

Paul's Letter to the Colossians

02. Colossians 1:1-5



Colossians 1:1-2

¹Paul, an apostle of the Messiah Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²To the holy and faithful brothers and sisters in the Messiah in Colossae.

Paul refers to himself as an ‘**apostle**’, because he is writing an official letter by virtue of the commission given him by Jesus himself and by the will of God.

Paul refers to himself as an apostle ‘**of the Messiah Jesus**’, because he is writing out of the communion which he has with the Risen Jesus.

Paul includes his co-missionary, **Timothy**, because he writes as a member of a community and is conscious of the fact that his missionary commission is a shared one. His letters are part of that apostolate.

The people Paul is writing to are said to be ‘**holy**’ because the Holy One is present in the community of ‘**faithful brothers and sisters**’.

Colossae was situated in the upper Lycus valley, about 180 kilometres east of Ephesus. Under the dominion of Phrygia, then Persia, then Greece, it came under Roman control in 132BC, and in 49AD it was included in the Roman province of Asia. It was an old city and had been of considerable importance as it was on the main east-west route through the centre of Anatolia (modern Turkey). It also connected Troas with the port of Attalia, some 200 kilometres south-east of Colossae. In Paul's day it was being overshadowed by the neighbouring cities of Laodicea (mentioned in 2:1 and 4:13-16), where the local assizes took place, and Hierapolis (mentioned in 4:13), which was renowned for its healing springs.

It appears that Paul himself had never visited the Christian community there (see 1:4,9; 2:1), though he does know some of its members (see 4:9,12,17). The apostle of the region was a native of Colossae, a disciple of Paul called **Epaphras** (see 1:7; 4:12). He may have been among Paul's students at the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus (see Acts 19:9-10), or he may have brought the gospel to Colossae from Antioch in eastern Phrygia, from the period of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (4:10; see Acts 13:49).

The faith of the Colossian community was being endangered by teaching which gave to super-terrestrial beings a decisive role in recording human behaviour and in carrying out divine punishment. It was important, according to this teaching, that people commit themselves to various ascetical practices which would ensure that they avoided punishment. They were promised the experience of visions and a participation in the worship of God offered by the angels. Paul does not give a full description of the 'philosophy' which he is opposing and commentators offer various suggestions. It is quite possible that the teaching drew on a mixture of influences.

Certain ideas from Judaism were part of the mix, perhaps indirectly. The Syrian king Antiochus III had moved two thousand Jewish families into Phrygia and Lydia in 187BC and had granted them a number of economic privileges as well as freedom to practise their faith. They influenced the religious thinking of the area and were themselves influenced by their neighbours.

Whatever other elements were involved, this erroneous religious teaching was threatening the integrity of the faith of the Christian community in Colossae, and it is Paul's opposition to this teaching which gives this letter its special character. He does not set out to define the teaching. He himself may not have had a clear understanding of it. Furthermore, it is possible that the teaching may have lacked consistency.

Paul's focus is on the central place of Jesus and on the fullness of salvation offered to all who live in communion with him. Whatever distracts us from Jesus is to be rejected. This is especially clear when it leads to behaviour which contradicts love and divides the community.

As we would expect, Paul's way of supporting the Christian faith of the Colossians is to present Jesus as the one in whom all their hopes rest. He does so by quoting and then commenting upon a Christian hymn which presents Jesus as the source of all human perfection. The vocabulary of the religion which Paul is opposing, as well as of the hymn upon which he is commenting, amply explain the differences in vocabulary between Colossians and the letters which Paul composed to this point.

Colossians 1:2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

The customary Greek greeting was χαίρειν (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). Paul uses a similar sounding word, χάρις (**grace**) – a greeting that reminds the Christian assembly of God’s action in their lives in drawing them to share the life of the risen Jesus – a life of communion in love with his Father through the shared bond of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s prayer for the community in Colossae is that they will continue to experience the graciousness of God pouring out his love upon them.

The customary Jewish greeting was shalom (‘**peace**’ εἰρήνη). Paul repeats this greeting here, for his prayer is that they will experience the peace that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion.

The grace and peace which is offered to us as Christians is an overflowing of the grace and peace with which the Father has filled the heart of his Son. Throughout this letter Paul stresses the fact that fullness of life is found only in Jesus, and it is to him, and to him alone, that we must look for life.

Colossians 1:3-5

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, for we have heard of your faith in the Messiah Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Paul assures the Colossians that they are with him when he is in prayer-communion with God, and that he continues to thank God for them.

The letter itself will explain what Paul intends by speaking of Jesus as ‘Lord’, for it is its central theme. Calling Jesus ‘Lord’ recalls God’s saving action in the Exodus, and expresses the belief that it is through Jesus that God exercises his ‘power for salvation’ (Romans 1:16).

Paul speaks of their ‘faith’, ‘love’ and ‘hope’: three qualities of the life of a Christian which regularly appear together in Paul’s writing

Faith

Far from being a speculative, cerebral thing, faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action.

As Jesus himself says: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

To speak of 'faith' is to speak of the truth about God's self-revelation through God's activity in the world, reaching its climax in God's self-revelation in Jesus. It is to speak of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

When we examine the meaning of belief in the Hebrew Scriptures, our first observation is that while belief is impossible without trust, biblical usage is against identifying belief with trust. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek verb πίστευω or by the related noun πίστις, or adjective πιστός.

These words only ever translate words from the Hebrew root 'mn The Hebrew noun 'mnh is often translated 'faithful'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, secure, sure, certain, and so trustworthy (note, trustworthy - which is not the same as trusting).

God has this quality (faithful, trustworthy) in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that God is the real God, not a false one, and that God always acts according to the truth. Because of this, we can find our security in God, we can rely upon God, we can place our trust in God.

‘The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness’ (Psalm 33:4).

‘I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord’ (Hosea 2:20).

When we speak of human beings having this quality, we are saying that they are trustworthy because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12), then we share in the faithfulness of the Lord, and others in turn can rely upon us (Jeremiah 15:18).

Abraham is described as having a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1 Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1 Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

When we come to the Hebrew verb 'mn we find, as we would expect, that it means to act in accordance with who we are and with our obligations. It means to behave faithfully with the result that others can rely upon us. Since we are creatures who are totally dependent upon God, for us to behave in a way that is truly in accordance with our nature means to live in dependence upon God. This includes placing our trust in God's faithfulness.

The verb 'believe' then has two essential components.

- It means to place our trust in God's faithfulness
- and to give evidence of this by behaving faithfully ourselves so that others can rely upon us.

When we say that God is 'faith-full', we are saying that God always acts according to who God is.

This loving kindness of God is stressed throughout the Old Testament. It finds its most sublime expression in the New Testament in the First Letter of John where we read: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8,16).

Since God is love, God can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith.

To believe in God, therefore, is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed. The Mosaic Law requires of God's people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor.

In the New Testament Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff).

The English word 'believe' captures nicely the essential meaning of faith. 'Lieve' is an old English form of the word 'love'. To believe is to choose to live our life (to 'be') in love – in God's love. To believe is to choose to be in God's love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God's being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts.

To have faith – to be faithful – is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion.

To believe is

- to listen to God's word as revealed in Jesus (Galatians 1:12).
- to heed what God says 'when God was pleased to reveal his Son in me' (Galatians 1:16), trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with our hearts and minds, our soul and strength.
- to live in communion with Jesus (Galatians 2:20), sharing his life of love and so sharing his faith – the faithfulness (fullness of faith) of God which Jesus incarnates and reveals.
- to act in accordance with God's will as revealed by Jesus, especially by living a life of love (Galatians 5:14).

Hope

In non-Biblical Greek ἐλπίς means ‘estimation’ or ‘expectation’. We should have a sound basis for our judgment of what the future might hold for us.

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Psalms and prophetic writings ἐλπίς translates words expressing ‘trust’ and ‘taking refuge’. The focus is on God as the one in whom we place our trust. This sentiment continues in the Wisdom literature, but there the influence of non-Biblical Greek can be seen with the focus shifting from present trust to future expectation.

In the New Testament ἐλπίς retains the idea of trust, but with the focus on the future. We could define it as a trusting confidence now in regard to the future – a trust based on one’s faith in God. Trusting that God is faithful we are sure that what God has promised will happen and we can leave the future peacefully to God.

The English word 'hope' does not quite capture the meaning of ἐλπίς as we find it in Paul. 'Hope' focuses on wanting something to happen in the future. With ἐλπίς the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on present assurance that in the future all will be well because of the God in whom one now places one's confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks.

A perfect expression of hope – of ἐλπίς – is found in Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and too marvellous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, **hope** in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

This is not without importance in recognising the distinction between faith and hope.

Faith is concerned with objective reality: the fact that God is real, the fact that God's will has been revealed, and that our basic response (our 'faith') is to accept this truth revealed in our history, base our life upon it and act accordingly. In Paul, as we have seen, the objective reality in which we believe is what God has revealed in Jesus (1:12,16).

Hope speaks of an attitude of trust whereby, because we believe, we can leave the present and the future in God's hands.

The Colossians know that the fullness of communion with God is something for the future. Paul is encouraging them to eagerly await the promised communion, but to trust that God knows their longing. It is, after all, God's gift to them. God is faithful. Let them believe in Jesus and live accordingly: which means giving themselves to his Spirit. If they do this, they will find that the love which they see burning in his heart will set fire to their own, and this is all that matters: 'The only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6).

Let us pause to reflect on what Paul means by love, since it is at the very heart of Paul's gospel.

Love

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God’s self-giving, a ‘word’ of love. When God revealed God’s Self to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God’s instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God’s love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus’ self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God’s gift of self, to God’s love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes elsewhere: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

One of the central texts of the Torah reads: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the word 'love' is translated in the Greek version by ἀγαπάω, the Beloved Disciple is always using this verb to speak of our basic relationship with God.

It may come as a surprise to discover how seldom Paul uses ἀγαπάω to speak of our basic relationship with God. He does so only three times:

1. He uses it in the following quotation: ‘As it is written: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who **love** him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).
2. ‘Anyone who **loves** God is known by him’ (1 Corinthians 8:3).
3. ‘We know that all things work together for good for those who **love** God’ (Romans 8:28).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of our loving Jesus only once, in the final sentence of his Letter to the Ephesians:

‘Grace be with all who have an undying **love** for our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (Ephesians 6:24).

Furthermore, Paul never uses the noun ἀγάπη with either God or Jesus as its object. In the context of human behaviour, the noun always, and the verb on every occasion other than the four noted, refer to our relationship with other people. In speaking of our response to Jesus and to God Paul prefers to speak of 'faith'.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God's love flowing through us to others. Paul sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and, thanks to this gift, from us to each other. Jesus' disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where Jew and Gentile share in the same Spirit.

In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves; to love with his love. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus' own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship, beautiful as that love is. Noe is it the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well, or a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals.

As Paul writes: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners the Messiah died for us' (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: 'Live in love, as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2).

When Paul says that ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6), he is quoting traditional Jewish wisdom. Judaism does not separate faith from obedience; it does not think of faith as an intellectual assent that leaves one’s behaviour untouched. To believe means to commit oneself to do God’s will ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5), and God’s will, as revealed by Jesus, is that we love.

Colossians 1:3-5

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, for we have heard of your faith in the Messiah Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Paul thanks God for the love which they have for **all** their brothers and sisters in the faith. It will soon emerge why Paul stresses 'all'. It is this love which defines their community, and which sets them apart from those among whom they live. Being special, however, does not mean that they are to live as a sect, putting a barrier up between themselves and the world. On the contrary, Paul goes on to speak with joy of the growth of the community and the success of its mission in and to the world.