

Synthetic Bible Studies

Containing an outline study of every book of the Bible
with suggestions for Sermons, Addresses and
Bible Expositions

By

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LESSON TWELVE

COLOSSIANS

Colosse was an important city of Phrygia in Asia Minor, situated to the east of Ephesus. It is not definitely known that Paul visited it, and yet it is assumed that he did so on his third journey. Chapter 2, verse 1, however, would seem to point in the opposite direction. Those who believe he never visited the city suggest Epaphras as the founder of the church there (1:7). The Epistle seems to have been written while Paul was a prisoner at Rome (4:8), about A. D. 62, and sent by Tychicus (4:7, 8).

Colossians bears a somewhat similar relationship to Ephesians as that of Romans to Galatians. That is, it seems to make a pair with that Epistle, and to have been written almost simultaneously therewith. It was sent by the same messenger (Ephesians 6:21, 22). It also contains some of the same expressions. Compare 1:4 with Ephesians 1:15, also 1:14 with Ephesians 1:7. Compare the prayers in the two Epistles also, and the references to the body of CHRIST.

The central theme of Colossians is CHRIST, while that of Ephesians is the church.

In the first named we have the Head, and in the last named the body of the church. Both are thus seen exalted on high (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 2:6).

Perhaps it would be well to designate the theme of the Epistle as, "*The Headship of CHRIST,*" or "*The Believers' Union or Identification with CHRIST.*"

It is quite evident from the contents that the Epistle was occasioned by the fact that the spiritual life of the church was threatened by false teaching (2:4, 8). This false teaching seems to have been in the direction of angelolatry (1:16; 2:10, 15, 18), ritualism (2:16), asceticism (2:20-23).

They, i. e., those influenced by the false teachings, seem in the first place to have questioned CHRIST's true relationship to GOD and to the spiritual and natural worlds. In the second place, they seem to have questioned the facts of an objective atonement, and like the Galatians, sought to supplement the Gospel by Judaism or an equivalent. While in the third place, they doubted sanctification by the HOLY SPIRIT, accepting instead methods of a physical and dietetic character. Indeed the whole region of Phrygia roundabout is said to have been particularly prone to mystical and fanatical superstitions of one kind or another.

Professor M. B. Riddle, characterizing the situation, says that while "the errors were not fully developed, they nevertheless seemed to combine Grecian philosophy, oriental mysticism and Jewish asceticism, all three leading away from the headship of CHRIST."

The same authority divides the Epistle into four parts:

- Doctrinal, (chap. 1).
- Polemical, (chap. 2)
- Hortatory, (3:1-4:6).
- Conclusion, (4:7-18).

Doctrinal Chapter, 1

In this first chapter CHRIST is shown to be the All in all.

For example: After the salutation (1:1-8), and the prayer (vv. 9-13), as in Ephesians, we have a declaration of His fulness (vv. 14-22), as Redeemer (v. 14), Creator (vv. 15-16), Preserver (v. 17), Head of the Body (the Church) (v. 18), Reconciler (vv. 20-22), Sanctifier of His people (v. 22). This declaration is, in turn, followed by that of Paul's ministry (vv. 23-29).

It is noticeable in this latter declaration that Paul speaks really of a twofold ministry:

- the first is the ministry of the Gospel itself, (v. 23), and
- the second that of the mystery of the Body of CHRIST (vv. 24-27).

Notice carefully his language in verses 25 and 26, which agrees entirely with Ephesians 3. This explains the otherwise difficult allusion in verse 24 to his filling "**up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ.**" "CHRIST" here seems to stand not only for the Head but the body as united with the Head. Compare I Corinthians 12:12. Thus Paul was filling up on his own part that which was lacking, having his own share in the suffering of the mystical body for that body's sake. Notice also the marginal reading of the last phrase of verse 25. "**To fulfill the Word of God,**" is rendered, "*fully to preach the Word of God*"; from which may be gathered that such is not done save as we reveal and emphasize this secret hitherto about the body of CHRIST, the mystery of the church, composed of a people called out from both Jews and Gentiles, distinct and separate from the coming manifested kingdom of Isaiah.

Before leaving this chapter let me call attention further to that description of CHRIST in verse 15 as "**the first born of every creature**," which has given anxiety to some as seeming to cast a doubt on His deity or eternal sonship. In the light of so much else to establish that great truth we might dismiss the apparent difficulty without fear. But it may be interesting to add that certain Greek scholars, conspicuous among them S. P. Tregelles, show good reason for explaining the words "*First born before all creation.*" We did not find time in our study of Ephesians to analyze either of the apostolic prayers.

Observe in this one however (vv. 9-13) the four needful petitions:

That they might be filled with the knowledge of GOD's will.
That they might walk worthily of the Lord in fruit, bearing.
That they might be strengthened with power to endure temptation.
That they might be thankful.

These prayers are very suggestive as the basis of practical sermons, and Bible readings.

Polemic Chapter, 2

Having established the fact that CHRIST is the Head of the body in whom all fulness dwells, the apostle now warns his hearers against being led away from Him (vv. 1-7). They were in danger of this through the philosophy of certain false teachers (v. 8), and through the Judaism or asceticism of others (vv. 16-23).

Perhaps we are hardly justified in making any rhetorical distinction between these false teachings, as it may be that the philosophy and vain deceit referred to in the first instance (v. 8) cover the whole. It will be seen that these Colossian Christians were in danger of putting the shadow for the substance - ordinances instead of CHRIST (vv. 16, 17), and a humility of the flesh, i. e., the old carnal nature, instead of one wrought by the HOLY GHOST (vv. 18, 23).

Let it be carefully observed that the apostle, inspired of GOD, meets these errors with the asseveration of positive truth; and that this truth is none other than that of the believer's identification with CHRIST involved in the proposition about the mystical Body.

The believer is circumcised (v. 11); buried (v. 12); risen (v. 12); quickened (v. 13), with CHRIST, and this on the basis of what CHRIST Himself did for him in His own death and resurrection (vv. 14, 15).

It is seemingly foolish to speak of the revelation of one truth in the New Testament as more wonderful than another when all are in a sense alike wonderful. But this one contributes to the assurance of faith in the experience of those who apprehended it as perhaps none other can.

Let the illustration of our own bodily formation aid in that apprehension. If my head dies, my body dies; if my head rises from the dead, my body rises; if my head possesses quickening life, my body possesses that life. Now CHRIST is the Head and the church is His body, and we believers are individual members of that body. Everything, therefore, which is true of the Head is

true of the body. The more we dwell upon this thought the more assurance can we draw from such familiar passages as Romans 8:1, and kindred teachings of the New Testament. Oh, the unsearchable riches of that expression "**In Christ**," and that other one, "**Christ in you**"!

Let us take up this prayer of Paul upon our lips and seek that GOD may lead us into the understanding of it. Compare again Romans 6:1-14.

Hortatory, Chapters 3:1-4:6

The writer has just shown that in a legal or judicial sense as members of the mystical body of CHRIST we, as believers in Him, have died and risen with Him, and He now exhorts us to live accordingly.

On the basis of our identification with CHRIST in other words, we are now, first of all, to set our affections on heavenly things, i. e., on these very things he has been specially revealing to us (3:1-4).

We may, in the second place, be said to do this in the degree in which we "**mortify**," i. e., put to death our "**members which are upon the earth**" (3:5-11). That is, forever give up those sins of body and mind enumerated in the verses just referred to. It deserves particular notice that the renunciation of the things on the believer's part are assumed to be quite possible on the ground of his standing in CHRIST, however it may have been before.

But this exhortation is further carried out in a more positive form by what the believer is expected to put on, to add to his life, as well as by that he puts away (3:12-17). This too, it is assumed he is able to do. We have seen how he is able to do it in the study of Romans 8, i. e., through "**the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus**," through the operation of the HOLY SPIRIT in him giving him the victory.

It will be already seen how this applicatory part of the Epistle as well as the doctrinal part agrees with Ephesians, but the similarity is rendered the more striking by the further coincidence that the three classes of the social order are again singled out for direct address, viz: Husbands and wives (3:18, 19); parents and children (3:20, 21); masters and servants (3:22-4:1).

Much is said and written in these days about sociological topics, and chairs of sociology are being endowed in colleges and seminaries; but after all, the Bible is the best textbook on that subject to be found.

If private Christians were more faithful in its perusal, and preachers in its plain and simple exposition, who can tell what a solution might be found for our present problems of the family and the state?

The several topics under the head of the "Conclusion" in 4:7-18, are so simple in their outline as to require no particular treatment here.

~ end of Lesson 12 ~