again the strength and the power of his glorious might. He upholds the very universe, and for that he is strong in power. Not one of his multitudinous galaxies shall fail. And shall he who upholds the uncountable myriads of the stars and the galaxies not uphold you and me?

In him all the physical universe holds together (v. 17). It is not ultimately the weak atomic power nor the strong atomic power that keep the atoms and our universe together. The creator of the universe not only made all things, but he holds them together by the word of his power (Heb 1:3). And it is he who undertakes to hold us together, and to uphold us in the faith. He has conquered death and is risen from the grave: 'He is the firstborn from the dead, he is the head of the body, the church, that in everything he may be preeminent' (see Col 1:18).

Consider that great line of worthies right down to the present. Paul and Peter, James and John, Luther and Wesley, and all the myriads of the saints down the centuries, and he, the head of the church, upheld them all. If they could speak to us now from the glory, not one of them would say, 'It was I who upheld myself.' They would all proclaim themselves to have been weak and poverty stricken in their own strength, and they were upheld by the vast ministries of *the cosmic Christ*.

You are in him, and in him for ever. He has undertaken to uphold you, if you are a true believer. That doesn't mean that things happen automatically. It doesn't even mean that our faith shall not wobble a little bit. With the evil that still clings to me from time to time, I am so delighted to read that the great example of faith, Abraham himself, was rather wobbly in his faith at times. It encourages me to go on with God, because if Abraham had been a little bit more of a saint than he was I should give up in despair. That's crooked reasoning, but that's how I sometimes feel.

### Peter's faith

In the New Testament we have the example of one whose faith wobbled exceedingly, and I turn aside to mention it now because it is germane to the topic of the *continuance* of our faith.

In the Upper Room, a few hours before Gethsemane, our Lord had to warn Peter that Satan had demanded to have all twelve apostles, to sift them as wheat. Then our Lord added, 'but I have prayed for you [Peter] that your *faith* may not fail' (Luke 22:31–32). Our Lord's prayers were exceedingly precise. He did not pray that Peter's courage should not fail; his courage failed abysmally. He did not pray that his testimony should be kept intact; he blotted his copy book severely. He prayed that his faith should not fail. Then he added, 'And *when* [not *if*] you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.'

When the day came, Peter's courage and his testimony failed, but his faith held. True, he denied the Lord Jesus and used all the swear words he knew to make it sound convincing, but it was a lie and marked the genius, if I may reverently say so, of our blessed Lord. When Peter had denied the Lord three times and the cock crowed, then the Lord turned and looked at him (v. 61). In that moment Peter believed him more than he had ever done before. He had thought it was nonsense and exaggerated untruth; but when he denied the Lord and the cock crowed, he couldn't help himself. He remembered what the Lord had said, and had more confidence in him than ever before. Oh, the genius of our Lord in the needs of his people, making preparation in advance so that, after they fall, they should believe him even more. The one who prayed for Peter always lives to make intercession for us (see Heb 7:25).

### 3. The hope of glory

Now we must turn to the final reference to hope in this chapter (1:27), and we should notice the contrast here between what this paragraph will say and what the previous paragraph has said. We began by thinking in the early part of the chapter of *the hope laid up for us in the heavens*. Then we turned to thinking of *the hope of the gospel*. Now notice how hope is described, 'Christ in you, *the hope of glory*.'

#### Our presentation to God

How shall we define it? Paul says, 'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ' (v. 28). Notice the contrast in verse 22. It was the Father's will that *Christ* should present us without charge. Now, in this later verse, it is *Paul* who shall present everyone mature in Christ. When it comes to being presented before the Father without charge, it is Christ Jesus himself who shall present

us. But when it comes to presenting each one fully grown and mature, Paul says, 'For this I toil . . .' (v. 29).

Notice another difference. How and on what grounds will Christ be able to present us to the Father without charge, so that none shall be able to 'bring any charge against God's elect' (Rom 8:33)? The answer to that is, he shall do it on the grounds of his sufferings and death at the cross (v. 22). But on what basis shall we be presented fully grown and mature? Well, this time it is the sufferings of Christ joined together with the sufferings of Paul (v. 24).

So let's get this very clear. When it comes to presenting us without charge, it is Christ's sufferings alone: he is the sole and only redeemer of mankind. But when it comes to the process necessary for presenting us fully grown to the Father, then not only is it the sufferings of Christ, but it is the sufferings of Christ filled up by his apostle Paul and the long succession of worthy people who have followed since. The secret of our being presented without charge is the cross of Christ, but when it comes to being presented fully grown, the secret is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (v. 27).

Paul is not just repeating himself for want of knowing how to fill up the rest of his sermon; he's turning to some quite different side of our Christian hope. The hope now is not merely of being presented without charge, it is the hope of being presented fully grown and mature (v. 28). At once we have to ask ourselves a question. We shall all be presented holy and blameless and above reproach, and none shall be able to lay any charge against God's elect—but shall we all be presented mature, fully grown, perfect? What do you say?

I'm tempted in my simplicity to say, 'Of course, we shan't.' Take the dying thief: converted one minute, and within a few hours in paradise. Shall he be as mature and fully developed as the Apostle Paul? Without turning to God's word for a moment, my natural answer to that would be, 'How could it possibly be, unless life is a mockery?'

Take one dear lady who got converted when she was a girl of ten, and since that time she has taken the Lord seriously. All her life, as her physical, mental, and emotional powers developed, she has followed the Lord and tried to work utterly as for him. She has been constant in her prayers, diligent in her self-examination, in her repentance and confession to the Lord, and growing in the strength of her faith she has taken upon her the resources of the Lord. All have watched her with joy over the years, and now in her seventies, a venerable, mature and delightful Christian, she goes home to be with the Lord.

Take this other fellow. He wasted his time all his years until, when he was about 55, he found repentance and came to the Lord. Even then he didn't take the Lord very seriously. He was content with an odd snatch of a verse off a calendar. That's all his Bible reading consisted of. As for examining his soul, repenting of his sin, and seeking to lay hold of the grace of the Holy Spirit to make progress in his life, his friends would whisper in your ear, 'He's a good chap, but he's a rough diamond.' A rough diamond indeed, and he goes home to be with the Lord within five years of his conversion.

Do we really think that he will be equally as mature and spiritually developed as the godly sister? If that were so, it would begin to suggest that there's no pressing need of 'bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God' (2 Cor 7:1). So long as we're believers, the careless and the careful, the worldly and the godly will all end up the same.

‘Before you go any further,’ says somebody, ‘I’d have you know that holy Scripture tells us that, when we see the Lord Jesus, all of us shall be like him. “We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Thank God it’s true, we shall be like him. But I want to add, what there is of us. A baby is like his father, and still is when he’s a fully grown man of fifty. There is, to be sure, a difference between the two: the man has grown, and there’s more of him than there was of the baby.

I don’t need to rely upon my own conjecture for an answer to my question. In his second Epistle, Peter deals precisely with this particular question, and in more detail than Paul applies here. ‘His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness’ (2 Pet 1:3). But alongside that, we ourselves are to ‘make every effort to supplement [our] faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love’ (vv. 5–7). We are diligently and by considered effort to add these qualities to our life, to our character, to our personalities.

### **Why should we bother?**

In the first place, ‘For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (v. 8). And in the second place, ‘there will be *richly provided* for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ (v. 11). In that last sentence, the emphasis is upon the adverb. Peter doesn’t just say that entrance shall be provided for you, for entrance into the eternal kingdom is not dependent upon our spiritual progress. Let’s have chapter and verse (but read it in the best text) for what the conditions of entry are into that eternal kingdom: ‘Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates’ (Rev 22:14). Every blood-washed believer will enter the gates of the eternal kingdom on the ground of the redeeming blood of Christ.

### **Degrees of glory**

But Peter is not talking about that. He’s talking, not just of entry into the eternal kingdom, he’s talking of an entrance being ministered to us *richly*, abundantly. So next we must ask what the difference is between a plain, ordinary, common or garden entry, and an *abundant* entry.

There was a hymn that some people used to sing in my youth, ‘Some low place within his palace, some low seat beside the door,’ and it was meant to be an expression of great gratitude and humility before God that the person who sang it would be content with a draughty seat just inside the palace of the king. I have to tell you that there will not be any draughty seats anywhere. And secondly, while heaven is a place, heaven is more than a place; heaven is an experience. Entering into the eternal kingdom is not simply like entering a place, and that’s that. It is entering into the experience and enjoyment of the eternal kingdom. Therefore, it is understandably important that, whether our entry is an abundant one or not, it will depend upon the extent to which we have grown, the extent to which we have developed our characters. ‘Add these things to your character,’ says Peter, ‘and so an abundant entrance shall be ministered to you.’

We could take the simple analogy of a party. Among the guests there is an eleven-month-old in his high chair, a nine-year-old on the floor playing with electronic trains with his father, there's a sweet young lady of seventeen sitting on the sofa, and then there's mum and dad. All of them are at the party.

The eleven-month-old is enjoying the party to the full. He's got hold of a spoon, dipped it in the cream, and he's ladling it all over his head, down the chair, and on to the carpet. He's having a tremendous time, according to his life potentials. When it comes to five o'clock he goes to bed content. He's been at the party and enjoyed it to the full.

The nine-year-old on the carpet isn't emptying the cream over his head; of course not. He's playing with sophisticated electronic machines on the floor with his father. There were moments in the course of the afternoon that the eleven-month-old peered over the edge of his high chair and wondered what was going on down there, but it didn't look interesting. He didn't understand it, so he didn't join in, and didn't miss it. Why couldn't he understand it? That's because he hasn't grown, and he also doesn't know that he hasn't grown!

Then there is sweet seventeen, sitting on the sofa, talking to a rather elegant young gentleman. Her brother, the nine-year-old, keeps pleading with her to come and sit on the floor and play trains. It is a mystery to him how an otherwise intelligent human being could waste time sitting on a sofa, just talking, when she could be sitting on the floor playing trains. It isn't a mystery to her, but it is to him because he hasn't grown up enough, even to get a concept of what is going on. If you asked him, he would say he prefers to be on the floor.

Then there are mum and dad, and they understand everything. They remember the time, perhaps, when they were little infants at the party and the things that pleased them then. They've gone through all those stages, and now they have their own special joys that none of the children could as yet know at all.

You say, 'It's only a party.' What do you think the great eternal banquet will be? There is, says Peter, such a thing as a plain entrance, and there is an abundant entrance; it depends on whether we have grown. In one sense, all glory is perfect. But there are degrees of glory, and in that world, where they do not measure time by years, they measure size by maturity. The hope of glory is so real, and so much depends on being able to present everyone fully grown, that Paul tells us without boasting that he rejoices in his sufferings.

It's like you mothers. What sacrifices you make, what pains you go through; what *drudgery*, you might even call it. But you rejoice to see your eighteen-year-old carrying off the honours in his profession. You've seen him grow up from a baby, out of his nappies into his graduate's gown, and how it rejoices your heart.

### **'The afflictions of Christ'**

And so Paul says, 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (1:24).

How shall we understand the phrase, 'the afflictions of Christ' in this context? Paul means that which is yet to be suffered of the sufferings of Christ. It could be that Paul is talking about the *afflictions* of Christ simply in the sense that these are the sufferings that he (Paul) endures



for Christ. But I appeal to you who are the theologians, would it be wrong to think that Christ still suffers?

His atoning sufferings are finished once and for all, and for ever. Let there be no doubt upon the topic. He offered one sacrifice for sins, and he has sat down, never again to suffer the wrath of divine displeasure on account of our sin (see Heb 10:12). But then I read that, when his saints were being persecuted by that wretch Saul of Tarsus, the glorified Lord said out of heaven, 'Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?' (Acts 9:4). Am I to think that our Lord merely said that for the purposes of identification, but felt nothing of the suffering? Did he sit impassably upon the Father's throne, and say, 'Well, it doesn't hurt me, actually, but I don't like to see it done'? I think I would be inclined to read the verse written by the ancient prophet, 'In all their affliction [God himself] was afflicted' (Isa 63:9).

Even though he is in glory, when the blessed Lord Jesus sees me going astray, fooling around and wasting the potential of life that he has bought for me at the cost of his blood, dare I think that it doesn't concern him, and he is not grieved to his very heart? If God the Holy Spirit can be grieved by our obstinacy and lack of progress, our worldliness and uncleanness, is not the risen Lord grieved also? Even as we sit here tonight, the ascended Christ longs to present us fully grown.

So Paul says, 'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me' (vv. 28–29).

### **The wealth we have**

Let us see to it that we are not wasting our time on unimportant things, but making genuine progress towards spiritual maturity. This is the resource available to us, and it was given to Paul to expound the secret:

I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them 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. (vv. 25–27)

My brothers and sisters, I must allow myself the pleasure of joining our blessed Lord in congratulating you that you have seen it. Listen to our Lord, 'But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it' (Matt 13:16).

King David would have given his very throne to see what you see. Much as he loved the Lord, he dared not enter the holiest of all to sing God's praise, but stood outside. I should think he would have written another one hundred and fifty psalms had he known that we now have access into the holiest of all.

Sometimes we're not aware of the wealth that we have, we live in such a modern pampered age. We have such spiritual wealth that we take it as though it were a mere nothing. Solomon would have given his right arm to know it, and Moses as well. To know, not only a

God who is awesome in his holiness, a God dwelling in the literal temple, but to know the secret, *Christ in us*. They never saw it, and you can sit on the seat without a 'hallelujah' escaping your lips, but you're saying it privately, aren't you? — 'Thank the Lord, I see it: Christ is in me.' Calculate, if you can, the riches and the blessed hope of this potential for glory: Christ is already in you.

We started by thinking of *the hope laid up in heaven*, and proceeded to think of *the hope of the gospel*, which is Christ on the cross. We have come at last to *the hope of glory*, which is Christ actually in me.

I love that story in the Old Testament where Abraham sent the servant to fetch a bride for his son (Gen 24). He gave her all the costly garments, and the earrings, and what have you. When he got her to agree that she would be Isaac's bride, he didn't say, 'That's a marvellous decision you've made, here's my visiting card and my master's address, and if at any time you should happen to be in our area please call and I'm sure Isaac will be delighted to see you.' Of course, he didn't. He had the camels for her, and plodded with her, step by step by step, until he got her home, as God did in the wilderness with Israel. He 'tabernacled' with them across the hot, thirsty desert, until he got them at last to the promised land.

With infinite condescension, the blessed Lord of glory has come to make his tabernacle in our very hearts, and he walks with us day by day. He was with you as you got up this morning; he will be with you as you go to rest, pondering your day's progress; and with you, if you see the morning light, to continue walking life's journey, bringing you to maturity of glory.

Not only did Paul proclaim it publicly; you will notice the three times repeated 'everyone'. 'Him we proclaim, warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ' (1:28). 'I not only proclaim it from the pulpit to the public in general,' says Paul, 'I warn each person individually — every individual counts. It is my aim and duty to present every person perfect in Christ.'

And I, their diminutive follower, must do it with you. Not that I'm more advanced than you are, I lag behind you; but it is my task as a preacher to do it. It's not enough to have preached a lecture generally, I must ask each of you individually how your progress is getting on. Are you nearer glory today than you were yesterday and last week, and last year? As you do your spiritual stocktaking this Eastertime, can you bow in gratitude before God and say, 'I have stumbled many times; nerve and flesh seemed to fail me, but by God's grace I do believe I'm nearer the image of Christ now than I was before'? God help us that it may be so.

To that end, wouldn't it be worth striving with every fibre in our being to say with the Apostle Paul, 'For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me' (v. 29)?

So may God bless his word to our hearts, for his name's sake.

## The Cosmic Powers and You

We come tonight to the end of our short study of three sessions on the Epistle to the Colossians, and to introduce ourselves to the subject, let's read from chapter 2:1–3:4.

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. Therefore, 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. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

May God give us good understanding of his word.

When we broke off our previous study we were thinking together of *the hope of glory*, and learning again to distinguish two things in our minds that ought always to be kept separate. The one is the great time when our blessed Lord Jesus shall present every believer holy and blameless and above reproach before him (1:22). We emphasized that every genuine believer shall be presented on that occasion without charge before God, for 'who shall bring any charge against God's elect?' (Rom 8:33).

The second thing we emphasized was how important it is to distinguish between that and what Paul is talking about at the end of chapter 1: his desire to present everyone mature in Christ (v. 28). We reminded ourselves that, while Christ will present every believer before the Father without charge, it is impossible to think that every believer shall be presented mature and perfect. Alas, by the time we're called to heaven's glory, some of us will not be so fully grown as we might have been. So Paul began to talk to us about the tremendous and earnest struggle that he had in his day for every single believer he was aware of.

In chapter 2 he begins to talk to us in full earnest of this wonderful topic, the hope of glory: the hope of being presented mature, fully grown, and spiritually adult. That is to be our topic this evening. What is the pathway? What are the resources? By what *power* have we any hope of making progress to full Christian maturity?

### **The pathway to spiritual maturity**

The first thing we should notice is the earnestness with which Paul begins, and the way he is concerned in the opening verses to make sure that he buttresses and strengthens the confidence of every believer to whom he writes, and guards against the possibility of discouragement and cynicism setting in. 'For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged' (2:1-2). To know that the great Apostle Paul was striving for them would surely fire their hearts with courage and encouragement.

Even in reading his letter, and feeling the throb of his heart and his spiritual desire in his prayers, we too can take courage. He wrote it in white hot fervour for our souls, hoping that we too will be presented fully grown and spiritually adult. He wants us to be saved from any discouragement and cynicism, which tells us at the very beginning that the path to spiritual maturity is not necessarily going to be pleasant and joyful along every stretch of the road. There will be many times when we feel like shouting our hallelujahs of triumph for the progress we have made, but there will come other times when the chief difficulty we are called upon to face is the temptation to grievous discouragement, loss of nerve and abandonment of hope, with a feeling that we are fast getting nowhere at all, even if we are not going backwards.

My brothers and sisters, that is in the very nature of the course upon which we have been set by the Saviour himself. We shall not wake up one of these days and say to ourselves, 'I feel different this morning, sort of peculiar. Whatever has happened? Oh, I know what it is, I have become holy overnight.' You'll never wake up like that. There is no quick, sudden route to spiritual maturity, any more than in nature there is any quick, sudden route to having ripe potatoes or ripe bananas. Nature will take its course, and our spiritual life will take its course.

Moreover, if we are to be made holy, it will involve God bringing us into circumstances and experiences from time to time that reveal to us our hidden weaknesses and failings, so that we may face them and repent, and seek the Lord's grace to overcome them. We shall not normally get the victory over sin without knowing it; we shall have to be exposed to ourselves.

### **The road from Egypt to Canaan**

For our encouragement, God has given us a map of this road in the Old Testament, in the story of how he delivered Israel from Egypt and brought them to their great inheritance in Canaan. When they stood on the further bank of the Red Sea, they sang their praise to God. 'I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea' (Exod 15:1). What a wonderful experience it was, and such was the gratitude and wonder at their deliverance that they sang as if their hearts would break.

In those moments of spiritual elation, they talked not only of the fact that they had been delivered out of Egypt, but they talked as if their entry into the promised land would be in the next day or two. 'You have brought us out,' they said, 'and you shall bring us in' (see vv. 13, 17). It seemed to them as if tomorrow, almost, they would be at their goal.

I suspect all of us have known those times of spiritual elation. We have surveyed the wonders of God's grace, the tyrannies that he has broken in our lives, and our hearts have welled up and it seemed to us as though heaven were but an inch or two above our heads.

And then what happened? Well, two or three months down the road towards Canaan, it was a very different story, for they discovered to their alarm that *God wasn't what they thought he was*. They'd imagined that the road to Canaan would be one triumph after another, with marvels of God's supplies meeting them at every turn in the road. Instead they found that very often the water ran out, and sometimes the food was scarce. All kinds of doubts began to rise in their hearts about God himself. Was this God as wonderful as Moses had said? Was he as loving as initially they had thought? All kinds of murmurs began to arise in their hearts as they discovered that God was different from what they thought he was.

And then, in those circumstances, they made another discovery: *they were different from what they thought they were too*. They weren't the marvellously saintly people they had imagined they were. When circumstances came around, they too could murmur and complain, doubt the love of God, and rebel against his word.

Why did God do it? He explained later on to the Israelites why he had treated them so: 'And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not' (Deut 8:2).

You see, there's no other way to be holy. From time to time, as we can bear it, God has to make us face what is in our hearts, and we shall cry out with Paul, even in his converted days,

'I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing . . . Wretched man that I am!' (Rom 7:19, 24). We discover what God has known all the time, what exactly we are like. When the idealism of youth has died down and the realities of life begin to creep in, it can be an emotionally and spiritually shattering thing for a believer in mid-life to find that one is still dogged by weaknesses that have not been overcome; weaknesses that one never knew were there.

### **God has the answer to our problem**

Hence therefore, the wisdom of the Apostle Paul. As he begins this great chapter on the road towards spiritual maturity, the first thing he says to his fellow believers is, 'For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you . . . that [your] hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love' (2:1–2). Pray that you don't let yourself be discouraged by what you find; God has known about it all the way along, and he has the answer. Courage up, my brother, my sister, if you are honest with God, then, 'he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil 1:6).

Remember that God loves you, knowing the very worst about you. It is his love that allows you the difficulties in the road. When you discover the evil of your heart, it is not because God wants to shame you and expose you, it is his love that digs it out, so that you may be helped to repent of it and overcome it, and be freed from it. That is the situation.

### **The wealth we have in Christ**

Paul continues, 'I strive for you, so that you may "reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"' (vv. 2–3).

There are resources. They are, you notice, 'hidden'; but there are 'treasures', Paul calls them, 'of wisdom and knowledge.' They are hidden in Christ and they are God's answer to our problem. I love the metaphorical language. Paul doesn't say, 'In Christ there is a *rulebook*, and if you study the rules you will know how you ought to behave.' He says that, in Christ are hidden *all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*. It is exceedingly important psychologically and spiritually that God maintains in us a sense of the superabundant wealth that there is for us in Christ.

It is so easy for us to lose the sense of that divine wonder and wealth in Christ. Christianity can come down to merely a 'how-to' concern: how to do this and how to do that, like some of those practical books you can get from the supermarket. 'Do-It-Yourself' — merely a book of rules and regulations. If it becomes like that with us, we lose one of the great motivating sources of power in a Christian's life: the sense of the wonder of the wealth, even in the very words: 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'

If you discovered a casket of diamonds under your lawn, I think I can see you letting the diamonds drip through the fingers, for the sheer fun of putting your hand through the treasure.

God meant his book to be like that. How do you regard it? As a host of rules and regulations, like the income tax inspector's regulations that you read because you have to keep

on the right side of the law? Or do you really find it a veritable mine of treasure, and you love every five minutes you get to run your hands and the fingers of your mind through the incalculable treasure that there is in Christ?

If I seem to talk double-dutch, and you don't find holy Scripture and the Son of God like that, ask God's Spirit to enlighten you. You're losing the battle already, if Christ doesn't appear to you as a source of absolutely entrancing spiritual wealth that is there to be explored. There are resources, and there is power, and in the verses that follow Paul is going to talk to us of our blessed Lord Jesus who, being the head of all principality and power, is at our disposal in the road towards spiritual maturity. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him.

You say, 'But Colossians is such *heavy stuff*. Let's be practical.'

#### *An illustration*

Very good. Suppose you had been moved by the plight of some remote primitive country, where the people had to walk miles and miles to the relief store of food that had come in, and carry the sacks of corn home on their backs. And you said to yourself, 'What they need is a lorry'—or maybe you call it a truck in this beautiful country.

So the proud day came when the plane touched down, opened its great nose, and you let the lorry glide down the ramp before the astonished eyes of the chief.

'There you are,' you say. 'I want to give it to you and your people to make life easy for you to be able to get the supplies of corn you need. Here are the keys. God bless you.' And you hop on your plane and go back.

Five years later you return to see how they're getting on. To your surprise, you can't see the lorry anywhere. You get around to asking, 'How did you find the lorry?' and you're met with glum faces.

'We put it round the corner there,' and you notice that the thing is dilapidated and overgrown with weeds.

'Aren't you using it?'

'To be honest, we found it a bit of a burden. It was bad enough carrying the corn on our backs, but when we loaded it and had to push the lorry, it was too 'heavy going'.

'What do you mean, you had to push the lorry?' you ask.

'To get it home, when the corn was loaded.'

'But you don't have to push a lorry,' you say. 'It's got an engine in it.'

'What do you mean by an engine?'

So you lift the bonnet, and say, 'That's an engine.'

'That's the heavy stuff, and we were going to cut it out to make it lighter for us to push.'

You say, 'But that's nonsense, my dear good folks. What you call that heavy stuff is the actual engine. If you knew how to turn it on, it would pulsate with power and pull the load for you.'

What you call the 'heavy stuff' about the blessed Lord, the head of principalities and powers, is the engine, the powerhouse. God's provision for us, if only we could understand it, is the power available to lead us to spiritual maturity. But then we must be aware of another danger.

If it is in our hearts to become spiritually mature, the devil will not leave us alone for long. If he can't make us worldly and turn us aside by that means, he will try the opposite tactic and lead us astray by our very desire to be holy.

He tried that with the Lord Jesus in the desert. In the first temptation, he said, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread' (Matt 4:3). Our Lord didn't deny that he was the Son of God; he was the Son of God. He didn't deny that he had the power; he had the power to make the stones bread. But he declined to use it, and said instead, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' His was to be a life of complete dependence on his Father, and when the devil saw he couldn't win that way around, and tip our Lord over into worldliness and the desires of the flesh, he tried the opposite tactic. If I may paraphrase him, he said, 'I recognize that you are a very holy man, and it's marvellous that you have set yourself to a life of dependence upon God. Why not take another step in dependence upon him?' So he brought him up to the temple pinnacle and said, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Show your dependence upon God and step out in faith.'

Many a Christian may well have been tempted to do it, supposing that it was a way of demonstrating dependence upon God. But our blessed Lord saw through the hellish sophistication of the deceit. Instead of being a step of faith, it would have been a question of tempting the Lord. The first question to be asked should have been, 'Has God told me to cast myself off the temple, because, if he hasn't, why should I do it? I mustn't take a step that would involve God coming after me to carry me in a way that he didn't intend for me in the first place.'

And so it is with us, isn't it? If Satan cannot lead us astray by worldliness, then he will attempt it by our very desire to be holy. Often he will hold out in front of us all kinds of recipes for deepening the spiritual life, which seem to be good, but are bogus.

### **True and false wisdom**

That is one of the burdens of chapter two. Paul is warning his fellow believers against bogus recipes for the deepening of the spiritual life. That is why the word *wisdom* begins to reoccur.

[Christ] 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (v. 3). *True wisdom*.

'See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy' (v. 8). (Philosophy is the Greek word for love of wisdom.) *False wisdom*.

'These have indeed an appearance of wisdom' (v. 23). *False wisdom*.

Wisdom could have many descriptions, but an important one is this. Wisdom is shown by choosing the proper *means* to attain your desired goal. A carpenter wants to cut a piece of timber and his wisdom will be shown in the tools he uses. It's no good taking a knife and fork to cut a piece of timber, is it? That would be foolish. He'd have a stab at it, but how could he possibly succeed? True wisdom and skill will be found in choosing the proper tools, the proper means to attain the end he desires. We want to attain spiritual maturity, spiritual adulthood, full Christian growth, full development of our spiritual potential. Therefore, we need wisdom to use the proper tools and resources, and not be deceived by false recipes.



Look at the four false recipes Paul talks of here.

1. 'See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy' (v. 8).
2. 'Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath' (v. 16).
3. 'Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions' (v. 18).
4. 'These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body' (v. 23).

Four false recipes that we shall briefly consider. At first they seem perhaps a little strange and remote, but I trust when we've finished we shall see how they are relevant to us in our modern age. As we consider them, we shall have to be careful lest we put a wrong emphasis on what Paul is saying.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. (vv. 8-9)

Can you see the distinction he's making, and the contrast? The traditions of men on the one side; the fullness of deity on the other. This is the contrast that we have to consider. Man's idea/God's idea; weak and puny human thought/the fullness of deity.

### **The love of wisdom**

Here we must be careful. I have known situations when God's people have given the impression that you don't need ordinary education to be a spiritual Christian—education is a bad thing, and the more ignorant you are the more spiritual you're likely to be. I must tell you, my brothers and sisters, that that is quite false. We are to love the Lord our God with all the thinking powers we possess. If ordinary, straightforward philosophy keeps to its proper field, it is a very good, useful, and healthy thing. It is *bogus* philosophy that Paul is hitting out against.

*Philosophy*, at least in Europe, began with the Greeks, and all of us are highly indebted to them for their philosophical thinking. They began to ask questions about what the world is made of, and thus were delivered from a lot of stupid idolatry. Whereas people thought the moon was a goddess, the Greeks saw it as simply a lump of rock. In the fourth century BC, if not earlier, they discovered through their natural philosophy that the world is made up of atoms. Today we are grateful for their discovery. It has been much refined since, but everyone who has to go into hospital and receive radium treatment should thank God for the Greeks, and we thank God for every educational facility to learn science still.

The Greeks were not content simply to ask questions about science; they asked questions about life. What is life for? What is man's chief goal in life? They called it, to use a Latin phrase, a *summum bonum*. They said to themselves, 'What is life's chief goal that we ought to be aiming at? Whatever it is, it must be an end in itself, and not simply a means to some other end.'

Let me use an illustration to show what they meant, and talk to Mr. Jones.

‘Why do you go to work, Mr Jones?’

‘I have to get food to eat.’

‘And why do you need food to eat?’

‘Isn’t it obvious? I need food to become strong.’

‘And why do you need to become strong?’

‘So that I can go to work, of course.’

‘So you go to work to get the food to eat, so that you can be strong to go to work to get the food to eat . . . Wait a minute, aren’t we going round in circles?’

So Mr Jones revises his idea.

‘There are other things,’ he says. ‘I go to work to get money because I’ve got half a dozen children and I want to give them a good education.’

‘Why do your children need to get a good education?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ says an exasperated Mr. Jones, ‘so they can get a good job.’

‘Why would they want a good job?’

‘So they can earn a lot of money and in due time give their children a good education.’

‘What for?’

‘So they can earn money to . . .’

We’re going round in circles again, aren’t we?

Things that seem to be a goal turn out merely to lead to some other project, and that project to another one. The Greeks saw that early, and they said that life’s chief aim can’t be just to go round in circles. There has to be a goal that is not simply a means to something else. So they asked the questions and came up with all kinds of answers. You may pity them, of course, because you know what the answer is, but I can’t find it in my heart to despise them for asking the questions. Can you?

It was my duty at one stage to teach these things to university students. Among them were some young believers, so I thought I would give them a chance to witness for the Lord. I explained that a *summum bonum* is the objective, the chief end in life, and not a means to something else. And then I said to the students, ‘Has anybody got a *summum bonum*? Would you like to tell me what your chief goal in life is?’

I was hoping for some of the Christian students to say, ‘The chief end of man is to glorify God, and enjoy him for ever. That’s why we are at university; not simply to get a good job and money, and a good house. We’re here as a sacred duty to our Creator so that we may improve ourselves and strive towards the great objective of serving God, seeking his glory, and enjoying him for ever.’ I suppose nobody had talked to these young believers like that before. They kept their silence, and the opportunity went by.

We must be careful not to criticize the ancient philosophers, when sometimes we Christians haven’t got our objective clearly in our minds either. We can get carried away and make the main objective of life simply a career and money, cars and houses, and lose the great objective: ‘Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ’ (Col 3:23–24).

The Greek philosophers were not only concerned with what is life's goal, they were very much concerned with how to behave uprightly and ethically. Listen to the Latin philosophers, for instance, posing practical questions. 'If you were trying to sell your house and people came to view it, do you have a moral duty to point out things that are not as they should be? The foundation is sinking a bit, or there's damp rising up that wall, or sometimes if the wind is wrong you get polluted by the smoke of some factory. Or should you keep quiet and hope the buyer doesn't notice, pays you a good price, only to find later that he's bought a dud?'

What should a Christian do? The ancient Greeks and Romans would have said that, to be honest and honourable, the seller of the house ought to point out the defects and be absolutely honest with the buyer. I have to tell you, my brothers and sisters, I've known some Christians who are not honest in business. We need to be careful before we decry education, philosophy and thinking. In the sense of the pursuit of thinking, and how to think logically, philosophy is a very useful tool. It doesn't have the answers, but it can point us sometimes to asking the right questions. The answer is in Christ, of course, and it is through Christ that we must look for those answers.

## 1. False philosophy

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy. (v. 8)

But the philosophy that Paul is talking about here in verse 8 isn't the ordinary and original straight Greek philosophy. This philosophy was a later development, full of stupid speculation. As they looked at this imperfect world, there were people who said, 'This world cannot be the creation of a perfect God.' Therefore, they speculated that it wasn't God who made the world; there must be lesser gods and down the chain of these lesser gods there was one or more who created this imperfect world, and some of them were fallen deities.

So they constructed a whole scheme of philosophy and said that they could tell all about these hierarchies of principalities, powers, mights, and dominions who were responsible for the world. You have to court their favour and be careful not to offend them or else they could do you harm. It's the kind of thing you would expect to find in certain forms of Hinduism, and the New Age movement.

### **'And you'—empty, now filled**

It was that bogus philosophy that Paul was talking about here, 'See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit.' The resource open to you is the blessed Lord Jesus Christ. 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, *and you* have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority' (vv. 9–10). He is the head of all rule and authority, and you need no other (see v. 9). Come to the highest source, not to some esoteric philosophy, yoga or New Age and all that kind of thing. Don't become excessively interested in demonic powers, 'cultivating the spirit power within you', and all that kind of false philosophy, but cultivate Christ.

Paul put it this way: 'Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him' (v. 6). You received Christ the Lord to start with, now walk in him. You don't need to go outside him. The way forward is the way back to Christ. Christ is enough.

### **'And you'—dead, now made alive**

As he comes to the end of that paragraph, Paul describes our spiritual condition in two ways.

#### *1. We were uncircumcised*

'And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive' (v. 13). 'The body of the flesh,' he calls it (v. 11), our fallen human nature.

We shall have to find an answer to this, if we are to become spiritually mature. What is the secret of the putting off of the body of the flesh, the secret of overcoming? God could have said, 'You are corrupt, fallen creatures, and the best thing to do, to get rid of the body of the flesh, is to destroy it.' But that would have been a puzzle for us, because if God had destroyed our fallen human nature, he would have destroyed us and that would have been the end of us.

The problem that confronted God was how to get rid of that fallen thing, 'the body of the flesh', and yet save us as human personalities. He provided the man, Jesus Christ our Lord, Son of God and Son of Man, and the wonder of the Lord Jesus is that he is such a person as we can be put 'into him'. Nothing less than that is the secret of our overcoming. And what happened in conversion was a marvellous thing. God calls it 'the circumcision of Christ' (v. 11). Let me try to explain it, difficult though it is to conceive of it.

Suppose you pass away, and they put you in your coffin into the ground. When the Lord comes and you rise to meet him, will you have that old, fallen nature that has dogged you all your years?

You say, 'No, of course not. When the Lord comes, I shall rise to meet him and I shall be free from it at last.'

How will you have got rid of it? Did the worms in the grave eat it, or something? No, it wasn't the worms, because when the unregenerate rise and stand before the great white throne, they shall still be as unregenerate as they always were, and that will be hell in part. They'll still be the proud, lustful, lying, self-centred egoists that they always were; that is the horror of sin (see Rev 22:11).

What was it that set you free? It was when you came to agree with God that you were so corrupt that nothing could be done to improve you. The only thing that God could do was to pronounce and carry out the sentence of death on you. And you said—for this is what repentance is—'Yes, Lord, that is right, and if I lived until I was ninety-nine I should still be a sinner. I might as well face it now. There's no hope, I deserve to be executed, dead, and buried.'

When you agreed to that, God said, 'Will you put your hope solely in my Son, and rely for your spiritual life solely on him?' You said yes, didn't you? And in those moments, the roots of your personality were cut and transferred to Christ. Listen to the apostle explain it elsewhere. 'You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you' (Rom 8:9). The great transfer was made.

Rejoice in the wonder of it, and if it has not dawned on us—it hasn't dawned on any of us as it should—may God help us to see it now. If you are a true believer, you were buried with Christ. When God's sentence upon us was carried out and Christ died, you died with him. You were buried with him; and now, thank God, already you are raised with Christ. You're in Christ, in the blessed Son of God himself. The roots of your personality are in Christ.

The tree of your personality might not have grown as it should have. Its leaves may be scanty and its fruit not what fruit should be, but 'you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit.' You are 'in Christ'. That is not vain imagination; it is as literal as your very heartbeat. 'In Christ'—what a lovely phrase it is, all through the pages of the New Testament. All the limitless resource of his life is for you; like a branch taken and grafted into a completely different root and now bears its fruit, so you are in Christ.

That is why no principality, power, might or dominion could possibly have helped you. You can't be joined like that to an angel. No angel can share his life with you. You can't be in Michael or in Gabriel. The wisdom of God's scheme is that his Son has become human, and you can be in Christ. If it is true that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ, then how blessed you are. This is your 'hope of glory'.

## *2. We were dead*

But there's more. From another point of view, you are not only 'uncircumcised', troubled with 'the body of the flesh', as Paul calls it; you were *dead* (v. 13). Not literally dead, but as good as, because arrayed against you were the commandments of God's holy law, 'the handwriting of ordinances that was against us' (v. 14 KJV). There they stood; it was public knowledge in heaven, earth and hell that you have broken those laws, and the law said that you must die. You were as good as dead; almost as if you'd been consigned to the eternal burnings.

What could any angel do there? Indeed, Paul boldly tells us that principalities and powers gathered around his cross, waiting for what he would do. I fancy they said to themselves, 'Now watch. If God is going to forgive those sinners, say their sin doesn't matter, and agree to forget it, what about his character? What about his throne? He threw us out of heaven, and now he says their sin doesn't matter and he's going to take them to heaven.'

They gathered around the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord, thinking it was the last step in their victory. But God raised him from the dead and you with him. Every spirit opposition was silenced eternally, not by destroying them but by the great answer of the cross of Christ.

What a magnificent salvation it is. No angel could have done it for you. He hung there, solitary, and he triumphed because he is God's incarnate Son. Then let us take heed to the message: 'Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him' (Col 2:6). He is your only hope, your only Saviour—find everything for your sanctification in him.

## **Does our shortcoming matter as believers?**

In the school to which I went, some of us were subjected to the rigours of Chemistry. I escaped them after one year—very wisely, in the view of the headmaster. Before we were allowed into the Chemistry laboratory our parents had to pay a deposit, in case, in our ardour to learn, we blew the whole laboratory up. They had to be prepared to pay the expenses for our education in advance.

My brothers and sisters, God has paid the expenses of your spiritual education in advance. It doesn't mean you're free to go out and sin, of course not. But I want to tell you tonight that God has paid in advance for the mistakes and shortcomings that would depress you and stop you from coming back to the Lord and beginning again. If you are a true believer, you can repent and come back to the Lord. You needn't sit there cynically and say it's no use and it doesn't work. You can come back to the Lord, all can be forgiven, and you may start again.

This is the glory of the gospel, and only that will do. Not philosophy, which is a mere tradition of men. What we want is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily in human form, so that we can be united with him.

We may deal with the other three far more quickly, and time says that we must.

## 2. Religious observances

Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. (v. 16)

Once more we have to be careful, for there are dear believers who have a genuine conscience about the Sabbath. They're quite clear in their minds that we don't earn salvation by keeping the Sabbath, but they do honestly feel that, if we are believers, we shall fulfil the law, and they feel that the law tells us that we must keep the Sabbath. We must respect their conscience, and not get it into our heads that we are such liberated people that we can tramp over other people's consciences.

In certain parts of Scotland there are Christians who have this conscience, and also unconverted people, and if they saw you driving your car on a Sunday they would think you were deliberately breaking the law of God. They wouldn't listen to you preaching the gospel, even if you attempted it. You might as well rob a supermarket on the Saturday and try to preach the gospel on a Sunday; they wouldn't listen to you. For their conscience' sake, you would have to respect it, wouldn't you?

But that said, we must make sure that we don't content ourselves with mere religious observances and miss the reality. 'These are but shadows,' says Paul, 'the reality, the body, is Christ.' How easily we can content ourselves with mere religious observance, instead of going for the reality. Many a man and woman celebrates Christmas, who doesn't know the great Saviour who was born. Many a man and woman will celebrate Easter this year, and they haven't the reality in their hearts. The very celebration of the religious day then serves to deaden their sense of need for the reality.

## 3. Visions

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions. (v. 18)

'Beware of visions,' says Paul. Beware of these people who promise you that they can give you the technique for developing visions. In some circles nowadays, visions have become very popular, and people have all sorts of visions. 'I see a vision,' they say. Beware of it!

That is not to say that God's people never have visions. Paul had visions. Though he didn't talk much about them, he did have genuine visions. But these visions he's talking about now are visions seen by Jews particularly. A certain section of Jews said that they could teach you how to have these visions. They called it the *Merkabah mysticism*. Just like Ezekiel saw a vision of the throne of God, they said you could too, if you learn their techniques. They could show you the techniques of body manipulation, mind manipulation, yoga breathing, and all such methods, so that you could have an out-of-body experience, rise up through the principalities and powers, and come to the very throne of God. They said, however, that if you weren't careful the principalities and powers could injure you, particularly on the way back down into the body, so you had to go by their techniques.

The Eastern world is still full of it, and some forms of Shamanism are coming into so-called Christianity. The cult of seeking visions is a most unhealthy cult indeed.

Paul says that the person who is seeking visions by those techniques is 'puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind' (v. 18). There are things going on in his head, but that's not the criterion as to the value of the thing. The criterion is what's going on in the mind of him who is the Head. This person is going in for visions, but he is not holding fast to the Head, which is Jesus Christ (v. 19). My dear brothers and sisters, seek the Lord, don't seek ecstatic visions. Let him talk to you through his word and show you the resource that is in him.

#### 4. Asceticism

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body. (v. 23)

In the ancient world a lot of people were admired when they began to treat their bodies in a very stern way: starve them, beat them, and develop all sorts of psychological methods of controlling themselves. Alas, that kind of thing came into Christendom. Hence, the habit of using whips on the naked back in many a monastery and convent, and all sorts of penances. In the part of the world where I come from, they'll climb a three-thousand-foot mountain in their bare feet, thinking somehow to cleanse their souls by the pain of their bodies. It's false.

That is not to say we are to be undisciplined. 'I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified,' said Paul (1 Cor 9:27). We have to learn godly self-control of our bodies, but godly self-control of the body is one thing, injuring the body and inflicting pain is another, and it's bogus, says Paul. It can be very impressive to see a man lying on concrete all night, walking on his bare feet and fasting for fifty days, climbing great mountains in his bare feet, and all that kind of thing. It looks impressive, but according to Paul it is no use. In fact, all it does is pander to the man's own fleshly sense of achievement. What is the answer, then? Not in inflicting the body. It is to be in touch with the creator of the body.

Suppose your car breaks down on the road and I come along to help you, dressed up in my uniform. I look at the car, and say, 'I know what a car like this deserves, for I am an expert in these matters. You want to kick it hard,' and I proceed to kick it. When it doesn't go, I say, 'I'll teach it a lesson, I'll put some sand in the cylinder head.'

And you say, 'That's a lunatic thing to say.'

One thing will be very clear. I wasn't the creator of the car.

There are people who will tell you that you can cure your soul by afflicting your body. By that very advice, they show that they're out of touch with the creator of the body. He'll never ruin your body in that sense, of course not. And it wouldn't do any good anyway.

You are dead with Christ; you are risen with Christ. And the secret is constantly to remember the glorious fact that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). So here is Paul's final advice. 'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (3:1-4).

We are to set not merely our affections—that can be difficult—we are to set our minds. We are to control our thinking, and as our thoughts wander we're constantly to bring them back and focus them on the blessed Lord Jesus, for he is our 'life' (v. 4). Do remember, my brothers and sisters, you have no life without Christ.

It is a false idea to imagine that God has given to us eternal life, in the sense that he's put it in a little brown paper parcel and handed it to us. We may take the parcel and we've got eternal life, but we don't have to keep in contact with Christ. We can go our way and forget him, days without number. That is false. None of us has eternal life except in Christ.

Therefore, let us heed the exhortation: if you are risen with Christ, and joined to Christ, the secret of coming to spiritual maturity is constantly to set your thoughts on Christ. Let him manifest himself to us in all his great reality and in his saving power.

The Lord bless our study of his word to that end, for his name's sake.



## Appendix

### *The Structure of Colossians*

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1.	2.	3.
<p><b>a. 1:1–8</b> THE HOPE LAID UP FOR YOU IN HEAVEN — and its effectiveness (1:5)</p>	<p><b>a. 2:1–5</b> ALL TREASURES OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE HIDDEN IN HIM — and their sufficiency (2:3)</p>	<p><b>a. 3:1–4</b> YOUR LIFE HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD — its source and location (3:3)</p>
<p><b>b. 1:9–23</b></p> <p>(1) <b>CHRIST: FIRST AND SUPREME</b>, image of God, firstborn of creation, creator of principalities and powers and of all things; firstborn from dead, head of church, all fullness in him, reconciler of all.</p> <p>(2) <b>BELIEVERS:</b> Past: alienated/enemies Now: reconciled (1:21) Made sufficient (1:12)</p>	<p><b>b. 2:6–15</b></p> <p>(1) <b>CHRIST: SUFFICIENT AND TRIUMPHANT</b>, all fullness in him, head of principality and power; the circumcision, death, burial, resurrection, victory and triumph of Christ.</p> <p>(2) <b>BELIEVERS:</b> Past: dead Now: made alive (2:13) Made full (2:10)</p>	<p><b>b. 3:5–4:1</b></p> <p>(1) <b>CHRIST: ALL AND IN ALL</b>, the Lord, the master in heaven (3:11).</p> <p>(2) <b>BELIEVERS:</b> Past: old man, old life-style Now: new man, new life-style Being made new again (3:10)</p>
<p><b>c. 1:24–29</b> PAULS' SUFFERINGS/STRIVING</p> <p>(1) to make known the mystery (1:26–27)</p> <p>(2) to present everyone perfect in Christ (1:28)</p>	<p><b>c. 2:16–23</b> THE STRIVINGS OF THE RELIGIONISTS, MYSTICS AND ASCETICS</p>	<p><b>c. 4:2–18</b> THE STRIVINGS OF PAUL AND FELLOW-WORKERS</p> <p>(1) to speak the mystery of Christ (4:3)</p> <p>(2) that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God (4:12)</p>

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## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy.** He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.