



Colossians - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

By beginning his letter with prayer and thanksgiving to God, Paul encourages his readers to consider more carefully why they should always be thankful as Christians. Most especially, they should be thankful because Epaphras' preaching ministry has introduced them to the truth about God's grace and the nature of the fruit that springs from it. Their response should therefore be one of thankfulness to God for bringing them out of the realm of darkness into the Kingdom of Christ.

In poetic form, Paul celebrates and describes the supremacy of Christ, acknowledging he is the firstborn of creation, the head of the church, through whom and for whom everything was created. It is through his blood, shed on the Cross, that all can know true peace through redemption.

Paul concludes the chapter with an explanation that his personal circumstances as a prisoner are for the purpose of serving God and his church. His suffering and pain will help to deflect attention away from fledgling churches while they grow to maturity. The great mystery that God has made known through the death and resurrection of Jesus is that all the promises of God are made available to the Gentile Christians in places just like Colossæ.

I. Colossians 1:1-2 - Salutation

Paul follows the general pattern of letter writing in his day. However, in his own typical fashion, he begins the letter by calling on God to pour out his grace and peace upon the Colossians.

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

Colossians 1:1

Paul, an apostle. Although Paul has likely never been to Colossæ, he nevertheless feels a pastoral responsibility for this church. He writes to the Colossians with the authority of an apostle, Greek *apostolos* means one who is sent with the authority

of the sender, to assist the church in dealing with the problem of the dangerous teaching threatening its health.

Paul announces himself as an apostle in other letters: <<*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia*>> (2 Corinthians 1:1), and: <<*Paul an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead*>> (Galatians 1:1). However, the situations in Galatia and Corinth were much different for there was contention over the validity of Paul's apostleship. This was not the case in Colossæ, where he was the undisputed messenger that had brought the Gospel to the region, if not to them personally. His assertion of authority and the source from which it came make it clear that the advice in this letter can be fully trusted by the church.

Although Paul announces he is an apostle of Christ Jesus, for it was the Lord who personally appointed Paul on the Damascus Road in Acts 9:15-16, he reflects on the fact that it was by the will of God. Jesus too did everything according to the will of his Father: <<*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done*>> (Luke 22:42), <<*And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day*>> (John 6:39-40).

Timothy had travelled with Paul since joining his second missionary journey when Paul came to his home town: <<*Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek*>> (Acts 16:1). He was highly valued by Paul: <<*To Timothy, my beloved child*>> (2 Timothy 1:2a), who willingly sent him to places like Corinth: <<*For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church*>> (1 Corinthians 4:17), and had left him in Ephesus to deal with problems in the church there: <<*I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine*>> (1 Timothy 1:3).

² To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossæ:

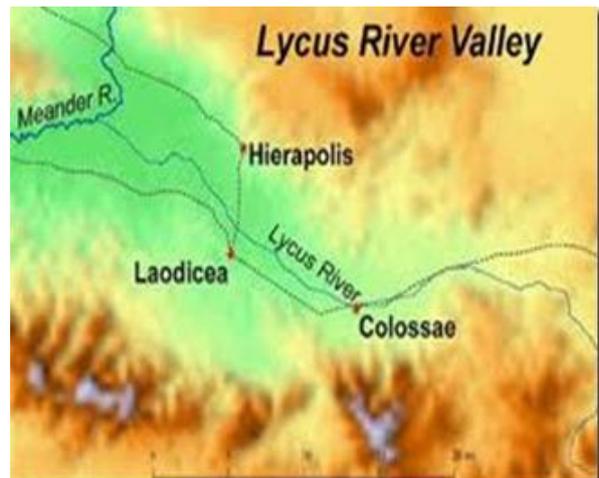
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Colossians 1:2

To the saints is an indication of Paul's intent that the letter is for the whole church and not just its leaders. That they are in Christ confirms them as a holy people, not by anything they have done but through the work of Christ who is within them by his Spirit and therefore they are in him.

Faithful brothers and sisters. The letter will go on to show that there was some confusion within the church due to false teaching. Yet Paul addresses them with the same description, i.e. faithful, as he does Epaphras (1:7), Tychicus (4:7), and Onesimus (4:9), all of whom were men he knew personally.

Colossæ was a city in Phrygia and was located on the Lycus River just over 100 miles or 161km east of Ephesus. Paul had visited the region on his 2nd missionary journey: <<*They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia*>> (Acts 16:6), and again as part of his 3rd journey on his way to Ephesus: <<*After spending some time there he departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples*>> (Acts 18:23), although there is no evidence he actually visited the city. See the image.



The Lycus River Valley

Surface surveys of the site of Colossæ have discovered inscriptions, a theatre, a cemetery and other structures. Coins point to official worship of the main Roman deities, plus the presence of mystery cults. Jewish presence in the Lycus Valley was likely strong, given the extant inscriptions and the literary references to Jews in Phrygia during the 2nd and 1st Centuries BC (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 12.147-153; Cicero, For Flaccus 68). A significant earthquake occurred in the Lycus Valley during the reign of Nero, circa AD60.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father is a typical Pauline greeting. Refer to Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:2 and Philemon 3. It was also used by other apostles: <<*May grace and peace be yours in abundance*>> (1 Peter 1:2b), and: <<*John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne*>> (Revelation 1:4).

Grace empowers a holy and faithful life from which death and sin are absent: <<*Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*>> (Romans 6:4).

In a profound sense this greeting nicely represents Paul's larger theological perspective. The sum total of God's activity toward his human creatures is found in the word grace; God has given himself to his people bountifully and mercifully in Christ. Nothing is deserved, nothing can be achieved. The sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God's grace is peace, God's *shalom*, both now and to come. The latter flows out of the former and both together flow from God the Father, being made effective in human history through the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. Colossians 1:3-14 - Paul Thanks God for the Colossians

Paul is thankful for the condition of the church in Colossæ, which had been transformed from the power of darkness into the glorious light of the Gospel.

Paul's long sentences, vv.3-8 and vv.9-11 are each a single sentence, evoke the sense of sustained conversation with God as the proper setting for reading or hearing Paul's letter. Further, Paul's thanksgivings are full of important theological themes that will be taken up again in what follows.

II.a Colossians 1:3-8 - Thanksgiving

Paul thanks God for the Colossians and their tangible expressions of faith, hope, and love.

³ In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.

Colossians 1:3-6

In our prayers for you we always thank God. As he was in a Roman prison, Paul could not be with the Colossians to help them grow and mature in their faith. There were, however, two things he could do: write to them with words of encouragement; and pray earnestly to God, who was present with him just as he was present with the Colossians. Paul spent much of his time in prayer for the church and its individual members. This is frequently reflected in his letters, for example: <<*For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers*>> (Romans 1:9), and: <<*When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God*>> (Philemon 4).

God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul will place a significant emphasis on the lordship of Jesus Christ in this letter. He is careful to affirm, however, that Jesus is not a separate God, yet he has a close relationship with the Father, for he is the Son and the agent of God.

For we have heard of your faith. Colossians, along with Romans, are the only two letters in the NT that Paul wrote to churches he did not plant and indeed had never visited. He did subsequently visit Rome as a prisoner but there is no historical evidence to suggest he ever did travel to see the Colossians, although it was clearly his intention, as he indicated to the local church leader Philemon: <<*One thing more – prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you*>> (Philemon 22).

Paul had written a similar comment to the church in Ephesus, where he had ministered for three years: <<*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers*>> (Ephesians 1:15-16). For them it was a different situation however, for there is historic evidence to suggest that the Word spread out from Ephesus to other towns and villages in

the surrounding countryside administered by Ephesus, and it seems it was these new converts that Paul was particularly referring to in that case.

Faith, love and hope. Paul spoke frequently of the importance of these three Christian virtues; refer to Romans 5:1-5, 1 Corinthians 13:13, Galatians 5:5-6, Ephesians 4:2-5, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, and 5:8, which were seen as foundational to the Christian life. See also Hebrews 6:10-12, 1 Peter 1:3-8, and 1:21-22.

In this passage, faith and love are based on hope, which is presented not as the action of hoping but as something objective – in the sense of ‘the thing hoped for’ – that Christians can anticipate with confidence, confirmed by: <<**When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory**>> (Colossians 3:4). Because it is laid up for you in heaven, no earthly ruler or demonic power can rob believers of the reality of this hope.

The word of the truth, i.e. the Gospel of Jesus, contrasts with the false teaching Paul later describes as: <<**empty deceit**>> (2:8).

Bearing fruit is a reference to the work a believer does as a natural response to accepting Jesus as Lord and the work of the Spirit within them: <<**By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things**>> (Galatians 5:22-23). It is the work of the Spirit that allows believers to truly comprehend the grace of God, without which no one could be reconciled with God.

In the whole world. It had been roughly 30 years since Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Gospel had indeed spread from Jerusalem into Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and likely into Egypt, North Africa, India and Persia as well. This had been at the command of Jesus: <<**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judæa and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**>> (Acts 1:8).

This whole passage paints a picture of God planting a new seed in his garden, which grows into something that was not even seen in his original creation. It is the seed of a new creation that will lead to the final fulfilment of all that God had intended right from the beginning. It is faith that reaches out to grasp what God offers in Jesus; the love that binds the community together; and the hope that looks eagerly forward to the time when God completes all that he has begun in Jesus.

⁷ This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow-servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, ⁸ and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Colossians 1:7-8

This you learned from Epaphras makes it clear that Paul did not plant the church at Colossæ. The people heard the Gospel from Epaphras, a shortened form of Epaphroditus, who was a fellow Colossian (4:12). The term for learned, Greek *manthanō*, is closely related to the term ‘disciple’, Greek *mathētēs*. More than

merely listening to a simple Gospel presentation, Paul makes it clear that the Gospel involves systematic instruction in the faith and in how to live as a Christian.

Our beloved fellow-servant is a term that can also be translated as slave or bondservant. In a culture where there were many slaves whose dream was freedom, and where those who were free had an abhorrence of the idea of becoming someone else's servant, Paul's frequent references to the servanthood of Christ would have been countercultural, yet highly descriptive of what it truly means to become a Christian. Examples of Paul describing himself as a servant are: <<*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God*>> (Romans 1:1), and: <<*Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness*>> (Titus 1:1); as well as references he makes to others: <<*What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each*>> (1 Corinthians 3:5), and: <<*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons*>> (Philippians 1:1).

Some manuscripts read 'on our behalf' rather than on your behalf. If this is the original reading, as several scholars suggest, this would mean that Epaphras has been a faithful ambassador in place of or on behalf of Paul among the Colossians. The name T. Asinius Epaphroditus occurs in an inscription found at Colossæ, showing that the name Epaphroditus or Epaphras was in use in the region.

He has made known to us your love in the Spirit is a reference to Epaphras' report to Paul and his team in Rome. Clearly, his report was a positive one in terms of the church generally, although he also raised concerns about false teaching that Paul will address later in the letter.

II.b Colossians 1:9-14 - Prayer

Paul reports in summary fashion how he regularly prays for the Colossians. He prays that they will know God's will and that God will give them the power to live it out. The prayer concludes with an expression of thanksgiving for God's mighty act of deliverance and redemption.

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

Colossians 1:9-10

For this reason is a reference to the positive state of the church in Colossæ, which resulted in those in Rome constantly praying for God's continued blessing on them.

Knowledge and wisdom were offered by the false teachers in Colossæ as noted in Chapter Two. Paul prays that the Colossians will have the wisdom and understanding that comes only from God; spiritual wisdom and understanding means that given by the Holy Spirit.

So that indicates that the wisdom and understanding would then lead to changed lives, for it would enable these Christians to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. To walk, here translated lead lives, is a Jewish metaphor for proper conduct or behaving oneself. It corresponds to the Hebrew term *halak*.

The rabbis had an entire oral tradition, later written down, especially in the Mishnah and the Talmuds, called Halakah that guided them in their behaviour. As a former rabbi, Paul calls believers to lead lives not according to the oral traditions of Judaism but in a way that is fully pleasing to the Lord Jesus Christ. Although Christians are completely justified from the moment of initial saving faith, they are not fully sanctified, and they can do things that either please or displease God each day.

Every good work is here viewed as the fruit of salvation in the life of a Christian, not as the prerequisite for entering a relationship with Christ. Paul's reference to bearing fruit and growing brings to mind the Parable of the Sower, refer to Mark 4:1-9 and 4:13-20. The seed sown on the good soil bore fruit thirty, sixty and a hundredfold.

¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

Colossians 1:11-12

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power. Spiritual power was a key issue in the Greco-Roman world. People sought power through connection with various gods and pagan rituals in order to protect them from evil spirits, as well as to help them acquire wealth or influence. Paul wants the Colossians to know that he prays regularly that God would impart his power to them, not for selfish aims or personal motives, but so that they can live for God in a worthy manner.

May you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks. The purpose of this God-given power is to provide the divine strength needed for the believer to attain Christian virtues, to persevere in the faith, to resist temptation and deceitful teachers, and so to know the joy of the Lord: <<*Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'*>> (Nehemiah 8:10).

Who has enabled you to share in the inheritance. Paul has taken language normally reserved for the Jewish people under the old covenant, as seen in Genesis 13:14-17, Numbers 26:52-56, and Joshua 19:9, and applied it to Gentiles under the new covenant.

Gentiles now have equal access to the Father and are heirs to the inheritance he has promised his people: <<*So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have*>>

access in one Spirit to the Father>> (Ephesians 2:17-18). This is based on the fact that God has made Gentiles saints in the light, i.e. holy ones or consecrated people, by the redemption he has procured through his Son.

¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:13-14

He has rescued us. Just as God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt under the old covenant: <<*Say therefore to the Israelites, “I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement”*>> (Exodus 6:6), and: <<*Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore*>> (Exodus 14:30), he has delivered them now from the power of darkness, that is, from the realm of Satan and the powers of evil: <<*I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me*>> (Acts 26:17-18).

The Kingdom of his beloved Son is the same as the Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of so frequently: <<*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*>> (Matthew 5:10), <<*And he said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables’*>> (Mark 4:11), <<*Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him*>> (Luke 8:1), and: <<*Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’*>> (John 3:3), which was central to Jesus’ teaching throughout the four Gospels. Jesus is the agent of God who will presently reign until he hands his Kingdom over to the Father: <<*Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power*>> (1 Corinthians 15:24), when the Kingdom of God comes into its full manifestation at the end of the present age. The emphasis here is on the present lordship of Christ, as it was for Peter: <<*For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you*>> (2 Peter 1:11).

Redemption means deliverance or liberation, emphasising here that believers have been delivered and have received forgiveness of their sins: <<*Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’*>> (Matthew 26:27-28), and: <<*God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins*>> (Acts 5:31).

III. Colossians 1:15-23 - The Supremacy of Christ

Paul's poem describing the centrality and supremacy of Christ forms the basis for much of what follows in the letter. It was through and for Jesus that everything was created, through him that a dying world is redeemed, and it is Jesus that is the blueprint for what all humans should aspire to become.

What the Colossians need to know above all else, if they are to grow as Christians, increasing in wisdom, power, patience and thanksgiving, is the true essence and nature of God as revealed through the life and death of his Son.

III.a Colossians 1:15-20 - Praise to Christ

In a strongly moving and poetic way, which some scholars think is a quotation from an early Christian hymn, Paul praises the lordship of Christ in relation to both creation and redemption.

III.a.i Colossians 1:15-17 - Christ is Lord of creation

Jesus is the Lord, the maker and upholder of all things in the universe. He reveals the Creator God, who would otherwise remain invisible to humans.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;

Colossians 1:15

The image of the invisible God. Paul depicts Christ in terms similar to the presentation of 'wisdom' in Proverbs Chapter 8 <<*When he established the heavens, I [that is, wisdom] was there ... then I was beside him, like a master worker*>> (Proverbs 8:27a with 8:30a). In later Jewish wisdom literature, personified divine wisdom is described as the image of God.

The prophet alludes to God as remaining unseen: <<*Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour*>> (Isaiah 45:15), and Jesus confirms that humans have not seen the true form of God: <<*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known*>> (John 1:18), and: <<*Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father*>> (John 6:46), something the apostle repeats in another letter: <<*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us*>> (1 John 4:12).

The firstborn of all creation. It would be wrong to think in physical terms here, as if Paul were asserting that the Son had a physical origin or was somehow created, the classic Arian heresy, rather than existing eternally as the Son, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, within the Godhead. What Paul had in mind was the rights and privileges of a firstborn son, especially the son of a monarch who would inherit ruling sovereignty over a kingdom. This is how the expression is used concerning King David: <<*I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth*>> (Psalm 89:27). Yet Christ far surpasses even the great man David: <<*While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your*

enemies under your feet.’” David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?’ And the large crowd was listening to him with delight>> (Mark 12:35-37).

Jesus had clearly asserted that he had existed before the dawning of time: <<Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am’>> (John 8:58), and: <<I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed>> (John 17:4-5).

¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.

Colossians 1:16

For in him all things were created. Jesus did not come into existence when he was born of the Virgin Mary. He was the agent of creation through whom God made heaven and earth: <<yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist>> (1 Corinthians 8:6). Jesus cannot be the first thing created, as the ancient Arian heresy claimed, since all things without exception were created by him.

All things includes the whole universe, indicating that, except for God, everything that exists was created and that, except for God, nothing has existed eternally: <<In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people>> (John 1:1-4).

Things visible and invisible may refer to those on earth and in heaven respectively, or it may link to the understanding of things that exist in unseen realms or dimensions, including the spiritual.

Thrones or dominions or rulers or powers. Paul is using the current Jewish terms for various rankings of angels, although he does not explain their relative ranks. His emphasis here may be on the evil angels, since they play a significant part in the next chapter of this letter. This would not mean, however, that Jesus created evil angels; all spiritual powers were created by Jesus, but some later chose to rebel against God and so to become evil: <<And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgement of the great day>> (Jude 6).

Jesus is not only the agent of creation but is also the object of creation, for all things have been created through him and for him; that is, for his honour and praise. Since Jesus is in this sense the goal of creation, he must be fully God.

¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:17

He himself is before all things can be both understood as alluding to Christ's eternal existence, i.e. he has always existed and was not created, and that he stands before and above everything else.

In him all things hold together. Christ continually sustains his creation, preventing it from falling into chaos or disintegrating: <<**He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**>> (Hebrews 1:3).

III.a.ii Colossians 1:18-20 - Christ is Lord of redemption

Christ is the head of the church and has accomplished reconciliation on the Cross.

¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

Colossians 1:18

He is the head of the body. Paul spoke elsewhere of the church as the body of Christ: <<**Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it**>> (1 Corinthians 12:27), but he takes the image a step further here and envisions Christ as the head of the body, as he also notes in: <<**And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all**>> (Ephesians 1:22-23). This metaphor conveys Christ's leadership over the body and may also suggest his role in providing sustenance for it; refer also to the comments made on 1 Corinthians 11:3, Colossians 2:10 and 2:19.

He is the beginning for everything started through him and it is he who will bring all things to a conclusion. Therefore, he is the alpha and the omega: <<**I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end**>> (Revelation 22:13).

The firstborn from the dead. This refers to both physical death, which most people will have to face in this life, and spiritual death, the state of all humankind before the death and resurrection of Christ. Because he rose from death, Jesus has conquered the power of death, and was the first to rise from it: <<**But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ**>> (1 Corinthians 15:20-22).

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:19-20

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. The fullness language here and throughout the letter is reminiscent of its use in the OT, where it was said that God 'filled' the temple with his presence. For example: <<*When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt-offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple*>> (2 Chronicles 7:1), and the prophet exclaims: <<*I looked, and lo! the glory of the Lord filled the temple of the Lord; and I fell upon my face*>> (Ezekiel 44:4b). Jesus not only bears God's glory, but all that God is also dwells in him. He possesses the wisdom, power, Spirit and glory of God. To say that all this divine fullness dwells in Jesus is to confirm that he is fully God: <<*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*>> (Colossians 2:9).

To reconcile to himself all things. As the <<*Prince of Peace*>> (Isaiah 9:6d), Jesus will ultimately quell all rebellion against God and his purposes. For believers, this means present reconciliation to God as his friends. As for nonbelievers and the demonic powers, Christ's universal reign of peace will be enforced on them, for their rebellion will be decisively defeated by Christ as conquering king as revealed in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, Revelation 19:11-21 and 20:7-10, so that they can no longer do any harm in the universe. The basis for Christ's reign of peace is the blood of his Cross. The Cross truly is the pivotal point in human and cosmic history.

In the Judaism of Paul's day, quite a lot of what he has said here had already been said about the shadowy figure of 'wisdom'. Part of Paul's point is precisely this: if it is wisdom that is required, Jesus is the place to look for it.

III.b Colossians 1:21-23 - Reconciliation of the Colossians to God

If the foregoing poem, with its powerful exaltation of Jesus as the Christ, is a map of the entire cosmos, then this brief section marks out where the believer is on that map. This section explains the meaning of reconciliation for the church.

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him — ²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Colossians 1:21-23

Once, now. Paul presents a strong contrast between the Colossians' pre-Christian status and their favourable situation now as Christians. It had long been accepted that God had chosen the Jews as a nation through whom he would reconcile creation, with Gentiles like the Colossians being on the outside, their thinking muddled by their pagan idolatry. Now God has acted decisively and unexpectedly to include everyone.

Estranged. Sin has resulted in alienation from God: *<<remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world>>* (Ephesians 2:12), and thus creates the need for reconciliation. This is due, in part, to the fact that nonbelievers are **hostile in mind** to God: *<<for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened>>* (Romans 1:21).

He has now reconciled. Since the fall of mankind there had been a state of almost open warfare against God by his creation: *<<And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done'>>* (Genesis 8:21). Paul had stated as much in his contemporaneous letter to the church in Ephesus: *<<He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it>>* (Ephesians 2:15-16).

The result of reconciliation is that Christ is now working in all the believers **to present you holy and blameless before God**. This is the same language used in the OT to describe the unblemished animals that the Levitical priest would bring for a sacrifice to God. When Christ brings his followers to the Father for inspection, they will be found to be above reproach.

Provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith. The form of this phrase in Greek, using the Greek particle *ei* and the indicative mood of the verb *epimenō*, indicates that Paul fully expects that the Colossian believers will continue in the faith; no doubt is expressed. Nevertheless, the statement shows that faithfulness to the end is essential in the Christian life: *<<But the one who endures to the end will be saved>>* (Matthew 10:22b). It also indicates that the Christian life is not one of passively accepting Jesus as Lord and then sitting back to wait for his return. Believers are to take hold of the Gospel and live it out to its fullest extent, day by day.

Without shifting. The idea here is very similar to Jesus' story contrasting the person who built his house on the sand with the one who built his house on solid rock as recorded in Matthew 7:24-27. Paul wanted the Colossians to build their house on the solid foundation of truth and not on the shifting sands of false teaching: *<<Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults>>* (1 Corinthians 14:20).

To every creature is a general statement meaning that the Gospel has gone widely throughout the Greco-Roman world and beyond, to both Jews and Gentiles (v.6).

I, Paul. This is one of only six occasions where Paul refers to himself by name in the body of a letter. The others are 2 Corinthians 10:1, Galatians 5:2, Ephesians 3:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and Philemon 9. On each occasion it inevitably carries special significance.

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. Paul was a Pharisaic Jew and a Roman citizen, a man born into freedom: <<*The tribune answered, 'It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.'* Paul said, *'But I was born a citizen'*>> (Acts 22:28). Yet he was more than content to give up this freedom to serve God through his new Lord and master, Jesus. Refer to the comments made on vv.7-8.

IV. Colossians 1:24-2:5 - Paul's Interest in the Colossians

Paul shifts the focus to describe his own work for the Gospel generally and then more specifically for the Colossians.

IV.a Colossians 1:24-28 - Paul's suffering and stewardship of the mystery

Paul's sufferings are the means God uses to extend the message of the Gospel to others, revealing its mystery.

²⁴ I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

Colossians 1:24

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake. Paul sees the tribulation he is undergoing as an extension of what Christ suffered for his people. Since Paul is in prison it seems that some of the pressure that had been placed on those coming to faith had been diverted away from them onto Paul, who rejoiced in the fact for his suffering allowed others to flourish.

It should be remembered that it was the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that were the direct cause of Paul being in a Roman prison. He had always been the main focus of opposition to the Christian faith and with him safely out of the way it seems much of the antipathy had reduced, although several churches still faced small pockets of resistance.

I am completing, Greek *antanaplēroō*, what is lacking, Greek *hysterēma*, in Christ's afflictions does not imply that there is a deficiency in Christ's atoning death and suffering on the Cross, which would contradict the central message of this letter and all the rest of Scripture as well: <<*For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself*>> (Hebrews 9:24-26), and: <<*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified*>> (Hebrews 10:14). Christ's sufferings are in fact all sufficient, and nothing of one's own can be added to secure salvation.

What was lacking in Christ's afflictions was the future suffering of all who, like Paul, will experience great affliction for the sake of the Gospel, as Paul described in: <<*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the*

affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again>> (2 Corinthians 1:8-10).

²⁵ I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Colossians 1:25-27

According to God's commission. Paul views himself as a divinely commissioned 'steward' or 'administrator', Greek *oikonomos*, a word used widely in the Roman world for the administrator of a large household or estate. Paul's responsibility was to make the word of God fully known.

The completing of Christ's afflictions (v.24) takes place as the proclamation of the Word is made fully known, Greek *plēroō*. Paul suffers as he proclaims the Gospel, and he declares that the basis of forgiveness of sins is Christ's once-for-all suffering and sacrifice.

The mystery does not refer to something mysterious or to a secret ritual. Rather, Paul is speaking of God's unfolding plan for the world and, above all, his plan of redemption through Christ: *<<and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ>> (Ephesians 3:3-4), and: <<At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison>> (Colossians 4:3).* It must not be forgotten that God had chosen the Jewish nation as his own people and it was through them that he would reveal his Christ as the Saviour of the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Although elements of God's design were already known through the prophets, key aspects of it were hidden throughout the ages and generations and thus were a mystery, which could only be known and understood when they were revealed by God. This language occurs often in the book of Daniel. After God reveals to Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar's dream foretold four successive kingdoms culminating in the Kingdom of God, Daniel tells the king: *<<but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days>> (Daniel 2:28a).*

At the heart of the mystery that God is now revealing through Paul is the amazing hallmark of the new covenant, Christ in you, the hope of glory. God himself, in the person of Christ, will be directly and personally present in the lives of his people, and his presence assures them of a future life with him when he returns. Moreover, Christ does not reside only in believing Jews but also in believing

Gentiles, so that there is one unified people of God; refer to Ephesians 2:11-22 and 3:2-6.

²⁸ It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Colossians 1:28

That we may present everyone mature, Greek *teleios*, in Christ. It was not enough for Paul to see people make a profession of faith in Christ, as important as this is. *Teleios* could be translated as 'perfect', but full perfection will only be attained when Christ returns and believers are fully transformed. Until that time, the maturity Christians are to seek stands in contrast with the immaturity of infancy: <<***We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming***>> (Ephesians 4:14).

IV.b Colossians 1:29-2:5 - Paul's labour for the Colossians

Paul ministers so that every person will be complete in Christ and will see that all wisdom and knowledge are in him.

²⁹ For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Colossians 1:29

Paul is struggling with all his, that is, Christ's energy to help them grow and mature in Christ. He was powerfully inspired by Christ to do the work he was called for and does not take the credit for it himself: <<***But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me***>> (1 Corinthians 15:10).