

Colossians:

Complete in Christ



We are exiting into the book of Colossians. This is Exit 12 in the New Testament, or Exit 51 of the 66 exits. There are only 15 books to go until we close out our tour of Route 66 where we started in a garden of ruin and in a city of restoration in the book of Revelations.

I remember the first time I went to Texas. I was going to the Southern Baptist convention. My wife and I were traveling with another couple. Now I saw many westerns when I was a kid about what Texas was going to look like. We get to Texas, and I know I am in Texas because I saw that big sign that says I am in Texas. To be totally honest, I was really disappointed. It is nothing against Texas, but I think it was about four hours into Texas when I had this thought; I am just not impressed. Not to offend anyone from Arkansas, but it looked just like Arkansas looked. It wasn't anything like I thought. Sometime it is easy to lose enthusiasm, because I know some of you are thinking that Colossians sounds a whole lot like Ephesians. But we will discover as we get into the New Testament and we fine tune Route 66, a lot of these books are going to have a similar feel, yet they are going to be so different. It is my responsibility to point out, not similarities, but the differences in some of these books. In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul's main theme was the church, and he presented the church as the body of Christ. He is writing to the church at

Ephesus while he is in prison, and some people believe he may have also written a letter at the same time to the church in Colossae. We know both of these letters are his prison letters, so they have a similar feel. You need to remember that he did not found the church of Colossae, Epaphras did. Therefore, he is writing to a group of people he had never met. He is writing to them because he has heard of a problem from Epaphras. He is writing this letter to correct a heresy. Colossians is going to feel like Ephesians because it does speak about the body of Christ, the church, but that is not Paul's emphasis. The emphasis in Colossians is not the church as the body of Christ, but Christ as the head of the body. There are some things in this small letter that will absolutely bring you to your knees when you realize what the Bible says about Christ, and therefore, based on who Christ is and what He has done for our salvation, the response that we should be living because we are in Jesus Christ.

When we studied Galatians, we talked about our freedom in Christ. When we looked at Ephesians, we talked about our riches in Christ. In Philippians, we talked about our joy in Christ. As we study Colossians, we will talk about our completion in Christ. In Christ, we are free, in Christ, we are rich, in Christ, we have joy, and in Christ, we are complete. You need to remember the heresy behind the letter of Paul's to the church of Colossae. There was a group of people coming into the church saying Christ alone was not enough. Now we saw that in Paul's letter to the church of Galatia where there were some Jewish folks saying that it was alright to believe in Christ, but you also have to add the works of the law. They had this list of things they thought you had to do to be saved. In Paul's letter to the church of Colossae, the Jewish people are not the problem. There was a Greek philosophy there. There is a group of people there called Gnostics, who believed in knowledge for salvation. They had no problem with a person believing in Christ, but Christ alone is not enough. Salvation was not through Christ alone, but Christ plus a certain level of knowledge. They were pulling people away from the church and Christ, so that is why Paul is writing this letter. That is why he speaks so

much about Christ. There are some things we believe about Jesus that we take for granted, but in that day, they were not as certain about Jesus. We praise God for this book of Colossians. Let us begin Colossians in chapter 1:15-23.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Now he is going to get personal, talking to the church at Colossae) 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, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister."

To me, because of the background heresy called Gnosticism, Paul's letter to the church of Colossae is not as easy to outline as some of his previous letters have been. We are not trying to capture the intricate details of the letter; we are after the big story of Colossians. Once we capture the big story, we will understand why God not only inspired this to an individual church nearly two thousand years ago, but he preserved it in our Bible so that it would have a purpose for us, as a church, this very moment. I pray there is a sense that each of us actually believe we are listening to God, through a man named Paul, write a letter to our church just like he did to

the church of Colossae. I would outline this book, not by its chapters, but by its subject matter:

The Person of Christ

1. His relationship with God
2. His relationship with the world
3. His relationship with the Church

This Great Mystery

1. He is the image of the invisible God
2. He is the firstborn of creation
3. He is the head of the Church

This Great Hope

1. The hope of glory
2. Christ in you

Paul says we have a great hope. It is Christ in us, the hope of glory. According to Paul, the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, the head of the Church, lives in you. Wow! That is your hope of glory.

Based on that truth, he will use “therefore,” two times. Now we see “therefore” a lot in Romans. We see it a lot in the big doctrinal books, because when Paul talks about doctrine, he wants us to make sure we don’t go off into theological clouds and only become intellectual in knowledge about God. He wants us to understand the reason he is talking about doctrine is because he expects us to live this thing out where we live. Now anytime we see, “therefore,” in the Bible, we stop and see what it is there for. We usually discover that what he is going to say next is based on what he has just said. So when he finishes talking about Christ being the image of the invisible God, first born of all creation, and head of the Church, then he gives us two practical applications of this truth of Christ being in us.

Now I have already told you that the main purpose of the book is to show us that we are complete in Christ. If you have Christ, you are full and you are complete. There is not anything that needs to be added to you. If you have Christ, you are in a right relationship with God no matter what anyone tells you. The Bible says you are complete. Christ alone, through faith alone, by grace alone, it is what the story of redemption is all about.

Image of the Invisible God

The Bible says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The word that Paul uses for image is a Greek word, *icon*, which we use today. In a Greek dictionary, it has three definitions, 'a likeness, a representation, and a manifestation.' That is how the Greeks used this word image. So we know that Jesus is the likeness, Jesus is the representation, and Jesus is the manifestation of the invisible God. The reason Paul states this because the Gnostics have the philosophical belief that matter was evil and spirit was good. So they saw the world through a dualistic approach. Anything made of matter is evil and anything of spirit is good. Do you see a problem with that? There is a big problem with that. The Gnostics believe God could not have created a world of matter if matter is evil. They believe God created an authority a little lesser than Him, who created an authority a little lesser than Him, and so on and so on until finally you get to the person, the being who is still somewhat heavenly, who creates the world. Therefore, God is freed from the matter that is in the world because a good God, who is spirit, would not create matter since matter is evil. To a Gnostic, salvation was to be freed one day from this body made of matter, and the way to salvation was through knowledge. At different phases of the knowledge, you would learn a key word, and that key word would give you the key to next level. Then you would learn another key word that would give you a key to the next level, until finally you were where God was.

Now here, the church is preaching Jesus, and Gnostics could not believe that Jesus was God because He has a body. And if He has a body, it means He is evil; therefore, He cannot be God. So the Gnostics do not believe

Jesus was God. They actually believed that if Jesus was God, He really didn't have a body, it just seemed like He had a body. But since you could touch Him, according to the early disciples, most Gnostics taught that the Spirit of God just hovered over Jesus, came on Him at His baptism, and stayed with Him during His earthly ministry. Then when He went to that cross, the Spirit of God left Jesus right before Jesus died. So He died on that cross as a man. As a matter of fact, the Gnostics had some paintings of Jesus hanging on the cross, and the Spirit of God is over to the side with this caption, this thought, as He laughs: *They think they crucified Me!* This is why Paul is laboring to say that if you know Jesus, you have the image of the invisible God.

Now archeologically, we have discovered some letters. For a long time, scholars had trouble translating the Greek manuscripts because they didn't have the code. It didn't go along with the classical Greek. They discovered that the Greek of the New Testament was called Koine Greek, and Koine Greek was the Greek of the common people, the country folk, so to speak. It wasn't the language of the intellectual world of the Greek society. In some of those common writings, we have discovered how they used this word, icon. We have archeological evidence of a letter that a dad wrote to his son. He said, "I am enclosing an icon of me, painted by...", and he names the painter. The father sent a painted portrait of himself to the son, and called it an icon; it was an image, a representation it was a manifestation. Have you ever wished you could see God? The way you see God is by seeing Jesus. Jesus walked on this earth to let us have a full portrait of who the invisible God is.

This past weekend, my wife and I were in Louisville. We had reservations at a hotel, where both had meetings to attend. When her meeting was finished, she went to our room. Thinking my meeting had finished before hers did, I went to the desk and tried to check in. They wouldn't let me check in because she had already checked in and he started to give me a key, and I thought that was strange. But then, before he handed me the key, he said he needed proof that I was Mr. Cunningham. How do I prove I

am Mr. Cunningham? He asked for a photo ID. So I reached in my billfold, pulled it out, and showed it to him. Then he agreed I was who I was.

You see, God wants us to clearly know who He is, so He gave us a photo ID. Some will look at that photo ID and question it. I will never forget my first mission trip to Brazil. Trying to be the shepherd of our group, I was the last one off the plane because whoever booked our seats booked those cheap seats in the back of the plane. One of our people left something on the plane and I had to go back and get it, so I was the last person in line. Everyone else had already gone through customs. Now, I knew no Portuguese at all...and there were all of my people on the other side of the line, with a man between me and them. I just had this sinking feeling. I showed him my passport and he looks at it, and then looks at me. He looks at it again, and then at me again, and then does it again. I am thinking *it is me!* You know what he was doing though. Sometimes you look a little differently as you get a little older, maybe your hairstyle changes. He was really investigating. If you want to investigate who the invisible God is, you need to look, clearly, at the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, you have a photo ID of God!

Firstborn of Creation

The Bible tells us Jesus is the firstborn of creation. Can you imagine being a Gnostic in the church and this letter being read pronouncing Jesus as the firstborn of all creation? "Firstborn" here does not mean priority in time, but supremacy in rank. Sometimes in the Bible, it is talking about someone's first born child. Jesus was the first born Son of Mary. It meant priority in time, first one to be born (though Jesus was also supreme in rank). But this word doesn't always mean the first in time; it means the first in rank. It carries with it the thought of preeminence. The Bible is not saying what the Jehovah's Witness' say. They say that Jesus Christ is not God, that He was created by God. They use this verse to say that He is the firstborn of creation; that He was the first thing that was created by God. Jesus is not a created being! He is the second person of the Triune

Godhead. He became a man, but in becoming a man, He remained who He had always been, the eternal Son of God. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the most preeminent person in the universe. Scripture teaches He created it, and everything that was created was created through Him and for Him. Just so we understand that He is not part of creation, Paul says He is before all things. Not only is He the creator of our universe and all things, He is actually the one who sustains the universe. So God just didn't create it and back off; God is still actively involved with His creations. Get this picture...Jesus, out of nothing, made everything. That is a big God! Everything that was created was ultimately created for Him.

He is not only the plan, the planner, the architect, the builder; He is the goal. It is all for Him. Paul is trying to tell us that our hope of glory is that the firstborn of all creation, the most preeminent person in the universe, is in you. Did you hear that? According to Paul, the second person of the Triune Godhead Paul lives in you, and that is your hope of glory. You are a Gentile, not a Jew, Paul says, and you have this hope of glory too.

The Head of the Church

Then Paul tells us Jesus is the head of the Church. When we think of head of the Church, we think of the husband picturing Christ, as Christ is the head of the Church, the wife picturing the body, as we are the Church, and the head gives leadership to the body, as Christ gives leadership to the Church. That is true, but that is not what this is talking about. Head is not being used to refer to leadership, or communication, or being the brains, so to speak, and that is no reference to husbands over wives. Sometimes, 'head' is used in a different way. As a matter of fact, Paul goes on to say the head of the Church, the beginning. We talk about the head of the Amazon River. When I am on that Amazon River, I realize I am not close to the head. This is saying Christ, the hope of your glory, is the source, the beginning, of the Church. Without Him, there would not be a creation, without Him, we would not know the invisible God, and without Him, you would not be where you are, a part of something bigger than you!

He is the firstborn from the dead. Now we know the Bible has already told us about other people who have died and been resurrected. As a matter of fact, Jesus resurrected somebody Himself before He ever died and resurrected. When we think of all that the Biblical record reveals about resurrection, we know the most preeminent person that ever experienced a resurrection was Jesus Christ because His resurrection was so different. He never died again! Why did God do all He did in Jesus? It was to reconcile us.

Reconciliation

I read about a pastor who had a man and his wife come to him, and you could really tell this man was from the country. He lived back in those days when most people only had a second and third grade education. He was a great man, but he struggled with some of his words. He came to his pastor when he and his wife were having trouble, and he meant to tell the pastor they needed help with reconciliation. Well he couldn't say reconciliation, so he said it this way; "We need help with re-cancelation." Now that sounds funny for a guy to say re-cancelation instead of reconciliation, but think about it, (if that could be a word) re-cancel-ation. What really needs to happen for reconciliation is that somebody has to cancel all of the things in the past that has got them where they are at. That is why some people can never be reconciled with someone else, because we can't cancel out what has happened to us in a relationship, so it severs the relationship.

God sent Jesus to reconcile, not just us as sinners, but all things to Himself through Christ, making peace by His blood. Please hear me. Man doesn't reconcile God; God reconciles us. There is nothing you can do to reconcile a holy and just God, so in salvation, God had to take the initiative and do the reconciling. He has reconciled all things to Himself. He did that with the blood of His Son going to a cross and laying His life down. Dealing with what was wrong with us; God could reconcile us and the world to Himself.

Now Paul is going to call them out and say you know how you used to live. Some of you know how you used to live, alienated and hostile in your mind toward God. But Paul says now you have been reconciled.

Complete in Christ

He goes through this wonderful passage of Scripture to teach us that Christ, the One God used to reconcile us to Himself, bodily contained the fullness of deity while He was a man. Again, if you are a Gnostic that would mean you can't believe Jesus is God's Son because Jesus has a body. God being a Spirit, He wouldn't touch a body. And now Paul is saying Jesus embodied deity. Jesus Christ was fully God while being fully a man who was a portrait of the invisible God. Jesus is full of God, and the Bible says I am full of Jesus! If you are full of Jesus and He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, and the source of the church, what else do you need? Do we hurt for people who don't realize Christ is enough? Do we truly understand the damage that is being done when many churches paint Jesus as dying on the cross just to make something available, and now it is up to you? We all have this list of things that we all have to do, and in somehow doing these things, we are reconciled to God. No! The beauty and simplicity of the gospel is captured here because there is an enemy to the gospel. Do you realize if there were not Gnosticism, we would not fully know what we know about Jesus without this letter to the church at Colossae? We would not understand its depth. Sometimes, that person that comes into your life, who believes totally heretical teaching, could be used of God to cause you to dig to a level you never would have dug to without that person in your life. Yes, God may have brought them into your life for them, but God also may have brought them into your life for you. In Him, we are complete.

Alive in Christ

Then in chapter 2, Paul begins to tell us why we are complete in Him. He says you have already been circumcised. In baptism, when you died with Christ, when you believed in the operation of God who raised Jesus and

could also raise you, God spiritually circumcised you, not a part of your male skin, but He cut off that body of flesh. The problem was you were a sinner because you lived in a body that had a flesh that was dead to God and alive to sin. There is nothing you can do about that. You, as a sinner, can't change your nature. You need the work, not of the hand of man, but a circumcision made without hands; the circumcision of Christ, in which He radically alters your nature by changing you from being dead to Him and alive to sin, to dead to sin and alive to God. Just so we get this, Paul says you were dead in trespasses and sin. You need to get this. That evangelistic illustration we have all used of a sinner in a lake gasping with his last spiritual breath, getting ready to go under the water and die, and we are trying to throw him a life preserver for him to reach out and grab...that is not Biblical. It may create a powerful story before an evangelists gives an invitation, it may cause someone to run out here and go 'fishing' and be a spiritual life guard, but you were not drowning. If you want to use that analogy, you were face down in the water. You were dead. If I can be honest, most of you stunk. You were not floating on top of the water; you were at the bottom of the lake, and God made you alive! Wow!

Forgiven Debt

Now watch this, Paul is going to use some participles to describe being made alive, he said, "...having forgiven us all our trespasses," not part of them, but all of them! I know this is scandalous to those who come out of a works based church where forgiveness was measured out incrementally, you dealt with everything one at a time. You could be forgiven, but something could cause you not to be right. But when you got saved, when God made you alive, He forgave you of all your trespasses. He released you from the penalty of every one of them; they have already all been dealt with!

Do you know what He did to forgive you? Paul is saying in Colossians 2 that He wiped out the record. He canceled the record of debt that was

against you. That word, debt, in Greek society in the Koine language meant an IOU. Have you ever done an IOU on paper or verbally? I owe you; that is how your sin is presented, as a debt. It is like some of us with a credit card. Why do we keep buying something that we can't pay for today thinking we will be able pay for it at the end of the month? We somehow think at the end of this month when we can't pay the debt, we are going to be able to pay it next month. They charge interest, so the next thing you know, we are in a situation where it is not possible. Can you imagine the credit card company sending you a nice little letter saying we have canceled your debt; you don't have to pay it back? That would be good!

In Greek society, they recorded debt, but the ink they used in Greek society didn't have a bite, didn't have an acidity to it. They wrote on papyrus, or vellum, which is animal skin. The ink would dry, but later you could take a sponge and wipe it clean because it didn't bite. Paper was real expensive in those days, so a lot of times you wrote and then reused it. It is hard for us to reuse paper today because we write in ink or print it out on a computer.

The Bible is saying there was a record of debt against you, and God didn't mark through it, He didn't write on top of it "paid in full," He wiped it clean. There is no record of it. Wow! The slate that He wiped clean, He nailed to the cross. Usually, when a business sells something, they keep receipts of their sales. Every bit of it has been paid for, but there is still a record of it. Are you listening? There is NO RECORD of our sin! It has been nailed to the cross; it has been wiped clean! Paul is saying this because some of us are going to let Satan or someone else whisper to us with a false teaching. Paul wants us to know that when Christ did what He did, He disarmed principalities and powers and authorities! He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross. Satan has no power over you at all! Why do you continue to let him beat you up with something you have done that God has had wiped clean? He wiped it clean because when Jesus put himself on that cross, He completely paid for your sins. You say that

you don't feel forgiven. I don't care how you feel. Quit living by how you feel, and live by the truth of God's Word! You are forgiven. Please hear me! Don't sit here thinking you are not! It will cripple you. It will paralyze you. It will handicap you. Then the next thing you know, you will be on the sideline, and instead of being useful, you will be useless.

Set your Mind on Christ

We have another 'therefore.' This one warns us about those people who come along in our life and are always us what we really need and don't need to be doing. Have any of you ever fallen for that? I used to get so convicted when I went to pastor conferences and a pastor would tell how early he would get up in the morning to pray. Then another pastor would tell how early he got up to study. Another one would tell how early he would get up to go out and witness. I got to where I didn't want to go to those conferences anymore. I can verify what Paul says. When you fall for doing what people tell you should and shouldn't do, you can change your behavior for a short period of time, but you cannot alter the indulgence of the flesh. You keep telling yourself that you are not going to drink. But will it stand the test if your flesh tendency is to want to drink? You can say you are not going to gossip ever again on online. But you will be posting again on social media no matter how much you tell yourself you are not going to if you try to appeal to something inside you to deal with your unredeemed flesh. It is not possible. Paul says that if you died with Christ, why are you trying to deal with your flesh tendencies in a fleshly manner?

He starts chapter 3 saying, "If then you have been raised with Christ..." He is telling us to get your mind off yourself. You need to get your mind on Christ. Set your mind on Christ! Set your mind on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. In chapter 2:6-7, he told us if you have received Christ, walk in Christ. Put down roots, grow up; get strong in the Lord! He says as you grow down, grow up you, and get strong in the Lord, you abound with thanksgiving.

The picture of abounding is like the Clarks River around here. Most of the time when I go by Clarks River, everything is cool. The last few weeks, not everything has been cool in the Clarks River Bottoms. The Clarks River Bottoms has not been able to hold all of the water that has fallen in the Dexter-Almo Bottoms. That is the picture; abounding, you can't keep it in. When you have your eye on you instead of on Christ and where He is, most of us do not abound with thanksgiving, it is woe is me. Paul says when you set your mind on Christ and where He is you, then you will begin to see your life as it really is, and your life is hidden with God in Christ.

When is the last time you saw yourself in Christ? He is seated at the right hand throne of God, and the Bible says when He appears, you will appear with Him in glory. Paul says when you focus on being a new man in Christ, being with Christ forever, you go to the closet, and you change your clothes. You put off those old deeds because you realize this is not who you are.

I know people think I am radical about alcohol, but I can't help it. I don't like it. If I had one wish in the world other than everyone being saved, it would be that there would be no more alcohol in the world at all. Sorry, that is just how I feel about it. I can't understand how a person can be a Christian, go to the closet, and pull out a Bud Light cap to put on, or come to church in a racecar coat that advertises it! How can a lady go into the closet and put on some of the things you ladies put on? How can we be men and wear what we wear, knowing we are wearing it for a certain reason that is totally fleshly. Every behavior hanging in that closet that we put on will say old man or new man. Yes, I am being radical to prove this point; how dare we gossip! How dare we be unkind! How dare we not forgive! Our behaviors say old man or new man. If we could really grasp this thought that I am a new man in Christ, I am going to Heaven and it could be today, we wouldn't be doing some of the things we are doing. Let me be bold, if before that thought, I just thought Christ is in me, and my behavior is going to tell if He is in me or not. That would change the way we live.

Paul finishes out Colossians by telling us that in your church, in your home, in your work, let your behavior say you are a new man in Christ, and Christ in you. He is your hope of glory. What a book! Praise God for the Gnostics because we now have a beautiful picture of the Christ who lives inside us.