

How Can Colossians Help Me?

David W. Gooding

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Introductory Discussion

This evening it falls to me to introduce our study of the epistle to the Colossians. We are to spend some weeks studying the detail of the epistle as diligently as we may. I am not going to attempt to give you an analysis of the whole epistle. What I shall do, God helping me, is to suggest the ways in which this epistle could help us in our spiritual experience. Before I do that, I'm going to use my privilege here this evening to reverse procedures, so that instead of giving the talk and then having the questions, I'm going to have the questions first and then the talk. That will give me an additional privilege of being the one who asks the questions, a luxury that is to be grasped if ever it comes your way! I am going to take advantage of the wealth of experience we have present here this evening. We have people here who have been studying Colossians for ten years, twenty years, fifty years, or maybe seventy years. In the first few minutes, I'm going to ask a couple of questions and see how many people will be so kind as to give us some answers.

Question 1: Is there anybody here who was saved through some verse in Colossians? If I were to ask that question about the Gospel of John, we should be here all night, I suspect. One after another would quote John 3:16, John 5:24, John 10:28, or whatever. And you would say, 'Yes, thank God, I shall be in heaven because of that verse.' But is there anybody here who was saved through some verse or other in Colossians?

Question 2: Has Colossians ever done anything for you? Is there some part of Colossians that is a favourite passage of yours, that means a tremendous lot to you and has helped you in some way? Perhaps it has strengthened your walk with the Lord, warmed your heart or provoked your worship. Has Colossians, or any part of it, and if so which part, been a help to you?

My point in asking these questions is so that you should help us who are younger to answer the question that now faces us: Why should we study Colossians? What is it likely to do for us? Just like those old pirates of long ago who went to their treasure island and made maps and came back, and then other intrepid explorers went out and looked at the maps, and there were notes saying, 'Treasure here, treasure there.' So from your experience, you could help us who come now fresh in our youth to this epistle of Paul. Would you like to mark our maps for us and say, 'Treasure here, I found treasure here'?

Those will be my two questions. While I give you a little time to think about them, I want to make some other remarks. I have brought along a few books from my own little collection. So here is my little selection:

*Philippians Colossians Thessalonians*¹, H. A. Ironside's little volume, perhaps already on everybody's bookshelves;
*Colossians and Philemon*² in the New Century Bible Series by Ralph Martin;
*Colossians and Philemon*³ by Herbert Carson, a rather learned volume;
*The Epistle of Paul to Ephesians*⁴ by E. K. Simpson, a smaller volume but no less learned;
*Colossians*⁵ by F. F. Bruce, our well-known and good brother;
*Fullness & Freedom*⁶ by R. C. Lucas⁷, from 'The Bible Speaks Today' series. A very vigorous exposition of Colossians, and one very well worth reading.

There they are, just a few. If it were thought possible, let me set the fashion. Let others in the coming weeks tell us what books they have found helpful, and so we share our riches.

Well now, just for ten minutes, first of all was anybody here brought to the Lord by any verse in Colossians? No? No. Well that's interesting. I haven't the time I wish I had to ask you what books of the Bible they were that brought you to faith, but apparently it wasn't Colossians!

So let's go on to question number two, what has Colossians done for you? Is there any particular verse or passage that has meant a tremendous lot to you? I know there's one passage that means a lot to Audience Member A.

AUDIENCE MEMBER A: Chapter 1 and verse 15. 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.' I have some remarks in my Bible that are comments from G. C. D. Howley who ministered in this hall quite often. He illustrated this idea of the image or manifestation of the invisible God as like an artist or sculptor who makes a cast or die into which clay or other material is pressed and then, when it is turned out, we have the manifestation, or reproduction, of the person. Rather like in Hebrews chapter 1 where our Lord Jesus is described as the 'express image' or the 'exact imprint' of God's person and nature. I thought that was very good and I've looked at it again and again.

DWG: Very good, thank you very much. That has been a great help to you in appreciating the person and glories of the Lord. It is helpful to understand the Lord and admire and join in worship of the Lord.

Anybody else? Audience Member B, it's meant a lot to him. I've heard him minister at the Lord's Supper on one particular passage more than once to my great profit.

AUDIENCE MEMBER B: Yes, that's Colossians 2:14. It's been quite a blessing in many ways. It's full of two lovely pictures that point to the blotting out and expunging of our sin and also the cancelling of the record of our debt, by nailing it to the cross. It has helped me to

¹ H. A. Ironside, *Philippians Colossians Thessalonians*, Loizeaux Brothers, 1988.

² Ralph Martin, *Colossians & Philemon (The New Century Bible Commentary Series)*, Eerdmans, 1996.

³ Herbert Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Tyndale Press, 1960.

⁴ E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, Eerdmans, 1957.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984.

⁶ R. C. Lucas, *Fullness & Freedom The Message of Colossians and Philemon (Bible Speaks Today)*, InterVarsity Press, 1980.

⁷ Lucas was a fellow student of mine when I was in college, which merely shows how elderly I am.

grasp the meaning and significance of the work of Calvary. When Christ died, he completely expunged our sins; they went away completely forever. Nailing the record of our debt to the cross, a picture of paying the debt, the mighty debt that was paid there.

DWG: Marvellous. How the words have helped him to understand the tremendous absolute character of our forgiveness, our sins being absolutely blotted out. That's marvellous to get hold of. When we come to face eternity, whatever else we've forgotten, verses like that will mean a tremendous lot to us. Yes, anybody else? Audience Member C is going to say something.

AUDIENCE MEMBER C: In chapter 3, I have underlined things that give me the indication of the co-operation on our part that is essential for Christian living. 'Seek the things that are above', and 'set your mind' or affection on things above when you serve the Lord Christ. And then there are things that you are to put off and things that you put on. 'Put off the old self', 'put on the new self'; and 'put on love'. The word of Christ is to dwell in our mind so that we are thinking as God thinks and seeking to do his will; doing what he would do, knowing the direction he would have us go. Then we get his help, for you don't automatically get God's power; your life has to be appropriate.

DWG: Yes, indeed. In other words, it has helped you to see that our developing holiness is something that has to be worked at. It's not something that will happen automatically by some magic touch in five minutes. I think all of us would be holy if it could be done in five minutes by some extraordinary experience or other. I gather you have the impression from Colossians there's no short cut to it, it has to be worked at. That's a very important thing. If I got it into my head that some people have become holy overnight by some tremendous experience or other, I should be disheartened by now because I haven't become holy overnight at all. It's been hard work and I haven't got very far. Then, if that was how it was meant to be anyway, that it was going to be hard work right until the end, that would be an important lesson to get hold of.

So Colossians has helped us to appreciate the person of the Lord Jesus' majesty and bow our hearts in worship of him. We've heard that it's a tremendous epistle for bringing home the wonder and absoluteness of our forgiveness. We've heard the epistle helps us to see what is demanded of us in practical Christian living in the development of our holiness, and we see that we will have to work at it. Anything else?

AUDIENCE MEMBER D: As we read in the epistle about the purposes of God for his people, and the work of Christ on our behalf, I thought simply the other day that it was like a commentary on Isaiah chapter 9—'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (v. 6). It also came to my mind where it talks about the high and lofty one that dwells in eternity but it says in Isaiah 9 that he's the father of eternity, the 'everlasting Father'. In the one Scripture he dwells in eternity, but to me, in the other one, eternity dwells in him. In chapter 3 verse 15, peace is found here—in the 'Prince of Peace'. The wisdom of God comes through as being the 'Counsellor', when it refers to the word of Christ dwelling in you richly in all wisdom (v. 16). And in this one is found 'all the fullness of God' (1:19), and he is the one for whom and through whom all things were created (1:16): the all-creating 'mighty God'. And I found my heart just momentarily in worship of the wisdom of God.

DWG: Beautiful. Again, emphasising the person of the Lord Jesus. If I may ask a question therefore along that line. This epistle, particularly in chapter 1, is going to talk to us about our Lord Jesus in relation to creation; how that all things were made in him and by him and through him. Let me ask you, has it ever seemed that it's very important, practically important to you, to lay hold upon the fact that the one who has redeemed you is the creator? What would it matter if he wasn't? I know you like to worship him as the creator, but what difference does it make to you? When we come to discuss the detail of chapter 1, about our Lord as the firstborn of all creation, why should I take the trouble to listen?

AUDIENCE MEMBER D: Would it be because this is simply a stage where God's greater plan is going to be shown and worked out? It's all in the framework, isn't it?

AUDIENCE MEMBER E: If there was someone who gave us grace and someone who gave us redemption, we would be worshipping two Gods, wouldn't we?

DWG: That would certainly not be good: it would lead to a dualism. Divided loyalties.

AUDIENCE MEMBER F: This is important. There are some who would teach that the Lord is a created being. It's important to realise that he is God and he is the creator of all things. If we had a Saviour who was anything less than God, I would say it's like a bridge that is broken at the far end: it doesn't get you anywhere. So we need a God who is as big as that.

DWG: I see, you're saying that if the Lord Jesus were not the creator, you wouldn't feel quite so secure in your salvation?

AUDIENCE MEMBER F: I think that is one aspect of the Godhead. My salvation rests on a divine being, not a created being, one who himself was capable of making creation, simply by the word of his mouth.

DWG: That has been very, very helpful—arrows put on our map for future study—treasure here. Those of us who take up the hint and look at these passages, we have liberty to come back to our brethren and say, 'I read that when I went home and it didn't mean a lot to me. What do you see in it?' It could make a subject of discussion over our soup on Sunday, couldn't it?

Introducing the Epistle

But now let's do a little reading in the epistle itself, and read just a few phrases which occur.

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. (1:9)

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. (1:25)

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. (2:1-2)

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. (2:8-10)

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. (4:12)

Say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfil the ministry that you have received in the Lord.' (4:17)

So if you ask what is my answer to the question, 'What is this epistle about and how will it help me?', I would answer that this epistle deals with the natural desire in all believers who love the Lord to make progress. Not to remain babes in Christ, but to progress and to perfect holiness in the fear of God; to experience the fullness of the Lord Jesus and the fullness of his salvation. As I say, that desire to progress is natural to the true believer unless, perchance, he has grown cold of heart and become stunted in growth. This epistle will tell us how that can be done, how I can progress in the things of the Lord and know the fullness of the Lord Jesus.

This epistle will also spend quite a bit of time telling us how it should not be done. To want to progress in the things of the Lord, to perfect holiness in the fear of God, is an exceedingly important and profitable thing. Like all things in life, it can have its dangers. I don't mean to frighten you off. Life is a very dangerous thing, isn't it? When you get up in the morning, you run the risk of falling over and breaking your leg before you've got downstairs. If you say, 'I will avoid that danger and stay in bed,' you will get thrombosis and die anyway! You can't live without danger. What is true of ordinary life is true of spiritual life: there are dangers on all sides. If Satan cannot trip us up as believers by ungodliness and worldliness and self-indulgence, but finds that we're determined to go on with the Lord and make progress in the life of holiness, then his satanic majesty will try to trip us up by our very desire to be holier.

You remember he tried that with the Lord Jesus. He came to the Lord Jesus first and said, 'Make these stones bread. Satisfy your hunger, if you are the son of God.' Our Lord refused to be dominated by his physical desires and said, 'Man shall not live by bread alone'. He was determined to obey the word of his Father first and in all things. Finding that it was no good trying to get the Lord to break the word of his Father, Satan tried another tactic, to push him over the brink the other way.

'Oh, young man,' he said, 'you are very holy. You are going to obey the Word of God, that's wonderful. You really believe it's the Word of God, you've got a strong faith. There are a lot of ordinary folks around here who don't really believe it's the Word of God at all, but you obviously do believe it. Then I'll tell you what, step out in faith on it. Take God at his word. Doesn't it say, "He will command his angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone?" Come on, young man, put it into practice. Jump off the temple and prove the Word of God.'

It was very subtle, wasn't it? It looked as if it was obedience to the word, and leading to greater exploits of faith. If our Lord had done it, it would have been an utter disaster. He didn't do it, of course; he saw through the deception (see Matt 4).

When Satan sees that we are determined to make progress in the things of God and to live holy lives, he will try and push us over the edge in that direction and get us interested in things that look as if they're holy but are of no use whatsoever for making us holy. They

will lead to sorrow and frustration and disappointment. So the first danger that this epistle will warn us of in our desire to be holy is that we shall think that it is all very good to trust Christ for the beginning of our spiritual experience but that, if we want to make progress into the more developed spiritual experiences and the greater riches and deeper spirituality, we'll need to go outside of Christ. Of course, that is wrong. This whole epistle is written to show us that the way to deeper experience of spiritual life, the way into the deeper things of God, is through that same blessed Lord Jesus through whom we came into salvation at the very first.

Apparently, going around the ancient world and troubling the believers, there were teachers who unashamedly would have recommended things other than Christ for the development of the spiritual life. No true believer is going to be permanently misled by those things, but we shall have to be careful. If I came to you and said, 'My dear brother, what is the secret for going on with God, for entering into the deeper things? I wonder what the first word would be that would come to your lips. Would it be 'Christ'? Would it be something else? Let us, therefore, briefly look at some of the other recipes for the deepening of spiritual life that were being advocated by these false teachers to whom Paul eludes in this letter.

False Recipe 1-'Special' spiritual experiences

Let no one disqualify you ('rob you of your prize' RV), insisting on asceticism and worship of the angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head. (2:18-19)

There are difficulties in Paul's language here, and in the translation of it, but the recipe that some of these teachers were recommending is obvious. It was going in for various super-duper spiritual experiences and embarking on visions. Not perhaps worshipping angels: I doubt whether any that would have dared to call themselves Christians in those early days would have recommended actually worshipping angels. The introduction of the worship of angels into Christianity came some centuries later. I myself think what Paul means is that these false teachers alleged that they could introduce you into such experiences of the spiritual world that you could actually join in the worship of angels as the angels worship God—tongues of angels. 'No,' says Paul, 'such super-duper so called spiritual experience is not of Christ. In fact, it will minister to our fleshly mind, and to go in for it is "not holding fast to the Head".' In my worship, in my spiritual exercises, it's not listening in to the angels that I need to be doing; it is holding fast to the Head, which is the Lord Jesus.

False Recipe 2-Philosophy

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. (2:8-10)

Another false recipe for the deepening of spiritual life is called philosophy. Now I doubt whether Paul was referring to what we normally call philosophy today. That is an academic discipline with its formal logic. What Paul is presumably talking about here are things that went under the name of philosophy but weren't real philosophy at all: things like theosophy or some of the Indian mystical religions and yoga and such like things. All those who claimed special knowledge that isn't common to all believers. Paul here says that seeking that kind of special knowledge and great mysteries and advanced learning is wrong. Why? We don't need it anyway. For in Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and if you are in him, because he is the very fullness of God, you have been filled. If you have been filled with Christ, there's no room for these other things. Beware of bogus claims to knowledge. Every believer is in Christ, every believer has been filled and all the fullness of the Godhead is available to every believer in the Lord Jesus.

False Recipe 3-Asceticism

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. (2:16)

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. (2:20-23)

These are things that we generally put under the term of asceticism, which sounds a long word but isn't really. *Askeō* in Greek means to practise, and then it comes to be used of an athlete's practise and training. If you are to be an Olympic swimmer, you'll not only have to shave your head, sir, but you'll have to get up very early in the morning, and in all weathers, to be down to the swimming pool to swim about twenty miles before breakfast and be in bed by ten, and all that kind of thing! That is what the Greeks would have called *askēsis*, stern exercise. Then it came to be applied to spiritual exercises, and is generally applied nowadays in particular to those so called spiritual exercises that take the form of being hard on the body: putting peas in your shoes, using hair shirts, training yourself to say the same monotonous prayer ten thousand times just by sheer willpower.

All such rigorous things like this have particular rules: handle not, taste not, touch not. These things have a show of wisdom in 'will worship' (v. 23 KJV), meaning the development of your psychological power and severity to the body. You may wonder how it is that these kinds of things ever appeal to anybody. I must confess they don't appeal to me, but then that's because of my sinfulness in another direction: I like to stay in bed too late on a wet morning! How is it that they ever appeal to anybody? Because there is in every true believer a desire to be holy. In your desire to be holy have you never found yourself wishing that there was some recipe for being holy overnight? Have you never felt yourself saying, 'I think I'm missing something; I'm struggling against these sins still.' And along come these chaps

saying, 'If you really want to be free of sin and come to the happy state of sinlessness, here is a recipe for it—rigorous disciplines.'

Paul says that they are absolute humbug. Instead of promoting holiness they will do the very opposite. They will lead to the indulgence of the flesh, sometimes by reaction. When the body has been severely used, it will sometimes take its own revenge in the other direction, and that will take its toll in the form of spiritual pride, like the Pharisees with their rules and regulations, imagining they were holy. 'You tithe mint, dill and cumin,' said our Lord to them, 'You wash the outside of the cup and your inner self hasn't been touched, full of extortion and wickedness' (see Matt 23:23–26). It is not the way to deal with the flesh.

What then is the way to deal with the flesh? Well let me just point you to the verses. That's all I may do, and we're trying to gather the general argument of the epistle. Here is God's recipe to deal with the flesh:

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)

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. (2:11)

Here is God's great gospel, God's way of dealing with the flesh. Then, in the power of the risen Lord, we are to do what chapter 3 and verse 5 tells us: to put to death, not our physical bodies, but what is earthly in us in the sense of sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry.

False Recipe 4—Fighting spiritual forces

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (2:15)

When it comes to conflict with demonic powers, these false teachers talk much about principalities, powers and dominions. They would have told you that it was possible to have direct experience and to enter into those realms and listen to the worship of angels, and there to struggle over demons and principalities and powers. Now in the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul does tell us straight that we wrestle against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places. That is perfectly true. But if our struggling against the spiritual opposition is going to be effective, we shall have to learn that it is not our victory or by our might. The victory has been won for us by the Lord Jesus. Therefore, if you would strengthen me in my fight against evil spiritual powers, don't fill my mind with endless discussions of evil spiritual powers, but do like Paul does, concentrate my mind on the Lord Jesus and on the fact that he has won the victory over those powers. This great victory over the powers of hell has already been achieved and the Lord has now ascended triumphant.

Understanding where we stand

I'm going to suggest one of the major things we shall be looking at. Far from being some sort of academic study, it is going to be a very practical study about how we may make progress in the things of God. As we have seen, this epistle will tell us what things we are to be careful about, the false recipes to avoid; and it will also point us to the true recipes. But there is one danger that can come while we are preoccupied with pushing ahead: we can forget what we already have in Christ.

You may not have found it so, but I have from time to time, and I think others have. When people want to go on with the Lord and develop holiness of life, that is exceedingly important. To perfect holiness in the fear of God, to develop a holy lifestyle in business, in the home and elsewhere, this epistle tells us that we have to work at it. But if it should happen, as it frequently does, that we fear we're making very little progress, we could become despondent and feel we will never succeed. And once more Satan gets the advantage of us. If we're not careful, in extreme cases it can lead to depression or even to nervous breakdowns. In the battle to make progress we shall need the tremendous emphasis of this letter, so that we do not forget what we already have in the Lord. Consider and never forget it: the tremendous things you already have in Christ.

When our Lord was in the upper room and wanted to teach his apostles about his way of holiness, he taught them two things. He taught them about that once and for all bathing that never needs to be repeated, and he taught them about the constant rinsing of the feet that has to be often done (see John 13:6–10). Tell me, which is the bigger thing? Bath all over, or the foot bath? You would say the bath all over is the big thing, and it comes first. What a lovely and healthy emphasis there is in this letter. I'm going to finish by rehearsing in your ears some of the things this letter will tell us that Christ has already done for us. In getting hold of them and enjoying them we will find great strength against the enemy, great enthusiasm to make progress.

What has he done then? Look at chapter 1 verse 12: he has qualified us already! 'Give thanks for that', says Paul. It is tremendous. Here you are, pushing ahead as best you can, but the fact is that God 'has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.' What glory it is to think of that inheritance of the saints. I was reading that passage the other day about those who stand outside the shut door (see Luke 13:22–30). There must be a chink or two in that door because, says our Lord, 'You'll see Abraham coming, and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets.' In my boyish fashion I couldn't help but imagine them outside the door and saying, 'Look there's Abraham coming! And who's that, that's Isaac. And there are all the prophets, there's Isaiah and Ezekiel. Oh, and there's Peter and Paul!' What a great thing to see the guests come in and take their places at the banquet in the kingdom of God.

Then I remember, of course, I am not standing outside looking through a keyhole, which is a place of unfortunate loss. But I am inside, my brother, my sister, and that's already true of you also. He has qualified you to be a partaker of 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' (Col 1:13). He 'has now reconciled' you (vv. 21–22). 'You have been filled in him' (2:10). 'In him also you were circumcised' (v. 11). You have 'been buried with him in baptism' (v. 12). Oh yes, but more than that, 'God [has] made [us] alive together with him,

having forgiven us all our trespasses' (v. 13). You stand in the clear with God. He has raised us together with him (3:1). Oh the tremendous wealth of what the Lord has done!

I found in my youth that, if I wasn't careful, when I came to the Lord in my private devotions, I reckon I must have bored him, rehearsing all my failures. What a very dull conversation with the Lord. It's got to be done of course, hasn't it? There's always a tremendous lot to say about my failures. But may God help me to turn around and survey again the wealth of blessings that are already mine. It is the memory and realisation of what he has already done that will give me the strength to go on.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has 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.