

Colossians – An Exhortation for Unity in Love

The New Testament portion of our daily reading plan (The Bible Companion) brings us to consider the Epistle penned by the Spirit through Paul to the ecclesia at Colosse. This Epistle covers many aspects of the believer's walk through life, weaving many themes together to produce a delightful tapestry of colour and beauty designed to provoke and exhort believers to a faithful servitude for Christ. As we come to prepare our minds for the partaking of the emblems of bread and wine, it seems appropriate to select the main theme of each chapter by way of exhortation and comfort in a day of evil.

CHAPTER 1 - SEPARATION FROM THE WORLD

The First Chapter alludes to the events that came upon Israel at the time of their deliverance from Egypt. Israel left Egypt in the darkness of night, following the angelic slaying of the Egyptian Firstborn. In a similar way, it is said that we are delivered from the darkness of a Gentile night, by the slaying of Yahweh's Firstborn. So Colossians chapter 1 speaks of our Father:

“Who hath *delivered us from the power of darkness*, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through this blood ... He is the head of the body, the ecclesia: who is the beginning, *the firstborn* from the dead ...” (Col. 1:13,18).

Notice the difference however, the Firstborn of Egypt were slain as Yahweh's judgment against the power of Sin – they died, and shall not rise again. But Messiah is Yahweh's Firstborn, being the first to rise from the dead into glorious incorruptibility. With Christ being the firstborn from the dead, we can have great hope and comfort, for it is written concerning the Resurrection: “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: *Christ the firstfruits*; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming” (1 Cor. 15:22-23).

There is a powerful exhortation provided when we consider these things. Elsewhere, Israel's departure from Egypt is again compared with our deliverance from the world:

“Moreover brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea: and were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea ... *now all these things happened unto them for ensamples*: and they are written for our admonition ...” (1 Cor. 10:1-2, 11)

Here is the exhortation: Our separateness from the world must match Israel's separateness from Egypt. As they gathered on the shores of the sea there seemed to be no escape, humanly speaking. They were being pursued by death – the Egyptian army – there was no going back. They had to trust in Yahweh's ability to deliver them – and it was so. Under Divine command, by the lifting up of Moses' rod, the sea departed on either side, enabling the people to go forward, through the waters into a new life that lay ahead of them in the land of promise. Even so, we descendants of Adam, a dying sinner, are pursued by death and mortal weakness all the days of our lives. But a way of salvation has been provided, through the lifting up of Messiah upon the cross, and through the waters of baptism into His Saving Name (cp. Romans 6). Once we recognise that the only way of salvation is to pass through those waters, we also realise that there is no going back – there is nothing but death behind - but deliverance lies ahead. It is this knowledge that enables us to endure the difficulties of our wilderness journey. Again alluding to Israel's deliverance, we read:

“There is no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Israel had no way to avoid certain death – but with their trial, there came deliverance, albeit in a most unexpected way. So they passed through the waters, “which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned” (Heb. 11:29). Leaving death behind them in the destruction of those who had the power of death, they were to walk forward to take up their inheritance – yet how tragic it was that the word preached concerning their inheritance “was not mixed with faith in them that heard it” (Heb. 3:2). But what of us? Do we walk, however faltering, through the wilderness of life, along the narrow Way to take up our inheritance – or will we grow faint and faithless on our journey? The choice is ours.

CHAPTER 2 – THE COMPLETENESS OF THE UNITED BODY OF CHRIST

One of the themes that we noticed in Chapter 1, is that of the Body of Christ, and how individual members might become part of it. So we read: “***He is the head of the Body, the ecclesia:*** who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell” (Col. 1:18-19). Chapter 2 takes up this theme of “fullness” dwelling in Messiah, emphasizing the completeness of his united body: “in him (that is, Christ) dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power” (v 9). The fullness, or completeness of God dwells in Christ, who is “the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person” (Heb 1:3) and we, being baptized into him (v 12) ought also to be complete in him. Nothing else needs to be added, for any deficiency (and there are many) in the constituent members thereof are forgiven, because of the perfection of their Master with whom they are at one, being “knit together in love” (v 2), in a mutual acceptance of the Gospel of Truth.

But there were those who sought to impose the ordinances of the Law to the Gospel. These Judaizers comprised the Apostasy in Paul’s day, and sought to add to the Gospel, by imposing a burden which neither they, nor previous generations could not bear (Acts 15:10). So it was, that as the apostle exhorted the Galatians, the believers were to “stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal 5:1).

In these things, there is a need to recognise that there is a “fullness” in Christ, and his sacrifice for our sins. There is no need for anything to be added to it, for it to become efficacious. In our days, we don’t have Judaizers in just the same way, but their spirit of wanting to add something to make Christ’s sacrifice efficacious is present. For instance, there are those who insist on having unleavened bread, in order for our memorial meeting together to be acceptable – and there are those who insist on using leavened bread. But “meat commendeth us not to God” (1 Cor. 8:8), and the real danger of both positions is not to do with literal bread and how it is made – it is rather the notion that the saving extent and nature of Christ’s sacrifice is limited according to what bread is used.

Again, there are those who believe it is necessary to have a direct bestowal of the Holy Spirit in order to be saved. The same problem remains: not only is it encouraging folk to have a false hope in something the Father does not provide in this dispensation, it limits the Sacrifice of Christ, by saying that something else (i.e. the Holy Spirit) is needed in addition to it. But the true situation is that we are “complete” in Christ, meaning that nothing else is needed to be saved, aside from our faith and obedient trust in him.

The means by which the Ecclesial body is held together, is said to be the unifying power of love:

“... that their hearts might be comforted, ***being knit together in love ...***” (Col. 2:2).

The allusion here, is to the circumstances of David and Jonathan, described in 1 Samuel chapter 18:

“and it came to pass, when he [i.e. David] had made an end of speaking to Saul, that the soul of Jonathan *was knit with the soul of David*, and Jonathan *loved him as his own soul* (1 Sam. 18:1). When we consider the intimate relationship between these two men of faith, we behold a love that was “wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Sam. 1:13). There are those who would degrade that wonderful love into a carnal relationship – but quite plainly such do not know the sweet love and fellowship that exists amongst Christ’s brethren, who are of like precious faith.

The Unity of the Truth Holders is the greatest defence for the household of faith. Our Lord taught that “every city or house divided against itself shall not stand” (Mat 12:25), and similarly, his Apostle exhorted: “if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal 5:15). We truly live in “perilous times” (2Tim 3:1), and there is no time for there to be “wars and fightings” (Jas 4:1) amongst the members of Christ’s Ecclesia. Rather than to contend against one another, the body ought to be one “*in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God*, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). The various members thereof ought to “exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any ... be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” (Heb 3:13), rather than to devour one another through petty squabbles emanating from those who seek to exalt themselves above measure. To be united in a “full assurance” of the revealed things of Truth is just as needful in our day, as ever before that the faith may be earnestly contended for (Jude 3) in the face of false brethren who would seek to beguile us by the enticing words of the world’s philosophy.

CHAPTER 3 – LIVING THE TRUTH

Colossians chapter 3 begins by describing the aspirations and affections of the disciple of Christ:

“If ye then be risen with Christ, *seek those things which are above*, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God. Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth ...” (Col. 3:1-2).

The principle is amply demonstrated in the words of the Proverb: “the way of life *is above to the wise*, that he may depart from hell beneath” (Prov. 15:24). Interestingly, the same point is made to Israel concerning their lack of obedience to Yahweh’s ways: “... for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith Yahweh. For *as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts*” (Isa. 55:8-9).

This passage from Isaiah is often misapplied to show that God’s ways are different from “our” ways. However, the context is to do with faithless Israel (see verse 7), not those who are sanctified with the blood of the Lamb. For us, as disciples of Christ, we ought to know better than Israel of old. For them, the ways of the Almighty were so high above their frame of thought that they could not perceive the message of the prophets. But we, however, recognising that Yahweh is High and Mighty, and His Ways high above the natural man, ought to “seek those things which are above” – that is, to make God’s ways our ways. To try to conform to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), who was “the express image of his [i.e. God’s] person” (Heb. 1:3).

Rather than to manifest the grovelling spirit of the natural man which, as that of the beasts of the field declines to earthly things, the spirit of the renewed man "goeth upward" (Eccl 3:21), focalising upon the place of favour and blessing - the Father's right hand, where our Lord is positioned. And in this, we have the example of our Lord before us, who always kept the things pertaining to His Father's Kingdom and Righteousness to the forefront of his mind, always seeking the will of His Father dwelling in the Heaven above: "I have set Yahweh always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved ... My flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (Ps 16:8-11). In these words, the Spirit of Christ speaks prophetically of the meditations of our Lord Jesus, faced with the agony of Crucifixion. Elsewhere it is testified that he, "for the joy that was set before him endured the

cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2). And this Psalm enlightens us as to what that "joy" was which was set before the Lord. "I have set Yahweh always before me", and positioned at His Right hand, the future seat of power upon which he would set, the Lord saw joy and pleasures: "in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore". So it was, that by continual meditation and reflection upon such a joyous vision of Glory - even His Father's Glory, our Lord was strengthened to overcome, enduring the shame of crucifixion that he might ultimately obtain that place of joy himself.

And even so it is with us. For the death of Christ was not the death of one individual - but that of all who are aligned with it in Baptism: "if one died for all, *then were all dead*" (2Cor 5:14). In our baptisms, we died with Christ. And for us, as with our Lord, crucifying the flesh is not a single event at the time of our immersion; but a daily struggle as we seek to "die daily" (1Cor 15:31). So the exhortation was given to the Colossians, that in seeking heavenly things - the "pleasures" at the Father's right hand - they must crucify earthly things: "mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and covetousness which is idolatry" (Col 3:5). As we died in Christ therefore, we must put to death earthly things, and do as he did, focus instead on the Joyous Vision of the Divine Presence, and all that it speaks of. For if we are dead with him, then are we also risen with him (Rom 6:5), and our life is bound up in him: "for ye are dead, and your *life is hid with Christ* in God". There is no earthly thing which appears in the presence of the Father - only things of the Spirit. And as our lives are "with Christ in God", who is the fountain-head of all life, then we ought to have no earthly thing dwelling in us. Only things of the Spirit. How hard that is to maintain, but how necessary to try!

CHAPTER 4 – SPEAKING THE TRUTH

We have seen that the central exhortation of this Epistle is, as expressed in the words of Paul's prayer for the believers:

"that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of they mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ" (Col 1:2).

Being united together in a "full assurance of understanding", true brethren in Christ experience a joyous fellowship which greatly surpasses any friendship the world can offer. For the unity of the believers ought to mirror in measure, that perfect unity subsisting between the Father and Son. Thus the Lord prayed: "keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are ... neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, *that they also may be one in us* ... and the glory which thou hast given me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one" (Jno 17:11,21,22).

Being risen with Christ in the baptismal waters of a typical grave (Col 3:1), this is a powerful influence which irresistibly draws brethren together, irrespective of their personal differences. By contrast to the morass of humanity who seek only their own, whose only desire is to satisfy the grovelling instincts of the flesh, Christ's brethren have no regard for the temporal advantages of this life. Rather, being One with him, and in him, they seek to set their affections "on things above, not on things on the earth", (Col 3:2), for 'above' is where their Master is, and is therefore where their hope of life is hid (3:3). They are elements of a New Creation (cp 2 Cor 5:17), formed in the image and likeness of their maker (Col 3:10) - the constituent parts of a "new man" (Col 3:10), formed by the living influence of the Word upon the tables of their heart. And as a new man – complete in Christ, having no need of further addition by way of the traditions of men and the Judaising influence of those who would have them believe in "another gospel" - they stand whole, with mutual regard one for the other, "forbearing one another, and forgiving one another" (Col 3:13), even as Christ forgave them.

THE UNITY OF BELIEVERS – EXPRESSED IN WORDS

This theme of a loving cooperation and unity continues in Chapter 4. Here, whereas the previous chapters spoke of matters of behaviour, and attitude; this section deals with words. For not only must the Spirit of Christ be seen in all our actions; our conversation also must be reflective of the One who always spoke his Father's Word. And this is seen in 3 ways – words of Prayer (4:2-3), Proclamation (4:3-6) and Care for fellow believers (4:7-18).

That which ought to come first and foremost in the utterances of the Saints, is the offering of Prayer to the Father: "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving; withal praying also for us, that God would upon unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds" (4:2,3). The saints at Colosse were to pray –but not simply a 'shopping list' of repeated requests, rather a watchful, thoughtful petition that the Father would be with the Apostle's preaching, opening a door of opportunity for him that the work might continue.

And in this, we are given a significant insight into the mind of the Apostle. Bound in prison, in threat of his life, in dire circumstances; his overriding concern was not for himself, and for the severe discomfort he was enduring. It was for the fact that whilst he was in chains, he was unable to preach the Gospel to the dying sinners around him. That "the mystery of Christ" was not being "made manifest" by him, as he had been Divinely Commissioned to do. Thus, the primary – and indeed only – thing he besought the brethren to pray for, was that he might have such opportunity presented to him, even in such dire circumstances when preaching the Word may well be farthest from the minds of many hirelings who place present advantage over future gain.

The Apostle besought the brethren to pray for "a door of utterance". Indeed, he had been granted such a "door" several times previous to this. At Ephesus (1Cor 16:8, 9 and Troas (2Cor 2:12), so he informed the Corinthians, "a door was opened unto me of the Lord". Here, a 'door' being an entrance or means of passing from one arena to another, the expression is used to denote the manner in which words might have opportunity to pass from Paul to the hearts of the hearers. Being alone, as when he was imprisoned at Rome, there was no-one to hear – the door was either closed, or was not even present at all. So, the 'doors of his lips' (cp Ps 141:3) were not permitted to allow the Gospel message to pass through them. But when it so fitted the Purpose of the Deity, opportunity was given; a 'door' was opened that Paul, and the message he bore, could enter beyond it, that the words of Life might not be bound.

And that the prayers of the brethren were indeed heard is evident from Paul's Epistle to the Phillippians, for there he speaks of how his deliverance into Caesar's palace was beneficial for "the furtherance of the Gospel" (Phil 1:12,13). And again, he refers to those who had received the word, upon the opening of the door of opportunity for its utterance: "all the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household" (Phil 4:22). So it was, even within the sufferings of imprisonment, the Gospel was preached – and received.

THE CARE OF THE SAINTS

One of the striking features of our Community, is the mutual interest which brethren and sisters have in one another's affairs. Whether it be reading ecclesial Intelligence, or via the "Christadelphian Grapevine", it is one of our communal tendencies, to want to know; and to seek after the wellbeing of those of like precious faith. And whilst the men of the flesh abuse this Scriptural, just disposition of mutual concern, debasing it into merely a desire to hear snippets of gossip and scandal; the true man of the Spirit will always seek after his brethren's well-being. The case of Paul is testimony to this: "All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here" (Col 3:7-9). Here is found the

expression of true carefulness in fellowship. Not a cold state of detachment from others, but a warm and living relationship – a desire to know one another's affairs, to help, encourage and pray for one another.

And in keeping with this spirit, the final words expressed in this epistle, are Salutatory greetings from brethren to those to whom Paul was writing. Aristarchus, Marcus, Jesus which was called Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, and Paul himself sent their fraternal greetings to their brethren in a far off country – a token of their fraternal love, and sense of unity as a Divine Family, organised under Christ as Head. In some cases, they may have been those of like precious faith whom they had never met or seen, yet the bonds of true fellowship is not bounded by familiarity or geographical location. And this is the central and powerful exhortation which runs through all we have meditated on in this article – that brethren of the Lord Jesus must strive to be united in fraternal love.

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