

**COLOSSIANS:  
MORE THAN ENOUGH**

**LESSON ONE**

**COMMENTARY**

# COMMENTARY NOTES

## COLOSSIANS 1:1-14

**Michael Bird, in the *New Covenant Commentary*, introduces us to Colossians:**

The letter begins with a standard epistolary prescript detailing the sender and recipient. At the head of the letter stands Paul, an Apostle of Messiah Jesus. The mention of Paul introduces the apostle as the author (or coauthor) of the communication. Paul did not establish the church in Colossae, but he would no doubt have been known to the Colossian assembly through Epaphras who was probably sent by Paul to establish house churches in the Lycus Valley (Col 1:7; 4:12; Phlm 23). Paul's evangelistic activities and hardships faced in Ephesus (1 Cor 15:32; 16:8; Acts 18:19; 19:1-41; 20:17-38) would have been among the things for which he was known. The letter stands as a substitute then for his personal presence and is also all the more important given the current absence of Epaphras and the uncertainties surrounding the effectiveness of the ministry of Archippus (Col 4:17; Phlm 2). As usual, Paul identifies himself as an apostle, and *apostolos* means "one who is sent" or an authorized emissary of a third party. One can be the apostle of a church (2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25), but Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Titus 1:1).

It is none other than Messiah Jesus who is the source of Paul's commission and authority as an apostle. Unlike other Pauline letters, what is at stake here is not Paul's authority as an apostle (e.g., Gal, 2 Cor), but the nature of the sending figure Messiah Jesus in light of the Colossian philosophy. I have rendered *Christos Iesous* as Messiah Jesus, using "Messiah" rather than "Christ" for *Christos* in order to emphasize the Jewish and eschatological connotation of the designation for Paul (although I recognize that this was not necessarily evident to all readers). While the Greek word *Christos* may be (or is on the way to becoming) a proper name, it has not lost all of its titular significance. "Christ" is perhaps a cognomen like "Caesar" of "Gaius Julius Caesar." But just like "Caesar," "Christ" can also have a titular and regal meaning. We should not forget that *Christos* is often a Greek translation for the Hebrew *masiah* and the Aramaic *mesiha* from which we get "Messiah." A reverse order of "Jesus Messiah" or "Jesus Christ" is more common in Paul (e.g., 1:3) and underscores its titular nature especially when coordinate to "Lord," i.e., "Lord Jesus Christ." Indeed, Christ Jesus/Jesus Christ arguably evokes a titular sense of "Jesus the Messiah" and perhaps even an implied confession of "Jesus is the Messiah" as well. Such a title or confession conjures up an implied narrative about the life, death, and exaltation of Jesus. In other words, Messiah Jesus or Jesus Messiah is essentially an encoded reference to the status and *story* of Jesus of Nazareth as the king of Israel and exalted Lord of the world.

Although Paul's apostolate is anchored in Messiah Jesus, it is also in accordance with the will of God, adding a theocentric dimension to Paul's apostolic office. His service rendered to Jesus is ultimately operative through divine empowerment, i.e., God working through Paul. God is working out his will, plan, and purpose through the Pauline mission. Paul is looped in a circle of authority between Messiah Jesus and God, as Dunn comments: "Paul as apostle of Christ Jesus, Jesus as Christ owned and authorized by God, and God as the one God of Israel through whose Messiah and apostle good news is extending to the nations." Paul is not alone in his missionary endeavors. He has a cohort of coworkers and naturally makes mention of his cosender Timothy [our] brother (perhaps the scribe and coauthor of the epistle). Timothy, a disciple from Lystra (Acts 16:1-3), is a cosender in other correspondence (2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Phlm 1). Later in the epistle Paul will add mention of Tychicus as another brother who was quite likely the letter carrier accompanied by Onesimus (4:7-9).

Paul does not address the letter to the "churches" in the designated region as he does elsewhere (e.g., Corinth [1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1]; Galatia [Gal 1:1]; Thessalonica [1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1]), yet this is hardly significant since he does not mention any particular "church" in the opening prescript of Romans, Philippians, or Ephesians either. For Paul, the fact that the gospel had spread to Colossae and the fact that they had been baptized into the Messiah is proof enough of the existence of an *ekklesia* ("church") in Colossae. He describes them as holy and faithful. I have chosen to take *hagioi* ("saints" or "holy") adjectivally with faithful, which modifies brothers and sisters (on translating

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*adelphos* in this inclusive way see also NET, TNIV, NRSV, NLT). The Colossians are, by reality and ideal, the holy and faithful people of God rooted in the Messiah. Holiness and fidelity describes their current state as those who are in Messiah, but it also designates the goal of their conduct as those who seek to live worthily of Messiah (see 1:10). The letter opening rounds up with a greeting of grace and peace. Paul has replaced the regular Greek *chairein* (“greeting”) with *charis* (“grace,” “favour,” “generosity”) and linked it characteristically to the Jewish concept of *shalom* (“peace”), understood as the absence of hostilities, but also well-being, wholeness, and prosperity. The apostle greets the Colossians with a blessing of divine favor and divine embrace.

Paul moves beyond his prescript into a rich prayer of thanksgiving and petition for the Colossians. Central to his prayer is the connection of the gospel to the Colossian assembly, their spiritual nourishment, the transformation of their minds, and the worthiness of their behavior before the Lord.

Hellenistic letters often began with a note of thanksgiving to the gods for certain persons or events. The inclusion of a thanksgiving section in personal communication carried over into Hellenistic Judaism, as evidenced by 2 Macc 1:10–13 where a letter from the Jews of Jerusalem to Jews in Egypt includes thanking God for his deliverance from a perilous military threat. While the form is clearly indebted to Hellenistic letter writing conventions, the content is very much of a Jewish and Christian character. Thanks is given to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is indicative of the binitarian devotional life of the first Christians focused on Father and Son. Jewish “monotheism” is assumed here, but it is redrawn in light of belief in the life, death, resurrection, exaltation, and coenthronement of Jesus who is both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:36).

The thanksgiving prayer is of a piece with the other Pauline thanksgiving petitions (Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4–9; Phil 1:3–11; 1 Thess 1:2–4; 2 Thess 1:3; Phlm 4–7; 2 Tim 1:3–7). This one is certainly longer than normal and it is rivaled in length and poetic poignancy only by Eph 1:1–14. The prayer is to some degree a general plea for the Colossians’ spiritual well-being, but specific elements do occur in the prayer as well. These elements are most apparent at the mention of Epaphras whose authority and influence in Colossae perhaps now hangs in the balance. The emphasis on knowledge and insight in the prayer are a direct counterclaim to the Colossian philosophy. The identification of the saints in the light as angels can be related to surfacing issues of angelic worship and deliverance from malevolent spiritual powers. These are matters that Paul will pick up again in the letter. The apostle signals early on, in the language of worship and adoration, that the Colossians already have everything that the local teachers are promising them, and they have it in the gospel of the Messiah.

## **Paul’s Thanksgiving for the Colossians’ Participation in the Gospel (1:3–8)**

Paul’s prayer begins with the first person plural We always give thanks and includes his coworkers in Ephesus (or Rome) and co-sender Timothy (cf. 1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3). In ancient letters thanksgiving does not merely display gratitude, but also gives the occasion for praise. In ancient letters thanks was ordinarily given to the deity for the well being of the recipient and here Paul offers his thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus *Christ*. The plural possessive pronoun *our* includes both the sender and recipients as those who belong to Jesus *Christ*. The two entities (God the Father and Lord Jesus) suggest that both are to be identified with the God of Israel who is “Lord God.” The designation Lord Jesus *Christ* is ubiquitous in the nt. Jesus as Lord is accompanied by reference to “God and Father” in a number of places in Paul’s letters. Later in Col 3:17 Paul urges the Colossians to offer thanks to God through/in the Lord Jesus. In Phil 2:11 the exaltation of Jesus as Lord is bound up with the glory of the Father. What Jesus’s lordship means is best spelled out by “he is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

The grounds for Paul’s thanksgiving is expressed in the triadic formula of faithfulness ... love ... hope. The formula is common in Paul (Rom 5:1–5; Gal 5:5–6; 1 Thess 1:3; Eph 4:2–5) and in other Christian literature, suggesting that it was a shorthand Christian virtue list (Heb 6:10–12; 10:22–24; 1 Pet 1:3–8, 21–22; *Barn.* 1:4; 11:8). Paul and his companions have received reports from Epaphras of the Colossians’ faithfulness in Messiah. Although *pistis* could be translated as “faith,” I find faithfulness to be the more likely given the literary context that focuses on action and attitudes rather than on assent to a *depositum credendi* or a body of teachings about Christ. This faithfulness is expressed in Messiah,

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that is, within the sphere of Jesus's lordship, as opposed to rendering him simply the object of faith itself. The Colossians are also known for their love for the saints which expresses a sense of affection and belonging to other Jesus-believers whom they have not yet met. The relationship of hope to the preceding virtues is difficult to gauge. The causal clause (*dia*) might suggest that hope is the basis of their faithfulness and love. Alternatively, the clause may relate back to the dominating verb above, we always give thanks (*eucharistoumen*), and provide a further reason for praise and gratitude to God. The hope is described as laid up for you in the heavenlies and the word for laid up (*apokeimai*) can denote either something put away for safekeeping (e.g., Luke 19:20) or reserved as a reward (e.g., 2 Tim 4:8). Both senses are allowable although the emphasis should probably fall on the former as it is the sense of security and certainty (i.e., assurance) that is paramount. Later on Paul will refer to the return of the Messiah as the hope of glory, as the time when Jesus will finally be manifested (1:27; 3:4). Even with the emphasis on present or realized eschatology (e.g., 2:11-13), there is no evacuation of an apocalyptic hope or a collapse into an entirely present eschatological experience. The point being pressed is that the Colossians' own hope is bound up with the Messiah as God's co-regent. He is now enthroned in the heavenlies and the hope centered on him is certain and unailing. The purported governance of the angelic powers over daily life as stipulated by the philosophy may call precisely for the present reign of the Messiah to be emphasized.

The hope that centers on the exaltation of the Messiah was made known to the Colossians through the word of truth: the gospel. Here gospel stands in apposition to word of truth. This description is naturally contrasted with Paul's assessment of the teachings of the philosophy, which are said to consist of empty deceit and human tradition (2:8). Moreover, much like the word of God in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 119:43), the word of the gospel is true and trustworthy. The epistle to the Colossians as a whole is "word" centered as evidenced by reference to the word of God, the word of Christ, and the word of evangelistic preaching (1:25; 3:16; 4:3). The Colossians are invited to see their own lives as part of the story of the gospel as viewed through their experience of deliverance and in their expression of faithfulness to the Messiah.

Paul then shifts his view to a wider horizon in the spread of the gospel in the worldwide theater. Paul says that in all the world the gospel is bearing fruit and growing. That is to say, the word of the gospel is being heard and garnering adherents across various political, ethnic, and territorial borders. The language here probably alludes to Gen 1:28 where Adam and Eve were to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Taken up here, the progeny of Jesus, the new Adam, are doing just that, and obedience to God's gospel-word is the means by which the old world is colonized by the new humanity of the new creation (see 1:10). We can also see here a possible allusion to Isa 27:6, which says, "In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit" (ESV). The great redemption of Israel that Isaiah predicted with its replanting of Israel produces an abundance of fruit that grows into the entire world. So too does the redemption in Messiah Jesus and the calling of the church to be Israel-for-the-sake-of-the-world bring forth a fruit basket of blessings that covers the earth.

The ideas here are made emphatic by the repetition of just as (*kathos*). Just as the gospel came to the Colossians, so too has it come to others in the wider Greco-Roman world. Whereas biblical scholarship has tended to think of Christian communities as somewhat isolated and introspective entities, in actuality, the circulation of written materials and the travel itineraries of the early Christians suggest that they had a sense of being a worldwide movement and were very much in close and constant contact with one another. It is reception and continued adherence to the gospel which will ensure that the Colossians remain in communion with a wider body of believers. It is their instruction from Epaphras that connects them to this trans-provincial movement. Through Epaphras, the Colossians have learned the gospel, the life of faith in the Messiah, and no doubt news about other churches in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy too. Epaphras's status, and therefore his continuing influence in Colossae, is lauded by Paul when he calls Epaphras a beloved fellow-slave and faithful servant. Paul uses similar terms for other coworkers elsewhere (e.g., Tychicus in 4:7) and the place of Epaphras as a member in the Pauline circle is emphasized in the phrase on our behalf, suggesting that Epaphras was Paul's representative in Colossae. He is the cipher through

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which mutual and reciprocal relations are established between Paul, his coworkers, and the Pauline churches on one side and the Colossian believers on the other. Epaphras then has a unique role as giving testimony to Paul's gospel in Colossae and also giving testimony about the Colossians' mutual affection for other assemblies of Jesus Christ. Thus, from a social perspective, Paul is very much interested in amicable and sustained relationships between himself and the Colossians, and to validate the ministry of Epaphras as well.

## COLOSSIANS 1:9-14

**N. T. Wright, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, explains Paul's prayer for the Colossians:**

These verses form a single unit, which is essentially a reported prayer. The reason why this is often overlooked is because most of the material, namely verses 13–23, is built on the final main element in the prayer, i.e. thanksgiving. Paul prays that the young church will grow in knowledge (v. 9), in holiness (v. 10) and in spiritual power (v. 11), adding a few phrases to fill out the petition in each instance; then, finally, he prays that they will continually give thanks to God (v. 12), this time filling out the meaning not with a few phrases but with several sentences. They are to thank the God *who ...*: Their knowledge of God and their thanksgiving to him is to be Christ-shaped.

The link with the opening thanksgiving (*for this reason*) should not be overlooked. It is because of what God has already done that Paul can pray with confidence for what God *will* do. Having begun a work of grace, God will continue and complete it (see Phil. 1:6). And this prayer is tireless: *we have not stopped praying for you* (see above, on 1:3) *since the day we heard about you*. In an echo of verse 6, Paul stresses that his response to Epaphras' news was just as immediate as their response to his preaching. The 'we' may include Timothy, but it could be simply rhetorical.

Paul's habit of reporting his regular prayers on behalf of his addressees (see e.g. Rom. 1:9ff.; Phil. 1:9; etc.) should not go unremarked. He will not offer teaching, advice and encouragement except in the context of prayer. His apostolic work is not his own idea. It is part of God's plan. Conversely, prayer brings the assurance that his ministry is being used within God's overall plan (1:24–29), and consequently that characteristic confidence which, outside this context, could sound like arrogance.

**9.** Basic to the whole prayer is the opening phrase: *asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will* (in the Greek the verb 'fill' is passive, 'that you may be filled'; niv has made explicit the regular use of the passive to refer obliquely to the divine action). It is this 'knowledge' which forms the basis both of holiness (v. 10) and of thanksgiving (vv. 12ff., in the light of 2:2), and which is the central characteristic of the humanity that is now renewed in Christ (3:10). The 'knowledge of God's will' is more than simply an insight into how God wants his people to behave: it is an understanding of God's whole saving purpose in Christ, and hence (as in v. 10b) a knowledge of God himself. Some have seen in the word 'knowledge' (*epignosis*) a hint that Paul is picking up the language (and, by implication, refuting the teaching) of 'gnostic' opponents—religious groups which, drawing on many traditions, held out the offer of a salvation attained through spiritual 'knowledge' (*gnosis*), which would enable one to escape from the material world and realize one's true ('spiritual') destiny. There is, however, no evidence of such teaching in any clearly defined form at this period, and when it does appear it is probably itself dependent on Christianity.

What Paul is speaking of here is not an esoteric knowledge, confined to private religious experience or exclusive sects. It is a knowledge 'of his (i.e. God's) will', which is open to all God's people. This knowledge is *given through all spiritual wisdom and understanding*. RSV's 'in' is a more literal rendering than NIV's 'through': knowledge of God's will *manifests itself in* these qualities. The two adjectives ('all' and 'spiritual') govern both the nouns ('wisdom' and 'understanding'). Their regular secular meaning ('wisdom' is mental excellence in general, 'understanding' is the ability to think through a subject coherently and clearly) is thus transposed on to a plane of more than merely human or worldly intellectual skill.

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The three terms ‘knowledge’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’, so important elsewhere in Paul, are therefore best understood against their Old Testament and Jewish background, in which they regularly denote aspects of that character which God seeks to inculcate in his people. ‘Wisdom’ is the characteristic of the truly human person, who takes the humble yet confident place marked out for Adam in the order of creation, under God and over the world. For Christians to ‘grow up’ in every way will include the awakening of intellectual powers, the ability to think coherently and practically about God and his purposes for his people. Paul never plays off spiritual life against intellectual understanding. The wisdom and understanding commended here are given the adjective ‘spiritual’, and at once expounded in practical and ethical terms in verse 10.

**10.** Verses 9 and 10, taken together, form a miniature picture of Christian life and growth. The argument is not circular (as might at first appear), but spiral. Paul prays that they may increase in knowledge of God’s will, with the result that the Colossians will live as God wants them to and so increase in the knowledge of God! Understanding will fuel holiness; holiness will deepen understanding. (An alternative, which I consider less likely, is that the phrase at the end of v. 10 means ‘by means of the knowledge of God’.) When Paul says *that you may lead a life* (NIV adds, in front of those words, *and we pray this in order*, to make the thought clear) he uses the verb ‘to walk’, in keeping with his Jewish background (cf., in the Old Testament, Prov. 2:20; 4:25–27; etc.). This ‘walk’ must be *worthy of the Lord*. The Lord, Jesus Christ, provides in his death and resurrection a pattern of life which sets the standard for his people. Those who are ‘in the Lord’ must live appropriately. The following clause, ‘(that you) *may please him in every way*’, is not expressing an impossible ideal. Paul knows that complete perfection is attained only with the eventual gift of the resurrection body (Phil. 3:12). Nevertheless, those who belong to Christ can and do please God (cf. Rom. 12:1–2; 2 Cor. 5:8; 1 Thess. 4:1). God looks on his new (albeit as yet incomplete) creation, and declares it to be very good.

This explanation is supported by another oblique allusion to Genesis 1. Just as the gospel is bearing fruit and growing, so God’s people are themselves *bearing fruit in every good work, and growing in the knowledge of God* (the Greek verbs are the same as those in v. 6). Here is the typically Pauline paradox of grace. God is at work, *therefore* his people are at work (see further, on 1:29). This (albeit indirect) reference to Genesis increases the awareness that what Paul is talking about is God’s new creation. He is asking that the Colossians may understand themselves more and more to be God’s new, true humanity, and that they may increasingly live in a manner appropriate to that vocation. The idea of ‘good works’ is of course thoroughly Pauline (see Rom. 13:3; 2 Cor. 9:8; Gal. 6:10; Titus 1:16, and the parallel to our present passage in Eph. 2:10). By adding ‘in every good work’ to ‘bearing fruit’ and ‘in the knowledge of God’ to ‘growing’ he has expanded the formula of verse 6, neatly integrating what we often see as the active and reflective aspects of Christian living. Knowing God is itself an activity; obeying him is a form of devotion.

**11–12a.** The remainder of the prayer indicates the power which enables the young church to grow in this way and the thankful attitude which will characterize them as they do so (rsv weakens this close connection with vv. 9–10 by beginning a new sentence here). God is accomplishing this productive and growing Christian character in his people so that they are *strengthened with all power according to his glorious might*. God is regularly seen in the Old Testament as the powerful God—the sovereign creator who rescued Israel from Egypt. That power, unleashed through the gospel (see Rom. 1:16–17; 1 Cor. 1:24; etc.), is now continually at work in God’s people to give them *great endurance and patience*. Paul singles out these qualities as the weapons one needs to live in the world undaunted by its crises and panics. A patient and longsuffering spirit, the quiet corollary of faith, hope and love, is the product of the settled conviction that the Father of Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord of the world, and that he is able to bring about his purposes in his own time and manner. There is a slight distinction to be drawn between ‘endurance’ and ‘patience’. The former is what faith, hope and love bring to an apparently impossible situation, the latter what they show to an apparently impossible person. Verse 11 contributes to the total prayer the insights (a) that growth in the knowledge of God, and in holiness, is an uphill battle, and (b) that strength for this battle can only come—but will surely come—from the power of God himself.

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Since the early manuscripts of the New Testament contain almost no punctuation, it is impossible to tell whether joyfully goes with giving thanks in verse 12 (as NIV) or with 'endurance and patience' in verse 11 (as RSV). But, as verse 12 is a continuation of the same sentence, it makes little overall difference. God's strength equips his people to live in the world with patience and to praise him for his grace. These thanks are to be offered *to the Father*. Christian maturity stems from a proper, thankful relationship to God, not as a remote or unconcerned being, but as the wise and loving Father of his people.

*The new exodus* (1:12b-14). Paul is not content merely to tell his readers to be thankful. He gives them three good reasons for gratitude. These (vv. 12-14, 15-20, 21-23) are not just stated side by side, but depend closely upon each other. Genuine Christian theology is the exploration of God's character and actions, not in a spirit of mere speculation and curiosity, but out of gratitude and love, and with the intention of, and desire for, obedience. Paul's prayer for the church reaches its climax in thanksgiving, and this thanksgiving is to be based on knowledge.

**12b.** The first reason for thanksgiving is that the Colossians have been given a share in the new exodus, the deliverance of the true people of God—the God, that is, *who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light*. This seems at first sight a complicated way of saying that God has caused the Colossians to hear and receive the gospel. That is indeed Paul's underlying meaning. But expressing it thus enables Paul to evoke a whole world of imagery relating to Israel's exodus from Egypt and her entry into the promised land. The 'inheritance' alludes to the promised land of Canaan; 'the saints' is a regular term for the people of God, indicating that they are set apart from the world for his service. The parallel in Ephesians 2:11-13 suggests the idea that the heritage of God's people is no longer the prerogative of one race, but has been opened up so that people of every conceivable background can share it. The promise of the land is widened into the promise of a whole new creation (Rom. 4:13; 8:17-25). The addition of 'in light' differentiates between the new and the old inheritance (the glory of heaven, not the land of Canaan) and also sharpens the moral contrast with the kingdom of darkness (v. 13), where the young Christians had formerly dwelt.

The Colossians have not come into this inheritance automatically. God has 'made them fit' for it. Paul elsewhere uses this word (in Greek *hikanosanti*) and its cognates when describing a status or office for which he was not 'fit' in himself, but for which God 'fitted' him (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:9; 2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5-6). He now explains this divine action further, in order to more securely ground the Colossians' thanksgiving.

**13.** Again he alludes to the exodus, this time referring particularly to the dramatic rescue operation in which God delivered his people from the dark power of Egypt (see Exod. 6:6; 12:27; 14:30), transferring them into a new land: *for he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves*. The harsh rule of the prince of darkness has been exchanged for the wise sovereignty of God's Son (cf. Rom. 5:21; 6:16ff.). Paul shares with other New Testament writers, and with Jesus himself, the belief in the existence of a dark power to whom the human race, and the world, is subject because of sin—and the belief that, in Jesus Christ, God has defeated this power and is establishing his own kingdom in its place.

On the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:23-28 we may infer—though the point is controversial—that Paul conceived of the establishment of this kingdom as a two-stage process. First there is 'the kingdom of Christ', which begins with Christ's resurrection and exaltation and continues until all enemies are subdued. Then there comes the final kingdom of God, the restoration of all things. This distinction does not, of course, correspond directly to the language about God's kingdom on the lips of Jesus; it belongs to a later perspective. The idea of the 'kingdom' is not found frequently in Paul (see Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 6:9), but is clearly presupposed throughout. The language of 1:13 is, in fact, firmly grounded in the world of Jewish expectations and in the fulfilment of those hopes in the Messiah, Jesus.

There are two closely related reasons why Paul has described Jesus as 'the Son he loves' (literally 'the Son of his love'; cf. RSV, 'his beloved Son'). There is, first, an allusion to Jesus' baptism, when

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God anointed him with his Spirit, and said 'you are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11), thus declaring Jesus to be the anointed King of Israel, the one in whom Israel's destiny is summed up and fulfilled. Hence, secondly, God has fulfilled 'in him' his ancient purposes. Jesus as the beloved Son is Jesus as the true Israel. He has offered to God the filial obedience which Israel had not: 'when Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son' (Hos. 11:1, quoted of Jesus in Matt. 2:15). This exodus reference fits well with the rest of our present passage. In Christ the love of God has been expressed and defined by being lived out, by being put to death to redeem sinners.

**14.** *In him, then, we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* The word 'redemption', as used in the ancient world in general, is from a root which carried the meaning (capable of metaphorical use) of 'purchase from the slave-market'. To a Jew, however, the root in question would always awaken deeper echoes, memories of the time when God redeemed his people from the kingdom of Pharaoh. As a result the 'forgiveness of sins' here is not merely good news for troubled consciences, though of course it certainly is that. It is one of the specific blessings of the new covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31:31ff. and Ezekiel 36:16–36. This idea belongs within the wider Jewish belief that God's purposes for Israel were part of his plan to rid the world of evil entirely. It is this plan that he has now put into effect.

Paul, then, is asserting in shorthand form that in Christ, the true Israel, the true King, the one whom God loves, God's people are rescued from the dark power that has enslaved them and are brought into all the blessings of membership in the new covenant. Chief among these blessings is the fact that sin has been dealt with. God's people are to thank him that they are indeed his people, qualified for inheritance (v. 12), delivered from sin's grim tyranny (v. 13), redeemed through his Son (v. 14). This statement (and its further application in vv. 21–23) must have considerably clarified for the young Christians in Colosse exactly what it was that had happened to them in their conversion, and why it had been necessary.<sup>1</sup>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC  
Douglas Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, Pillar NT Commentary  
David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT  
Robert Bratcher and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook of Paul's Letter to the Colossians*, UBSH  
Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, IVP New Testament Commentary  
Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Application Commentary  
James D. G. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIGTC  
Dick Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, The Bible Speaks Today  
Clinton Arnold, *Colossians*, Word Biblical Commentary

<sup>1</sup>N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 49–67.