

Studies in Colossians

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of a series of seminars given by David Gooding at Apsley Hall, Belfast, N. Ireland in February 1988.

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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast

BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: col.002/bh

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The Main Themes of Colossians

Colossians 1:13–19; 2:9–15; 3:10–11

As we come to our three seminars on the epistle to the Colossians, let us just devote our first moments to reading certain passages as a tribute of worship to the blessed Lord. *In chapter 1 he is described as the Son of God's love*—God's loving and beloved Son. He is to be the major topic of this epistle.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 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 pre-eminent. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell. (1:13–19)

If chapter 1 talks to us of the Son of God's love, *chapter 2 will talk to us about our blessed Lord as the mystery of God* (v. 2). Paul prays that we may know the mystery of God, even Christ.

For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 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, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (2:9–15)

Finally, *chapter 3 speaks to us about the worshipful person of our Lord.*

You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (3:10–11)

This is the glorious theme of our epistle, and I suggest we make it the theme song in our hearts for these studies—that *Christ shall indeed be all, and in all*. May the Holy Spirit, who inspired the epistle, use it to glorify the Lord Jesus and reveal him to our hearts so as to provoke our faith and deepen our loyalty, increase our thanksgiving and our joy.

We aim to capture the special message that Colossians brings to us in a way that no other part of Scripture does in quite the same fashion. If we are to do that well, then first of all we must bring to our study sympathetic understanding of the spiritual experience and the state of the people to whom the letter was originally written.

Let me remind you of what their experience had been. I suspect for the most part of them they were originally rank heathen. Educated people maybe, but heathen in the sense that they didn't know the true God. They were alienated from him. Some of them would have been Jews, but Jews that had not come to know the Messiah. Therefore it was true of them, as of the Gentiles, that they originally were without God, without the Messiah, and therefore without hope in the world. The gospel was brought to them by a certain Epaphras¹ (1:7), and it had a revolutionary effect in their lives, as we can see from what is said in the epistle.

It is described in chapter 1 as *a coming out of darkness into light*—'Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness' (vv. 12–13). In chapter 2 it is *a change from a state of death to one of life*—'And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him' (v. 13). It was nothing less than a veritable spiritual resurrection. In chapter 3 we find that *it had led to a totally different lifestyle*. Upon hearing the gospel, 'you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator' (vv. 9–10).

That may sound to your ears at first as if what had happened to these people was simply that they had received a new set of rules, a new code of morality. But we shall find that is far from true. The revolution that took place in their lives as a result of hearing the gospel was not simply that they received a new set of standards—it was that they received a new kind of life. Being before simply creatures of God, and sinful creatures at that, they had received the Lord Jesus and become the beneficiaries of that great new movement in God's universe that happened with the coming of the Lord Jesus into our planet—his life, his death, and his resurrection. A vast and hitherto unheard of thing, that the Creator should not only become human, but upon his death and resurrection the personal Lord Jesus Christ should enter the heart and personality of those who love him. The secret of the new lifestyle of these ancient people was that *they became indwelt by the Lord Jesus*. Ceasing to be mere creatures of God, they became children of God in whom the very Son of God dwelled. So they had 'put on the new man', says Paul, 'where Christ is all, and in all' (3:10–11 KJV).

With that it becomes apparent that their spiritual revolution had given them an utterly new outlook upon the universe around them. As I have reminded you, many of them were heathen—they lived a long while ago in a pre-scientific age. To them the universe had been a very mysterious affair. Not only was it beautiful in spring, summer, autumn and winter, with its animal life and glorious flowers, but sometimes terrifying, with mysterious powers,

¹ Epaphras was a nickname; his longer name was Epaphroditus (see Phil 2:25; 4:18).

earthquakes, pestilence, and in the end death. It wasn't always a pretty thing to live in the ancient world. It may have improved a lot since then, but how much is an open question. In some of its workings the universe remains exceedingly mysterious. It can fill your heart with joy and gladness one day and break it with disaster and disease the next.

The spiritual revolution in their lives had given them an utterly new outlook upon the universe. Instead of a world of hostile powers and no ultimate hope, it had introduced them personally to the very maker. They now knew the God who stands behind the universe and behind our individual lives. The Son of God had shown them what God is really like. Paul uses that delightful expression—into the kingdom of the Son of [God's] love (1:13 KJV). Just imagine what that means. They had been introduced to the king who stands behind the universe and had come to know him as the one whom God loves with all his infinite power and wisdom combined. There's nothing that God wouldn't do for him. Not only is he the Son of God's love in the sense that God loved him, but as the creator and ruler of the universe he is the Son of God who expresses to us the love of God.

As we study this epistle seriously together, let us 'Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with his love doth befriend you.'² They had come into the enjoyment of the universe and of this kingdom of God's Son because their sins had been forgiven (1:14), and they had been reconciled to God. They were no longer alienated from or hostile to God, and he was no longer a threat that, if they got too close to him, he would restrict their liberties and take away their enjoyment. In Jesus Christ they had discovered what God is really like. The gospel that Epaphras brought them had a revolutionary impact on their lives, as Paul put it in his opening verses, 'because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel' (1:5).

That brief sketch then, is the experience of the people to whom this letter is addressed. The letter won't make full sense to us unless we have, to some extent at least, had that same kind of experience. These people had been born again—they had been converted, they had been saved. Let's sum it up once more. They had been enemies of God—they were now reconciled. They had been dead—they were now made alive. Previously their lifestyle was that of the old man—from now on it was that of the new. We shall have to ask ourselves, as we read this letter and study it—have I also had this kind of experience, would these things be truly said of me?

Not only had the preaching of the gospel led to their initial conversion, we gather that it had led to a subsequent desire to make progress in spiritual life. It had indeed led to actual progress being made—the gospel was bearing fruit among them and growing (1:6). Their newfound hope had set before them a new objective in life. Paul had a longing that on that coming day he should be able to present every one of them mature³, fully developed in Christ (v. 28).

It had not only given them an objective that they themselves might make spiritual progress and arrive at spiritual maturity, it had also given them a tremendous desire to get

² Joachim Neander (1650–80), 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty'.

³ Older English translations use the word 'perfect'.

involved in the spread of the gospel throughout the world (4:2 f.). Though they were, so to speak, an infant church, it is remarkable how many of the missionaries who were engaged then in worldwide evangelism were known to them by name. They were people whom they knew and for whom they prayed.

So they had been converted and now were seeking to make progress. I suppose if we are going to understand this letter as it should be understood, that will have to be true of us as well. It's not enough simply to be converted. We would need to be filled with a desire to make progress in our own spiritual life, to be engaged up to our very necks in the spread of the gospel in our locality and in the world. One of the reasons for that is as follows, though only one. The dangers that beset the early churches were the dangers that beset people precisely because they are determined to make progress in the spiritual life, not because they were living carelessly or because of the attractions of worldliness—though those dangers are big enough.

You say, 'I didn't know that there were any dangers along that path. I thought that if only you were keen to serve the Lord, to please him and to make spiritual progress, then all is plain sailing—there are no dangers.' The opposite is true. Satan has traps, snares, perils and dangers for every type of believer. If he can't misdirect us through our worldliness then he'll try misdirecting us through our spirituality. He's been a long time at the job.

You will remember how in the wilderness he assaulted our Lord himself, and how crafty and devilishly cunning were his temptations (Matt 4:1–11). The first was that he should act in independence of God. It was only a simple matter—at least it was a simple matter for our Lord. It concerned his daily bread. When the temptation came he was desperately hungry after a fast of forty days. The tempter came first to him tempting him to worldliness, suggesting that he act in independence of God, his Father, and use his miraculous powers to turn stones into bread. Our Lord saw through the temptation and confronted it at once. 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"' (Matt 4:4, quoting Deut 8:3). You couldn't tempt our blessed Lord to live in independence of God by a few bits of bread.

The second temptation took notice of that fact. The devil came to the Lord Jesus and took him up to the temple and suggested that it would be a grand idea if he flung himself from the top. This time the suggestion was backed home by Scripture—watch the devil when he begins to cite Scripture. He's not given to too much Bible reading, or normally interested that you should fulfil it, but on this occasion he posed as a spiritual advisor to the Lord, suggesting areas in which he might make spiritual progress. If I may interpret his words—'I've noticed what a godly man you are. You're not like some others, where a bit of bread or an extra £10 a week would be enough to entice them into independence of God. It's marvellous that you are determined to live dependent on God, young man. Take it a step further! The Bible says that God will always support you. Ordinary believers don't take too many risks, but a man like you who's prepared to act in dependence of God—step forth on Scripture! Cast yourself off the temple top and prove that God's word means what it says.'

How many of us would have been unspiritual enough to try, thinking we were pleasing God and making progress? It was a dastardly trap. Our Lord saw through it and refused it, and countered the devil's misquotation of Scripture with a balance of another direct

command of the Lord (v. 7). Satan opposed the Lord Jesus on that second occasion by trying the tactic of urging him along what looked like the path of spiritual progress. He will certainly try to do the same for us. We too need God's holy Word to dwell in us richly, as Paul puts it (Col 3:16), so that we might be saved from these deceptions of the enemy.

Thank God, the evidence of the epistle is that these early Colossians withstood temptations of this sort. But how long they would have gone on withstanding them had not Paul written his letter to them, who can tell. We shall find that the special danger to the Colossians was that certain teachers had come among them, offering them all kinds of recipes for spiritual advance that on the surface looked brilliant and wonderful and very impressive, but were nothing other than the deceptions of Satan and absolutely bogus. So Paul sat down to write to them and tells them in explicit terms what these bogus recipes are and exposes their nonsense. Of course he doesn't leave it there, but prescribes that panacea for all our spiritual troubles and dangers—the blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

He takes them back to their initial conversion, back to the gospel which they originally heard, and expounds to them the wonderful glories of the Lord Jesus, so they might see again that in him, their Saviour, 'dwells the whole fulness of the deity bodily' (see 2:9). They need nothing else but Christ. He is for them their initial salvation, their growth in sanctification, their final glorification—Jesus Christ is all they need.

May the Lord use our studies to help us take a firmer grip on the glories of the gospel and help us unpack a little bit more the immeasurable riches that there are in the mystery of God which is Christ, so that our lives may be kept from falling, our hearts filled with faith and joy, and our new lifestyle properly represent God in this sorry world.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 90](#).

[The Nature and Effectiveness of the Christian's Hope](#)

Here is a simple overview of the epistle to the Colossians. It doesn't claim to be a full-scale analysis of the epistle, nor does it claim to be *the* analysis. It is simply a practical device that puts before us some of the leading ideas of the various parts of the epistle, so that before we get down to detail we may see the whole and, as the cliché has it, we don't miss the wood for the trees!

Movement I	Movement II	Movement III
1. 1:1–8 THE HOPE LAID UP FOR YOU IN HEAVEN Its effectiveness (1:5)	1. 2:1–5 ALL TREASURES OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE HIDDEN IN CHRIST Their sufficiency (2:3)	1. 3:1–4 YOUR LIFE HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD Its source and location (3:3)
2. 1:9–23 A. CHRIST: FIRST AND SUPREME The image of God: firstborn of creation; creator of principalities and powers and of all things; firstborn from dead; Head of church; all fulness in him; reconciler of all B. BELIEVERS 1. Past: alienated; enemies 2. Now: reconciled (1:22) 3. Made sufficient (1:12)	2. 2:6–15 A. CHRIST: SUFFICIENT AND TRIUMPHANT All fulness in him; head of principality and power; circumcision. Death, burial, resurrection, victory and triumph of Christ B. BELIEVERS 1. Past: dead 2. Now: made alive (2:13) 3. Made full (2:10)	2. 3:5–4:1 A. CHRIST: ALL, AND IN ALL The Lord, the Master in heaven B. BELIEVERS 1. Past: old man; old lifestyle 2. Now: new man; new lifestyle (3:10a) 3. Being made new again (3:10b)
3. 1:24–29 PAUL'S SUFFERINGS/ STRIVING To make known the mystery (1:26–27) To present everyone perfect in Christ (1:28)	3. 2:16–23 THE STRIVINGS OF THE RELIGIONISTS, MYSTICS AND ASCETICS	3. 4:1–28 THE STRIVINGS OF PAUL AND FELLOW-WORKERS To speak the mystery of Christ (4:3) That you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God (4:12)

The chart is a simple way of remembering the general outline of the epistle, which comes to be very simple in the end. Three major movements, with three paragraphs each, and they follow similar topics all the way through. Just let's look therefore at those marvellous statements in the first paragraph of each movement.

- I. The hope that is laid up for you in heaven (1:5)
- II. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ (2:3)
- III. Your life is hidden with Christ in God (3:3)

I love those evocative expressions in the first paragraph of Movement I (1:1–8)—*The hope laid up for you in heaven*. Our Lord taught a parable, which we call the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16–21). His fields brought forth plenty, so much so that he had nowhere to bestow his goods. He solved this problem for his own satisfaction, saying, 'I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.' Poor fool he was. There was nothing wrong with the goods—it was where they were laid up that was grievously amiss. Soon his life was to be called from him. Soon he must leave the earth where his goods were laid up in his wretched barns—'And whose will they be?' says our Lord.

In vivid contrast let's indulge our enjoyment just a little bit, shall we? You have many goods laid up, my brother, my sister. Praise God for the terms of it, 'the hope that is laid up for you in heaven.' If you can't pay attention to anything else I say because your hands are metaphorically rumbling through the piles of gold that you've got laid up for you in heaven, well never mind. It's not a bad exercise from time to time, is it? The hope laid up for you in heaven!

Then the first paragraph of Movement II (2:1–5)—*All treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ*. There are some folks to whom at this moment these treasures are absolutely hidden—they don't even know they exist. What fortunate people we are to have discovered that hidden in Christ there are incalculable and indescribable riches. What fun, what an invitation, to discover them, to unpack them and to dive your hand and your heart into these hidden treasures!

Not far from where I lived in Ipswich there was a good Christian man. He had a farm and he farmed it for years, diligently ploughed it and got a respectable living out of it—such as could be got in Suffolk from farming in those far off days. Then he became very, very elderly and eventually the family sold the farm to developers. One day they brought in their great machinery and a bulldozer or something was scraping the earth when it pushed up to the surface something that glittered. The driver got off his seat and had a look, and it was an Anglo-Saxon golden torc. They began to scrub in the ground, I tell you! This was an immense and utterly invaluable treasure, and the farmer's plough had been skimming over the top of it for years and years and he never knew it was there. The people whose houses had already been built on that land had planted their gardens with their bushes and lawns. What would you have done if you thought there was treasure underneath your back

garden? Would you disturb your lawn? It was a bit of a risk! I have to report that many of them dug up their lawns and found nothing.

If you're going treasure digging you want to dig in the right place, and that's what Paul is saying to the Colossians. 'With all these pseudo theories of spiritual advancement that are being advertised and pushed, you've got to dig in the right place,' says Paul. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden *in Christ*.

Now the first paragraph of Movement III (3:1–4)—*Your life hidden with Christ in God*. You may read that, if you like, as a statement of security; but it is also a directional statement, isn't it? Telling us where the source of our life is, and where its location is. At the moment it is hidden—we cannot see the blessed Saviour. But the verse that immediately follows reminds us—'When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (3:4). What a wonder that is to know and think about. The very life that you have from God is hidden now, but one day it shall be revealed. You have that life from its source—in *God*. It is hidden with Christ there. You have it in you and I have it in me. I look a little bit like a dull old chrysalis, all brown on the outside and a bit curious, but wait until the butterfly emerges! When my life that is hidden shall be manifest, if you could see it now you'd be tempted to fall down at my feet as though I were an angel. Your life is hidden with Christ *in God*.

What lovely evocative phrases begin each of these first three movements! There's nothing wrong in making the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with joy and gladness (I nearly said excitement) at the incalculable wealth that there is for us in Christ.

Then in each movement come two very long paragraphs dealing basically with two things:

A. Christ

I. Christ: First and Supreme (1:9–23)

Not only the image of the invisible God but firstborn of all creation and firstborn in redemption. 'That in everything he might be pre-eminent' (v. 18).

II. Christ: Sufficient and Triumphant (2:6–15)

He is sufficient—'In him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him' (vv. 9–10). At Calvary he was triumphant—'He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him' (v. 15). He sits now at the right hand of God and his triumph is eternal.

III. Christ: All, and In All (3:5 – 4:1)

Our appreciation of Christ will govern the way we live, according to the apostle. Through him we have put on the new man, where 'Christ is all, and in all' (3:11). We talk not merely of theological theories; we talk of this stupendous wonder of a Creator and Redeemer in us. If you are a believer, he is in you—the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. Lift your head high—not in pride but in humble and awestruck gratitude. Learn to live with the nobility of people that are aware that Christ is in them.

B. Believers

Each movement in those second paragraphs talks to us about ourselves—about believers, referring to various aspects of our past.

I. *'You once were alienated [from God] and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds' (1:21)*

II. *'You were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh' (2:13)*

In the condemned cell, merely awaiting execution.

III. *In these you too once walked, when you were living in them' (3:7)*

The former life was that of 'the old man' (KJV)—that is, the fallen manhood that we receive through Adam. Now the transformation: 'you have put off the old self (v. 9).

There came a revolutionary change:

I. *'Now you are reconciled' (1:22)*

II. *'Now you are made alive' (2:13)*

III. *'And have put on the new self' (3:10)*

We were enemies, now we're reconciled. We were dead, we're now made alive. In the past we lived according to the old self, now we have put on the new self with a new lifestyle.

It is interesting to notice the verbs (the causative verbs, as the grammarians would say) that are in these paragraphs.

I. *'God has qualified us' (1:12)*

This is what God *has done*—it's not even what he will do. He has made us sufficient, he has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

II. *'You have been filled in him' (2:10)*

Again, this is something that *has been done*. 'In Christ you are complete,' says the old and well beloved Authorized Version. But it is a perfect tense, in Greek it means 'you have been filled'—not will be, but have been. Fullness resides in Jesus our head, and ever abides to answer our need—we have fullness in him.

III. *'You have put on the new self' (3:10)*

You are being made new again.

At one stage in my career I lived in the north-east of England among the mining community—what noble people I found them to be. I noticed how the good ladies were forever redecorating their houses. Well, so would you be if you lived near to where they washed the coal and the dust was scattered all over the town, tonnes of it every day. So they were always redecorating, it gave their homes a very interesting aspect! You'd go in this September and they'd just redecorated it, and the theme was pink or something. You'd go next year, and it was something completely different—new wallpaper, new paint. It was always interesting, you never knew from one year to the other how the place was going to look.

I think we would all be more interesting people if we were constantly being renewed! It's a lovely thing to see our older brothers and sisters. If we have any memory of them we know what they used to be. And now, added to all their former virtues, there's this that's been added, that new bit of polish here, that new adjustment there. They're on their way to glory and they are constantly being renewed by the Spirit of God, and the Saviour who is in them.

Do you think we shall be the same for all eternity? I'm sometimes tempted to think it would be a bit dull if we were! Let's content ourselves for the moment with this constant renewing that is going on in our hearts.

When we come to the final paragraph in each movement, we notice they all have to do with suffering and striving.

I. Paul's suffering and striving (1:24–29)

Why did Paul have to strive that much to make known the mystery and to present everyone perfect in Christ?

Say you are a solicitor, and one of these days you received information that a client had been left 500 million in stocks and shares in America somewhere, three ranches, four Cadillacs, one or two ocean going yachts! You get yourself round to tell him his good news, put on your learned and legal spectacles and read out the information to him. The man isn't interested! It would be odd, wouldn't it, if he preferred to watch television or something, and said, 'I can't be bothered about all those stocks and shares and ranches and things, I'm going out to play football.' If he persisted like that over the weeks, what would you do? Tear your hair out or something and say, 'Man, you're rich!'

Why do you have to struggle to get people to see their wealth? But it is so in spiritual things, isn't it? Paul is witness to it—the struggles he had to get his fellow believers to wake up to their riches and thus make true progress in spiritual life.

II. The strivings of the religionists, mystics and ascetics (2:16–23)

Some of them look very impressive, particularly when you see them afflicting their bodies in the development of their great psychological techniques. 'But they're bogus,' says Paul. Let us be thankful if God has delivered us from misdirected and wasted energy on spurious spiritual disciplines and exercises.

III. The strivings of Paul and his fellow workers (4:2–18)

This is a report of the missionary activities of the servants of God and evangelists, in which we read again of Paul's suffering and striving. Also of Epaphroditus once more: 'always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God' (v. 12).

Now if that is a survey of the contents, let's sit back a moment and think of the occasion and the setting of the writing of this letter. We gather from what he tells us in 4:4 and v. 18 that Paul himself was in prison and chained in Rome. He was there for the gospel's sake and for the testimony of the Lord Jesus. One day he heard the footsteps of the jailor. Was it with his

bread and water, or what was it? The bolts of the prison door began to clang open and in comes Epaphras. Paul could scarcely believe his eyes! For somebody who's in his prison it seemed like a bit of heaven and fresh air to see Epaphras. He had been converted through Paul's ministry apparently, when Paul had been preaching for that long period in Ephesus.

That is in itself an encouragement—to see somebody who has been converted through your ministry. What a thing it is when you're old, or when you're in prison. Life seems near the end, and you look back. 'What have I done in life, what have I achieved?' It would be such an encouragement then, if someone should call at your door that was led to Christ through you, or through your sacrificial giving to the cause of the Lord.

Of course, Paul had another good reason for being glad to see him. Not only was he converted through Paul, but after he got converted he went off as an evangelist himself to the Lycus Valley and preached. Numbers of folks got converted, a church was formed at Colossae and in various other towns round about. Paul was delighted to see him.

After they'd finished talking about the weather (why do we spend so much time talking about that?) they got down to life's real things. Epaphras began to tell him how the work of the Lord was going and how the believers were doing, and Paul pictured them in his mind's eye. He was there in spirit. Marvellous isn't it, when you're confined to bed with rheumatism, how you can picture some work of the Lord somewhere else, and it takes you out of yourself. He would later write—'For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ' (2:5). It's a lovely thing to have an interest like that in your own locality and all around the world. Paul was delighted therefore, as Epaphras gave the good reports about their 'faith in Christ Jesus and of their love for all the saints' (see 1:4), and their 'love in the Spirit' (v. 8). He could report that the gospel was bearing fruit and increasing—not only in their moral behaviour, the developing of Christ-likeness in them, but in their interest in the gospel.

But then Epaphras had some other things to report, not telling tales out of school but out of genuine spiritual concern. There were false teachers around apparently (see 2:8). The danger in them, as we saw in our first session, was not that they were advocating worldliness—the Colossians wouldn't have fallen for that one perhaps, though the Laodiceans did later on. They came with an impressive message of great potential spiritual advance in theosophy—philosophies about the unseen world, the ranks of angels and principalities and powers that stretch between God the Creator (or are supposed to) and us here on earth. Great theories—nothing to do with Scripture but sounding very interesting.

As we shall see on another occasion, we are to be interested in the spirit world of course. 'We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (Eph 6:12). We need constantly to remember they're there, but it isn't good to be obsessed with them.

There were two preachers in a train once, each going to a different place for a Christian conference.

One preacher said to the other, 'My brother, what are you going to talk about?'

He said, 'I'm going to talk about Christ. What are you going to talk about?'

'I'm going to talk about antichrist,' said the other chap.

'You'll get the bigger audience then!'

Print a book on demons you'll sell it by the millions. Print a book on Christ, not quite so many.

These young converts were liable to find all this theosophy business attractive. Then, in addition to the theosophy people were advertising techniques about how you could induce visions and ecstatic experiences—out of the body experiences—and supposedly rise in the spirit realm beyond the ranks of the angels. What you had to do, and how you had to worship this angel and the other angel, and know their names, and how by your ascetic discipline you could induce visions of the very throne of God. That sounded tremendous stuff.

These teachers weren't worldly in the normal sense of that term. They observed the strictest observance of religious festivals and holy days, they were very particular as to what food they might eat or not eat. To see them, as they disciplined themselves in severity to the body, it made you feel that it was tremendous spirituality—like walking with peas in your shoes, or without any shoes at all up a mountain, or something.

It was bogus—the whole lot was bogus. The danger was that these Colossian believers would fall for it. The sad thing would be that, if they fell for it, it would make them terribly discontented to start off with. It would move them away from 'the hope of the gospel' (1:23). It would make them forget the great riches that are already theirs in Christ, and in the name of progress would lead them to concentrate on other things that could not justify, sanctify, or glorify them, but in the end leave them spiritually and sometimes mentally and physically impoverished.

What then would Paul do? Well, he writes to them. You wouldn't have known there was any trouble at all about it until he comes to the second of the three movements. He starts off positively—wise man, isn't he? Let that always be our emphasis—first and foremost to be positive.

A mother is watching her child playing, and presently he leaves his toys and picks up father's sharp pen knife, with a blade open, that father in a moment of absentmindedness had left lying around within reach of the baby. The mother doesn't try to pull it away because the infant will grab it and cut his hand. So she thinks of the most attractive thing she's got in the house—ice cream, a sweet, a brightly coloured ball or something, and offers that to the toddler. He looks at this and goes to grab it and lets the knife go. A homely but very effective technique!

Paul will tell them first of the riches of Christ, and if the danger is that they have moved away from the hope of the gospel then he'll talk to them about their great Christian hope. So let's look at the first movement and consider the emphasis that Paul places in these three paragraphs on the question of hope.

1. The hope laid up for you in heaven (1:5)
2. The hope of the gospel (1:23)
3. The hope of glory (1:27)

We cannot miss the emphasis, so let us then consider these marvellous things about our hope.

First we're told about its security. 'The hope which is laid up for you in heaven' (1:5). We've already thought about it: 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal' (Matt 6:19–20). It's your hope—it's laid up for you. O that God's Spirit would impress it upon us all. 'It's true,' says Paul. 'This is not imagination or escapism. You heard it in the word of the truth of the gospel, and you knew the grace of God in truth' (see 1:6). What a marvellous hope we shall discover we have when we get hold of the grace of God in truth.

You can describe the hope in various terms. 'An inheritance incorruptible and undefiled', one of the 'many mansions in the Father's house'; and supremely the hope of one day being 'conformed to the image of Christ and reigning with him.' All those things are utterly secure. It's because they are *in Christ*. The hope is in Christ, and in him all shall be fulfilled—'in him all things hold together' (1:17). You won't need those other things, they can give you no real hope.

Secondly, 'not shifting from the hope of the gospel' (1:23). Now we notice its basis. If the security of our hope is that it's in Christ, and he's already in glory and none can assail him, then the basis of our hope is what the gospel tells us. It tells us about our blessed Lord on the cross. 'He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death . . .' And because of that all-atoning death, consider the prospect involved in our hope: '. . . in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him [without accusation] (v. 22).

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? . . . Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (Rom 8:33–34)

So that is the basis of the hope—its prospect and its firm and immovable foundation.

Thirdly, its wealth—the hope of glory' (1:27). I'm told that God himself lives in indescribable wealth. But even he seems to get excited (if I may say it with reverence) as he urges us to open our eyes and see the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.' If it has been a mystery this is the secret. Not so much merely that Christ is above and our hope is vested in him, not now that the basis of our hope is Christ at Calvary, but that the riches of this hope of glory is *Christ in you!* What more do you want to make you holy? What more do you need to guarantee you the development of all the potential of being conformed to the image of Christ, than to have Christ actually already in you?

We live in a hopeless world, the Bible tells us that and experience shows it. Men and women are without God. They don't know God, some of them even deny he exists. As far as the universe is concerned, ultimately they'll have to admit to you that they have no hope for it, other than in 20 million years the whole thing will be blown to smithereens and cease to exist. They're without hope.

What do you say to your friend from next door when she's standing by the grave of her loved one, and they're not believers? Oh, what a sorry world it is. Without God and without Christ, they know nothing of God's great plans in history or for the future. They have no hope. May God use these studies to burn again into our hearts the wonder of this hope of the gospel, so that we not only enjoy it ourselves but send us out to preach it and offer it to a world that is without hope.

We are now about to see that the hope is effective—it actually produces change in people. The hope is utterly indispensable: 'If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard' (v. 23). The hope is indispensable, but it is glorious. The glory of this mystery is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (v. 27).

You say to me perhaps—'Mr Lecturer, you've upset me a little bit. What I'm wondering now is, have I got the right thing? I trusted Christ; at least I thought I did. But when you were talking about those pseudo, bogus forms of spirituality, how do I know I've not got one of them? Have I got the right thing?'

How would you know whether it was real or not? Here's the evidence of its effectiveness: the hope of the gospel produces faith in the Lord Jesus, love towards all the saints, fruitfulness and growth. Paul says he's heard of their 'faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that they have for all the saints' (v. 4). How did they come to have that faith in Christ Jesus and to love all the believers? It came about on account of the hope. When Epaphras came he preached the Christian hope, and hearing it they 'fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before them' (see Heb 6:18 KJV). They'd never heard such a wonderful thing in all their lives; and when they heard it, it produced faith in the Lord Jesus. That's the number one mark if you've got the real thing. And the more you think about it, the more Christ will grow in your estimation. *Christ, first and supreme; Christ, sufficient and triumphant; Christ, all in all.* The hope produces faith—ever growing faith and ever growing evaluation of the Lord Jesus, and love towards all the saints.

I warn you, saints are not always the easiest folks to get on with! But do consider where they were when God started with them. He's got a lot of remaking to do with some. Why would you love them? Not merely out of stern religious duty, nor for the fact that you've got to live eternally with them in glory. You see, when you get hold of this Christian hope and begin to discover the riches you can enjoy it yourself. But the sheer discovery of somebody else that's found this treasure as well is a friendship starting all at once, because you have the great treasure in common.

It produces faith, love, fruitfulness and growth. And when did it do all this? It did it the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth (v. 6). It is all of God's magnificent grace.

Grace! 'tis a charming sound,
Harmonious to the ear;
Heav'n with the echo shall resound,
And all the earth shall hear.

'Twas grace that wrote my name
In life's eternal book;
'Twas grace that gave me to the Lamb,
Who all my sorrows took.

Grace taught my wandering feet
To tread the heavenly road,
And new supplies each hour I meet,
While pressing on to God.

Grace all the works shall crown
Through everlasting days;
It lays in Heaven the topmost stone,
And well deserves the praise.⁴

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 90](#).

⁴ Philip Doddridge, 1702–51.

Paul's Prayer for the Colossians

We start with the prayer of the Apostle Paul. I don't know how you find it, but sometimes I have found it a little difficult to follow exactly what he is saying, and praying about. So let's try to analyse the various clauses that we find in his prayer.

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, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in 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, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:9–14)

We might have thought that, being an inspired apostle, when Paul got down to pray he didn't just repeat a lot of phrases over and over again. Presumably, every clause that he now conveys to us about his praying is meaningful and makes sense in its own context. I would like to try and demonstrate that by running quickly through the clauses.

His main request is *that [we] may be filled with the knowledge of [God's] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*. That is the first and major request in his prayer. It raises the question of course, what would be the purpose of our being thus filled with knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding? And the answer to that question is immediately told us—*so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him*.

If we grant him that, perhaps we should ask, 'And what might be involved in walking in such a manner?' He's not just using vague phraseology that he would be hard put to explain if you stopped him in the middle of his prayer and said, 'What did you mean by that?' He has a very definite thing in his mind. What is involved in walking worthy of the Lord? Two things: *bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in [or by] the knowledge of God*. If that is what is involved we might well ask ourselves, 'What conditions are necessary for such fruit bearing and growth?'

Any gardener, amateur or otherwise, would tell you that if you're going to get fruit bearing and growth you must have endurance and perseverance, not to speak of longsuffering. Even the pansies in the garden won't grow if they're expected to flower five minutes after the seed has been put in, and that's all there is to it. No plant can possibly bear fruit unless it perseveres. Haven't we all had those pots of beautiful things that we brought home from the garden centre, and a week and a half later they all went dead on us!

What conditions are necessary to be fulfilled therefore, if we're going to bear fruit and increase? *It will have to be endurance and patience*—and Paul adds, *with joy*. We say to ourselves, 'If that is what is involved in the prayer of Paul, and endurance and patience are so all-important in the Christian life, where would we get the strength and resources from?' Here in Paul's prayer is the answer to that question as well: *Strengthened with all power according to his glorious might*. That's where you'll get the strength for endurance that is so absolutely essential for fruit bearing and growth.

Of course if you begin to say, 'What do those words mean? It's easy for the preacher to indulge in phrases like, *Strengthened with all power according to his glorious might*—but what does it mean?' We get the answer to that question in those delightful verses that you're so impatient to hear about from verse 15 onwards, and what a spectacular answer that is going to be! 'But,' you say, 'if all those unlimited resources for perseverance and growth are at our disposal, how do we lay hold of them?' One way is to cooperate with God by doing what we are next told to do: *'giving thanks to the Father.'*

I don't know how you get on when you see your bank balance coming through! I daresay some of you may have been wondering, 'Can I afford the new car or the new coat, or the new spade for the garden?' You've been going very carefully. Then the bank statement arrives, and there it is in all its glory—as black as black could be and a nice round figure in it. So you thank your good bank manager for that and say, 'Now I can go ahead.' You thought there wasn't much in the bank and you were afraid to go and face the man. Now that you've found there's a very good bank balance, how grateful you are and of course you go and plunder the bank!

Oh that we spent a little bit more time thanking the Father, for in that very process we actually become more and more aware of the enormous resources God has put at our disposal: 'Giving thanks to the Father, who has [already] qualified you [made us adequate] to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.'

Should you next ask, 'How has he made us adequate?'—look at that lovely cavalcade of things that God has done. Not only chosen us and given us an inheritance, but if you're going to rise to the opportunity and use it and enjoy it you'll need to be educated and provided and trained and prepared—and God has made us adequate. He has qualified us by these various things that we are now told in vv. 13–23.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 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 pre-eminent. For in him all the fulness 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. 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.

He has already delivered us from the power of darkness, transferred us to the kingdom of the Son of his love, redeemed us, forgiven us, reconciled us, in order that one day he may 'present us holy and blameless and above reproach before [God]—provided only we continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel' (vv. 22–23).

This, or something very like this, is what I take is involved in Paul's prayer for these Colossians. It will be hard work, but let's patiently go through his prayer and think of a thing or two in connection with the main items in it.

Filled with the knowledge of his will (v. 9). What does this mean, and for what purpose? It will not escape us, if we pay close attention to Paul's letter, that everywhere and at every turn Paul is exhorting us to lay hold of knowledge—not always a virtue extolled in Christian circles. Sometimes knowledge gets itself a very bad name, but not in the epistle to the Colossians. Believers are constantly being exhorted to make sure that they not only get knowledge, but get 'filled with the knowledge of [God's] will.' Why do we need the knowledge of his will?

So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him (v. 10). Obviously and simply, if we are to please the Lord we had better take the trouble first of all to find out what pleases him.

I remember once being at a missionary breakfast in my student days in the late 1940s, when the famous Dr Lobark came to address us. He was the great expert in teaching illiterate people to read. He had been so successful with his method that many governments invited him to come to their countries and apply his techniques to the teaching of their population. On one occasion he was in a very (to us) primitive part of the world, and he taught this leading man of the tribe how to read. The man was a tremendously big, strong fellow of course, and when at last he was able to read a few simple sentences he was delighted. Putting his arm round the doctor's neck, he drew out a long knife and said, 'Dr Lobark, I'm so grateful to you—who would you like me to kill, to show my gratitude to you?' He meant it well, didn't he? But if ever he was going to please Dr Lobark that was the very thing he wouldn't have to do.

We shouldn't suppose that we know what pleases God. You married gentlemen didn't just suppose what your wife would like for a birthday present, did you? You did your very best to find out, lest you waste a lot of money on things that weren't appreciated.

'Filled with the knowledge of his will . . . so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him' (v. 10). His will about what? I suppose, in one sense, the will of God covers every aspect and detail of our lives. Very often when people are converted one of their first concerns is to know what the Lord's will is in this and that particular of life. Young people are necessarily much given to it. What career shall I follow? What beautiful lady shall I marry, what husband shall I take? And so on. Doubtless the Lord is concerned for guiding

us at that level. But according to this epistle the major area where we are to know his will is in the great moral questions of life, as you will see from the final chapters. How we should behave morally, as we learn to put off the old self and all corruption, and put on the new self. His will in all the great, basic relationships of life—husbands and wives, children and parents, employees and employers.

We live in a day where we really do need to consider seriously what the will of God is. It's a sad day when men in high religious places are called upon by the Prime Minister to state outspokenly to the nation what the will of God is for moral behaviour, and they are not prepared to call sin, *sin*, but are only content to say it is *falling short of an ideal*. We are so much people of our own day and generation that we need to give ourselves rigorously to the study of God's holy Word and discern what is the will of God in these vastly important areas—morality in the home, in society, and in business.

Another area in which we must be concerned about the will of God is in the question of the methods by which we propose to attain to holiness. Is that not obvious for a believer? Paul didn't think it was all too obvious to the Colossians. There had come to that part of the world teachers with all kinds of recipes for the deepening and advancing of spiritual life, but when examined in the light of God's revelation in Christ they were seen to be bogus. They were seriously wrong because they went against God's declared will.

Look again at what Paul says: 'For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell' (v. 19 KJV). Faced with the task of reconciling and redeeming mankind, of justifying the believer, sanctifying him and bringing him at last to glory, how should it be done? God didn't leave that to my say so, or your say so. There came the divine decree—it was decreed of the Lord. That is what is involved in the word, 'it pleased the Father,' or, 'it was the good pleasure of the Father.' It is not merely that it gave him pleasure in our modern sense. It is a Greek word that indicates a decree passed by those who have the authority to do so. It was the divine decision as to how and through whom the great work of redemption should be done. 'It was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell; And through him to reconcile all things unto himself' (vv. 19–20 RV). God has determined the processes of salvation, justification, sanctification and glorification for the believer. When it comes to making progress in the spiritual life we need to give heed to the revealed Word, so that we might know what is the will of God in these matters and so 'walk in a manner worthy of the Lord' (v. 10).

Suppose then we know the will of God, what does it mean to walk worthily of the Lord? What a marvellous dignity it puts upon the child of God. To walk worthily of the Lord presupposes we have some sense of the worth of God. The next verses that we shall be reading about him who is 'the image of the invisible God' (vv. 15 f.) will, by God's grace, increase our sense of the worthiness of the Lord.

If your little child were to steal a Mars bar in Woolworths, nobody would take it too seriously, would they? I mean, a child of one and a half—a Mars bar? He hasn't yet understood the laws of private property and all that. You wouldn't make a great fuss. And if some poor miserable drug addict—tortured, tormented with pangs—stole £5 to satisfy his

urges, you would say it's wrong but you might be moved to mercy. If Prince Charles came to your shop and stole a shirt it would be a very different thing.

For an unregenerate man or woman to do certain things and show certain attitudes you could understand it, if not excuse it. For a believer to do those things and bring disgrace on the worthiness of the Lord, what a sad business that would be—and how often we've done it. Of course, in order to 'walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,' we shall need to get to know the Lord. And not just grumblingly doing his commandments because we have to, with that mingy old attitude that says, 'Do I have to do this thing?' But so to know him and to live near him that we do it just because it pleases him.

There is an immortal story, recorded in 2 Samuel 23, of three noble warriors that belong to King David. They heard him one night, tired after the battle and the exigencies of camp life, sighing to himself. He wasn't speaking to anybody—'Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem' (v. 15). Those three men didn't wait to be commanded, they simply got the hint from a sigh in the heart of David that he'd like some water from Bethlehem. Though they did it at the cost of their lives, they went and got it and brought it back. It was so sacred in David's eyes that in the end he didn't drink it, but gave it as an offering to God. God alone, David thought, was worth that kind of devotion.

It is a devotion that we should be showing, isn't it? Not, 'Do I have to do it?' But, 'Does it please the Lord? Has he given the slightest sign of an indication that this would refresh his heart?' Then, if I'm living near enough to hear the sighs of God, I will give myself to fully pleasing him.

What is involved in walking worthily and pleasing the Lord? There are two things: *Bearing fruit in every good work*, and *Increasing in the knowledge of God* (v. 10).

1. God wants our lives to be fruitful. That is the delightful imagery that our Lord himself used in the upper room. Or was it when they were just leaving the upper room, breathing the hostility in the night air that surrounded Jerusalem on the eve of Calvary? On their way to Gethsemane, if our Lord didn't start talking to his apostles about growing grapes! What a lovely mind he had in this horrible, cruel, dark world, as he went to Calvary he talked to his apostles about God's scheme for growing grapes. 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser. . . . I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit' (John 15:1, 5).

The Old Testament people were branches in the vine and they produced some decent grapes. When you're thirsty and you come across a vine that's got some luscious grapes, and you pick three or four and munch them, they're gorgeous aren't they? Do you know what's more? You're getting some idea of God's mind! Grapes were his idea—he made them. As the verses are about to tell us, he made everything—'For in him were all things created' (see vv. 16 f.). In saying that his people are branches in a vine, intended to bring forth grapes, what he's saying is that you ought to be able to watch their lives, listen to their talk, read their writings, benefit from their work and find it like a delicious bunch of grapes, and through them discover what God himself is like.

David is a branch in the vine that I habitually go to. 'Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered' (Ps 32:1). 'That's a lovely grape, David', I

say. 'How did you manage to grow that? It's delightful!' Sometimes the old sap dries up a bit, doesn't it? Feeling down in the dumps and low on a grey Monday morning, then I have recourse to a few grapes from David. 'I will bless the Lord at all times' (Ps 34:1). I ask, 'How do you get around to that?' 'Forget not all his benefits,' says David (Ps 103:2)—count them up! 'Who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases' (v. 3). What delightful bunches of grapes from King David. The nation as a whole eventually became a sour wild vine. When men came to Israel, Israel gave the impression that God was some horribly bitter thing, and they spat it out. We are to bear fruit, so that through us men and women might enjoy what God is really like.

2. Not only bear fruit, but increase growth in general (Col 1:10). How shall we not only bear fruit as of now, but grow larger in our spiritual capacities and bear more fruit later on? We are to 'be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy' (v. 11). We are to endure with all endurance.

That word reminds me, first of all, of what our Lord himself taught in the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:5–15). Of the four different kinds of results that followed the sowing of the seed, I want to suggest to you that the only result that was any good is described in v. 15—'As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.' We shouldn't understand it as *patience* as distinct from impatience, but patience in its older sense of *endurance and perseverance*.

Take a bit of wheat, sown as a seed. It grows up as a blade, but if it's ever going to be a fruit it must develop roots downwards and grow by perseverance, come sun, wind, rain or storm and by perseverance eventually it brings forth its fruit. Those who believe for a little while, and in time of temptation and testing fall away, what use is it? What use are those that fall among thorns and bring no fruit to maturity? The only kind that's any use whatsoever is that which brings forth fruit with perseverance. What resources have we got for bearing fruit by this means of perseverance? Paul gives us the answer in that same context—'Strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might' (v. 11).

Let's anticipate our next study. Think what *his glorious might* is. He made everything, and in him all was made. At this very moment he sustains this gigantic universe. There isn't a galaxy that whirls in space but he upholds it. If he can uphold a vast universe, my dear fellow Christian, do you think he couldn't hold up you and me? The verses tell us that, as well as being 'firstborn of all creation', he's 'head of the body, the church' and 'the firstborn from the dead [in resurrection]' (vv. 15 and 18). This is the blessed Lord that upheld Saul and Peter and James and John, and all the vast uncountable numbers of the redeemed throughout all ages. He upheld every one of them—and he who can uphold the whole church, shall he not uphold you and me?

You say, 'Yes, but I'm a little bit frightened by that verse lower down the chapter (v. 23). Doesn't it say there that he will present us, @if we continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel'?"

Sure it says that, but we shall need to read it in its context. The verses tell us that it was the decree of the Father that in [Christ] all the fulness should dwell; and having reconciled us he shall present us. All the resources of the Godhead are behind him in this glorious task

of reconciliation and presentation. Notice how they follow immediately in the text. ‘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’ (vv. 21–22).

Paul is not thinking here of what he talks about in Philippians 3—the ongoing sanctification of the believer. He’s talking here as he talks in Romans 5 and Romans 8.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any *charge* against God’s elect? (Rom 8:28–33)

It is that same word, *charge*, that Paul uses in Colossians, when he tells us that it is God’s decree that Christ shall present his people holy and blameless and above reproach—without charge [without accusation] on the basis of his great atoning work and reconciliation at Calvary (1:21).

You are still apprehensive! ‘But suppose all his power is available to hold me, but it depends on whether I continue in the faith, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel?’ So let’s consult Paul.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. (Rom 5:1–4)

‘How could you possibly be joyfully confident, Paul?’

‘By knowing that, where there’s true faith to start with, tribulation works endurance’—the very endurance we’re talking about!

James as usual speaks in accord with Paul—‘Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds’ (1:2).

‘Don’t get carried away with apostolic fervour, James! Are you talking about *testing* like the Lord mentioned in the Parable of the Sower, that test the seed and the young plant as to whether it really has roots? Testing whether it’s the genuine thing, or whether in the time of trial it’s going to wither away because it has no root? If we’re going to face something that will test our basic reality—if we are believers with roots that are going to endure—how could you possibly face a test like that and “count it all joy”?’

‘I’ll tell you how to do it,’ says James. ‘For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness [patience, KJV; endurance, NASB]’ (v. 3).

Thank God for James and for Paul. And thank God for our blessed Lord. Charged with a task, not only of reconciling us but presenting us faultless before the throne of his Father, he looks after the intervening bit. The great Christ that upholds the vast universe in his priestly ministry prays for you and me that our faith shall not fail: 'Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25).

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 91](#).

The Person and Work of the Redeemer–Reconciler

We come now to what must be one of the most exalted parts of holy Scripture. I feel a little like the ancient Israelite who saw the ark of God approaching. Pray for us, then, that we may say nothing and think nothing unworthy of the divine majesty.

Let us begin by reading once more the words from Colossians chapter 1 that we read at the beginning of our studies.

Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in 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, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 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 pre-eminent. For in him all the fulness 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. 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. (Col 1:12–23)

To help us grasp afresh this much loved and much honoured part of holy Scripture, I would like us to consider the person and the work of the Redeemer and great Reconciler of the universe under five headings.

1. The magnitude of the ruin, which called forth his great work of redemption and reconciliation.
2. The immensity of the task that was his, when by divine decree he was appointed to the work of redemption and reconciliation.
3. The majesty of God's agent, the one through whom God has done these great things.
4. The marvel of the methods that God decreed should be used.
5. The magnificence of his achievements.

The magnitude of the ruin

So then, what was the ruin that our blessed Lord was called upon by the Godhead to deal with? It was nothing less than a whole universe in disorder. Disorder at the highest possible level, not only of the physical creation—though our own planet is evidence enough of great and dark disturbances. It is well that we dwell on the beauties of creation, and rightly so. But we should be unrealistic if we did not observe that, even in the dimensions of our own planet, there are some dark and disordered things.

We think not only of a creation subjected to vanity, as Paul would put—‘We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly’ (Rom 8:23). Twice over this epistle directs our attention to the highest possible levels of creation and talks to us about ‘thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities’ (see 1:16; 2:15)—beings whose very name and description brings before us high intelligentsia entrusted with enormous realms of responsibilities. Though Scripture indicates clearly that not all such exalted beings have revolted against their Creator, yet this passage faces us with a stark and dark reality. At the very highest levels of the created universe there has long been a terrible revolt against the person of God. That revolt has led to who knows what disturbances in the universe as a whole, but we do know that our little planet and we on it have been caught up in the vast ruin and disorder introduced here by these rebellious spirits.

If that were not enough to make our minds all gloomy, then listen to the further indictment—‘and you’ (v. 21). What a problem we put before God Almighty. You and I, and all the rest of mankind apart from the Saviour, were ‘alienated [from God] and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.’ We are at a distance, estranged from God. Perhaps it’s not the worst thing that you could think of saying of anybody in their unconverted state; but when you sit down and ponder it, it is enough to break your heart, is it not? Creatures endowed by God with all kinds of gifts actually living estranged from their Creator.

Take this bright young lady, she’s not only beautiful to look at, she’s a brilliant musician. Listen to her playing, she enchants you with her melodies. The very concept of the music she plays, the extraordinary skill with which she executes and interprets it are a magnificent delight. Speak to her of Christ and she doesn’t want to know. She’ll tell you she has no time for God and all those things. She’s not interested, she’s too busy with her music. It would break your heart, wouldn’t it? Who gave her the brains to create the music? Who gave her the ear, and who invented the music anyway? By some strange, specious argumentation (who would doubt it is devilish?) she has been brought to believe that she couldn’t have time for God because the God who made her music somehow would spoil it and spoil her enjoyment of it. Haven’t we all known the feeling in the days when we were estranged from God and considered him a bore?

Not only estranged, but hostile in our minds. Why? Because sin has induced a guilty conscience, which we cannot completely shake off even if we wanted to. We are after all creatures of God endowed by him with a conscience. Like the enemy’s flag in an outpost, it will witness to us that our deeds are wrong. Therefore it gives us the impression that God is against us; he is our enemy, hanging over us with dire threats of punishment. And that induces in us rebellion and hostility. We are part of the universal problem.

The immensity of the task

Let us think next of the immensity of the task that faced the Saviour and faced the Godhead in considering this ruin, and how it could be put right.

For in him all the fulness 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.
(vv. 19–20)

If this universe became disordered through the sin and rebellion of great spirit beings that eventually infected our world, it may seem like an easy task to you for His Divine Majesty to put it right. What need he do but issue some lightning stroke, some divine laser beam and fizzle our little planet out of existence, us with it and all the created host of heaven? Why did he not do it and start afresh? God isn't hard up for ideas—having invented you he wasn't bankrupt to think of something else he could do. A few uncounted millions of galaxies don't exhaust his creative ingenuity. Why didn't he just destroy the rebellious universe and start again?

To talk like that is to show that we haven't understood the problem. No one with any sense would question the almighty power of God. That is not the issue at stake. When Satan tempted our Lord he said: 'Bow down and worship me, and I will give you all these kingdoms—for they have been given to me.' Even Satan cannot escape the fact that he is a mere creature. That isn't the issue. The issue is rather the character of God. Is God a tyrant? Having created gifted beings with high intelligence, does he deliberately torture them by holding back his best, keeping them in some kind of servitude, cramping their personalities—so that the only way to develop the potential that God originally gave them is to do what Satan said, attempt to be as God and live independently of him? The problem is what does creation think of God and his character? Does God Almighty care what we think about him? Yes, he does! What you think of God in your heart of hearts is more important to God than ten million galaxies of mere brainless matter.

How well the enemy's tactics have succeeded, haven't they? From those early days in our planet when he persuaded our forefathers that God was some kind of a sadist, torturing his creatures—planting trees and then forbidding people to eat their fruit. Check it out on your friends and see whether it is true still. Man's instinctive notion over centuries is that somehow God is against them; he is their enemy. If God had used his almighty power to obliterate the universe, who would have won? The question of the character of God would have remained at stake.

The immensity of the task then: to reconcile the whole of creation. It doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is going to get converted but that all things, be they saints or rebels, shall be brought to own the justice, magnificence, holiness and love of the Creator.

'And you' (v. 21)—once enemies, alienated and estranged from God, the task was to reconcile us. From believing Satan's lie we have come to think now of God as the magnificent, wonderful God that he is. And not only to reconcile us now, but out of earth's ruin one day 'to present [us] holy and blameless and above reproach before him' (v. 22).

The majesty of God's agent

Now we shall consider the majesty of the agent that God chose. Agent in the sense that these great operations should be achieved through him. 'He is the image of the invisible God' (v. 15a). The one who perfectly expresses, so that creation can see it, what the invisible God is really like. Who shall solve the problem of reconciling man to God, unless he is able to tell us absolutely fully and beyond question what God is like? What's the good of asking Michael the archangel? He can tell you lots of things, but the high mysteries of the Godhead escape Michael. We must consider the one who is *the exact image of the invisible God*, the agent who was eventually to reconcile all things to the Godhead.

He is 'the firstborn of all creation' (v. 15b). Not in the sense of course that he was the first creature to be created but in the sense that verses 16–17 explain: 'For by him all things were created.' By the careful use of the small prepositions we are given to understand something of his glory: '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.'

Imagine visiting a brand new vast factory with all its complicated machines and technology and the five or six thousand people that run it. I say to the managing director, 'Where did this all begin?' Would you expect him to answer, 'When they laid the first bricks,' or 'When the sand and cement were created'? I'm not thinking in those terms at all, and he knows I'm not. He'll say, 'This great factory that you see is the result of an idea that happened in my brain. That's where it all started!'

If you want to know where this universe started, it's no good analysing the chemistry or the physics of it. That will tell you one or two things, but it can't tell you where it all started. 'In him', says verse 16. He is the beginning: 'In the beginning God created . . .' (Gen 1:1). That is to say, he was the great beginning in which the whole thing was conceived. What a mind this great agent of deity has. You are Christ's idea, you know! That's where you started as well.

It was not only made *in him*, it was made *through him*: 'All things were made through him' (John 1:3). Whatever processes have gone on in the formation and development of the universe it was because he engineered and sustained them, and sustains them still.

What's it all for? I wonder have you ever stood watching the stars at night, burdened maybe with the cares of your business, with family problems, finding life exceedingly complicated and perplexing. You say to yourself, 'What is it all about, where is it all going?' We're corkscrewing in space, following the sun. Where is it all going, where are you going? Were you designed to go anywhere in particular? The answer comes back from the measureless past. When it was made, it was made *for him*. If there has been any genuine progress in the history of our planet, in the end he shall be the heir of all things and inherit it. Was I made for him? It's obvious that I haven't always lived for him, and that's part of the great disorder. Men and women were made for him, but 'all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). That's cardinal sin No. 1 in the logic of creation.

Not only were we made for him, 'he is before all things' (v. 17). Of course he was, in the sense that he was there before anything was created. But he still is 'before all things' in a

way that you and I are not. If you want to know what's going on in the sun you have to wait some minutes for the light from the sun to arrive here. When it arrives, the thing, whatever it was, has already happened those minutes ago. In that sense we're behind everything that comes in from outer space.

In daily life we are often like that. Here's a wife, preparing dinner for her husband and son. But they have had a crash and they're not coming home. She doesn't know it yet; she's behind events. What a shock it will be when eventually the news catches up with her. Some would find it overwhelming if they hadn't already made friendship with the great Son of God. He is never behind anything; he is always before. If anything happens it happens because he knew it was going to happen and allowed it to happen. He is never taken by surprise. In him the whole thing stands together. Be it at the level of its atomic motions or the great universe itself, it all hangs together as he upholds it.

Not only is he the firstborn in relation to creation, but 'the firstborn from the dead.' 'He is the head of the body, the church' (v. 18). Since the death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, there has been something new in our universe that was never known before. The scientists peer into their telescopes and suddenly they discover a new star. If you had the telescope of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost you would have seen a new phenomenon in the universe that had never been there before. It's called 'the body of Christ'. Christ is the head and redeemed men and women are the body, sharing the same life, their personalities intact but no longer completely independent. Each personality is a member of that greater thing, which is the living organism of the body of Christ.

God has such brilliant ideas! We shall not get bored with eternity. When everybody thought they'd seen the last of his inventiveness in creation, he comes up with this completely new concept in the universe and the body of Christ is formed. Christ is the head of that as well, 'that in everything he might be pre-eminent [first]' (v. 18).

The marvel of the methods

Let us move on now to consider the marvel of God's methods in the accomplishment of the task to reconcile all things. You'd need the wisdom of Solomon to describe it! This was no little task that might be entrusted to some angel, however magnificent he was. The whole of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was to dwell in Jesus of Nazareth. How can we find words to describe it? 'For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell' (v. 19).

Our age, so we are told in Scripture, will finally see an exhibition of man's folly. Stirred on by that old dragon the devil, man shall attempt to equal God:

The man of lawlessness [shall be] revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.' (2 Thess 2:3-4)

In our crazy world man in his rebellion tries to be above God, but God's magnificent answer was to become man (v. 22).

Not only so, but God decreed to reconcile all things unto himself 'by the blood of his cross' (v. 20). The cross was a cruel instrument of execution. The scattering of blood emphasises the carnage of the opposition and what it did. Our planet has this dubious but singular honour—into it has been staked a cross upon which man impaled his Creator. The wisdom of God is seen in it: that the very vehicle of man's hatred, destructiveness and rebellion against God should be turned by God for the reconciliation of all things. That does not mean that all should be saved. Revelation chapter 5 helps us to understand what shall yet happen when the blessed Lamb of God takes the book from him that sits upon the throne and proceeds with judgment to bring back the world and the universe to God's obedience. The cry shall go out, not merely, 'Who is able?' or 'Who has the power?' but 'Who has the moral worth to do it?' How shall God deluge the universe with his judgments of destruction and retrieve his name? With his dying gasp Satan would say that he had been proved right—the Creator was a tyrant, and God himself would be left with an empty world.

The question is, 'Who is morally right?' When the Lamb takes the book, then not only those in heaven and on the earth, but those under the earth shall confess that Jesus Christ is worthy to take it. How is he worthy? 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain' (Rev 5:12). And from the caverns of the lost nobody shall be able to say otherwise. 'At the name of Jesus⁵ every knee [shall] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Phil 2:10–11). The whole universe shall be pacified and glorified, and God's honour proved to the remotest boundary.

'And you . . .' (v. 21). It matters to God what you think of him. It mattered so much to him that the divine decree was that all the fulness should dwell in the Lord Jesus, and he would reconcile you to God. To win you, to remove your fear and to show you what the infinite God is really like, he became an innocent baby in the womb and arms of a virgin. The guilt of our sins that had made us fear God has been removed: 'He has now reconciled [us] in his body of flesh by his death.' Even though life may be difficult, you find yourself saying, 'If that's God on Calvary and he's there for me what a great God he is.' And not only so, but eventually he shall 'present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.' So we marvel at the method and 'stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me.'⁶

The magnificence of his achievements

We don't speak of empty promises or schemes, but of a great purpose that God has already achieved. '[He] has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light' (v. 12). *He has done it.*

The Queen does not normally ask me to dinner, and I'm grateful for that! She's a delightful and charming woman of course, but I should feel ill at ease and may not know which knife to use and forget the proper terms of address. So I don't go!

Are you keen to go to heaven? Do you know what *the inheritance of the saints* will be like? I'm looking forward to it. What an eternity, to be able to mix with the excellent of the earth,

⁵ Who was man-slain and God-given.

⁶ C. H. Gabriel (1856–1932).

and talk to them. God has already made us adequate to enjoy that inheritance. Twenty years ago some of us didn't know what Christians were talking about. We felt embarrassed in their company. But now we're adequate for it, aren't we? You know the Redeemer; you know what it's all about, and anybody that knows the Redeemer is a friend of anybody else that knows him. Not only that, but the inheritance of the saints *in light*—he has qualified us to face the very light of the divine presence. It's no longer a threat to us, for we know the God from whom the light issues.

O how shall I, whose native sphere
Is dark, whose mind is dim,
Before the Ineffable appear,
And on my naked spirit bear
The uncreated beam?

There is a way for man to rise
To that sublime abode:
An offering and a sacrifice,
A Holy Spirit's energies,
An advocate with God.⁷

Oh consider the magnificence of the achievement of the mighty Redeemer and Lord. He has delivered us from the power of darkness, broken the fascination of the lies that Satan wove and shown us what the truth is. He has brought us redemption, the forgiveness of our sins, breaking the chain of guilt that held us to the past. He has reconciled us, and one day shall 'present [us] blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy' (Jude 24).

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 91](#).

⁷ Thomas Binney (1798–1874), 'Eternal light! Eternal light!' (c.1826).

Paul's Sufferings and Strivings for the Body of Christ

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. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, 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, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (Col 1:21-29)

So now, as we begin our studies, let us try to take our bearings. For practical purposes we divided the material of the epistle into three main movements and we noticed the leading theme that is set in each of the first paragraphs of those three movements.

- I. The hope that is laid up for you in heaven (1:5)
- II. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ (2:3)
- III. Your life is hidden with Christ in God (3:3)

Then we noticed that the theme in the first paragraph of each movement continues through its particular movement. So as we began to think about movement I we noticed how the theme of hope is to be found in all three of its paragraphs.

1. The hope laid up for you in heaven (1:5)
2. The hope of the gospel (1:23)
3. The hope of glory (1:27)

In pursuance of that theme of hope we considered together the first two paragraphs of movement I. Now we shall move on to paragraph three and we shall find its topic is suffering and striving.

1. Paul's suffering and striving
2. The striving of the religionists, mystics and ascetics
3. The striving of Paul and his fellow-workers

First we are going to think of Paul's sufferings and strivings—genuine, marvellous sufferings for the sake of the body of Christ. We shall also think of the pseudo, bogus religious exercises of the religionists, mystics and ascetics.

Paul will eventually come round to painting an exceedingly vivid picture of what happened at the cross of Calvary (our Lord's sufferings and strivings, if I dare call them that) where the principalities and powers and all the hostile venomous might of the spirit world gathered around, as a besieging army gathers around the fortress that it hopes to take and subdue. Christ was solitary in the universe as he fought the fight upon which our salvation and our eternal welfare depended. We shall hear about the outcome of that struggle—'For us he fought the fight, the triumph won.'⁸ He stripped off the principalities and powers and made a show of them openly, triumphing in the cross over all their vast and venomous might and strode triumphantly to the right hand of God where now he sits (see 2:15).

We noticed in paragraph 2 of Movement I what the hope of the gospel is. It is nothing less than that one day Christ will present every believer 'holy and blameless and above reproach before him' (v. 22). Now we're going to move on to paragraph 3 and notice that it talks once more about this matter of our presentation before God in the day to come—'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me' (1:28–29).

So let's begin by thinking about those two presentations, and the difference between them.
The hope of the gospel (1:23)

For in him all the fulness 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. 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. (vv. 19–23)

Notice again that presentation in paragraph 2 and how it is based solely and utterly on nothing else than the once-and-for-all atoning sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. It will help us perhaps to focus on the point of the presentation if alongside this we put those famous verses from Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

⁸ Horatius Bonar (1808–89), 'Blessed be God, our God'.

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (8:33–34)

This phrase—'to present you holy and blameless and above reproach'—reminds us that this presentation is based solely on the once-and-for-all sufferings of Christ at Calvary. It is his precious blood that cleanses our conscience, wipes out our guilt before God and enables the Saviour to present every believer at last without charge in the presence of His Divine Majesty. The very moment you trust the Saviour you have the very hope of the gospel. Notice how it is phrased. The hope is not dependent on your progress but on the hope of the gospel. You have it the very moment you trust the Saviour.

Who shall condemn us now?
 Since Christ has died and risen, and gone above,
 For us to plead at the right hand of Love;
 Who shall condemn us now?⁹

The hope of glory (1:27)

Now we come to paragraph 3 and we read again about presentation:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (vv. 28–29)

Says Paul: 'I proclaim Christ, admonish and teach everyone, that we may present every one mature (fully grown) in Christ.' That's not quite the same thing as presenting them 'holy, blameless and above reproach' (v. 22). The newest Christian can rejoice in the hope that he stands before God cleared of every charge—every sin has been forgiven. But a babe in Christ is hardly mature, full-grown or perfect. So there is this other side of Paul's work. He labours constantly so that he might eventually present everyone perfect, mature, full-grown in Christ.

If you want to focus more accurately on the terminology used, you may consider what Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, where he tells us of his own struggles and strivings to make progress in spiritual life—

I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (3:13–14)

The great apostle Paul admits that he is not yet perfectly mature. It is one great objective of his life in pleasing the Lord Jesus that he might eventually be presented full-grown, mature in Christ.

⁹ Horatius Bonar (1808–89), 'Blessed be God, our God'.

In this third paragraph the basis of maturing is different from the other presentation in paragraph 2 where it is based on and brought about by the once-and-for-all sufferings of Christ at Calvary (v. 22). This presentation is brought about in great part by the ongoing afflictions of the Lord Jesus. 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (v. 24). We notice two things about that. First and foremost *the ongoing afflictions of Christ*. Then *the afflictions of Christ in which others have a share*.

Notice at once the difference between the two things. It would be a blasphemy and contradiction of the gospel to say that any other person had a share in the atoning sufferings of Christ at Calvary. In those sufferings he stood alone in all his unique majesty. But Paul explicitly tells us here that he has a share in the sufferings that go towards presenting people mature in Christ. As life goes on in our work for the Lord you and I too shall find that we are privileged to have a share in those afflictions. I want, if I can, to enflame your hearts with love and respect for the apostle Paul. This paragraph is almost entirely Paul speaking about himself. I'm not going to ask you to idolize him; and certainly I have no intention to detract from the glories of Christ any more than Paul himself had.

We've thought of those glories and how marvellous they were, but just let's remind ourselves of them and the person and work of the Reconciler and Redeemer that we studied in paragraph 2.

1. The magnitude of the ruin of sin
2. The immensity of the task that lay before the Lord Jesus
3. The majesty of God's agent—chosen by God for the task
4. The marvel of the methods that God used in our reconciliation
5. The magnificence of the achievements of the Lord Jesus at Calvary

It is not Paul's intention, nor mine either, to detract from the unique glories of the Lord Jesus. Paul was never given to boasting and if he comes anywhere near he apologises for it. On the other hand, you will notice from time to time that he is not afraid to stake out the importance (I almost said, the unique importance) that he had in the work of the gospel.

If we would make progress in spiritual life and not come to grief in our efforts, one thing we would be wise to do is to get clearly into our spiritual sights an adequate concept of the importance of the apostle Paul. Not only to respect him for his work, but to grow to love him for all the sufferings he endured for our sake. It is probably true to say that there's not one of us that does not owe his or her salvation in part to the apostle Paul. In his second great missionary journey he brought the gospel to Europe. He was given a ministry to us Gentiles and how he suffered in the fulfilment of it. After preaching for hours on end throughout the day, when everybody had gone home he went back to make his tents to have enough money to pay his own expenses and for all the team that went with him, so that he might preach the gospel to us free of charge. That's not to talk of the sleepless nights he spent in prayer, or the imprisonments, beatings, stonings and shipwrecks. Nor the laborious work of writing the letters that have provoked and sustained our faith in many a crisis. What a debt we owe him. I'm looking forward to meeting him in glory. I hope you are too. I shall be able to

express then, more adequately than now, my profound and eternal gratitude to this greatly honoured servant and apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I admire among other things the way he stood so valiantly amidst tremendous criticism. When you get home to heaven watch all the crowds around John! And we love Peter because he's so much like us with all his mistakes. Paul's theology is a bit heavy and he's a bit tough at times. He never has been the most popular of the apostles. But I do admire the way that in his own day he stood utterly immovable for the sake of the gospel and the definition of the gospel. When even Peter was guilty of hypocrisy and compromise in the gospel Paul refused to budge an inch. Why? So that the truth of the gospel might stand and come down to us right here and now. If Paul had compromised in the gospel you and I wouldn't be sure now exactly what the gospel is.

In order to protect the gospel Paul is not afraid to claim his apostolic authority. You will hear him saying—'I Paul say to you. . . .' If I were to adopt that style you'd soon challenge me. 'I Gooding say to you!' You'd say, 'Who do you think you are, Gooding, taking airs and graces like that to yourself?' I don't speak like it, but Paul did. The Lord Jesus gave his apostolic authority to him.

'Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you' (Gal 5:2). Here is Paul on the basis of salvation, standing valiantly for the conditions and definitions of the gospel. 'For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles . . .' (Eph 3:1). He tells us about the revelation that God has given him concerning the church and her heavenly calling, her place in the body of Christ, 'and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph 2:6).

Over the centuries Paul has been forgotten and the church has been turned into a worldly institution with all its career structures, and in the end made partnership with the world.

His first letter to the Corinthians is about the way we order our churches and the way we are to order and control the gifts of the Spirit. So, when it comes to that, once more Paul uses his apostolic authority—'If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord' (14:37).

Similarly now in Colossians, when Paul is going to talk to us of our spiritual progress he reminds us of his authority. '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' (1:23). Then he speaks of being made a servant of the church 'for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister' (vv. 24–25). So he invites us to think of the special ministry God gave him, affecting the growth and maturity of the Colossian believers. It was for our growth as well and serves to present everyone, so far as possible, mature in Christ.

I have mapped out the contents of this third paragraph. In verses 24 and 25 Paul talks to us of his part as a servant of the gospel and a servant of the church, his share of Christ's sufferings and his stewardship of God's Word. Then in verses 26 and 27 it is about the glory of the mystery that has been committed to his stewardship, and he helps us to see the wonder of it by talking to us about the progress of revelation. The mystery was concealed for ages and

generations, but now in the course of God's progressive revelation it has been revealed. Then again he talks to us of the glory of this mystery, the potential it carries for our glorification: *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

Having said that he comes round once more to talking about his own part in attaining this purpose of presenting everyone mature in Christ. So in verse 28 he talks of the process: proclaiming Christ, warning and teaching everyone. Then finally he talks of the power available for him in his ministry: 'For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me' (v. 29).

Paul's part then, his share in the sufferings of Christ. When he talks about 'filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (v. 24), it's not of course a criticism of the Lord. It's not as though he's blaming the Lord Jesus for not having quite suffered enough. His term implies no criticism. What he means is the sufferings that remain to be suffered because as yet they could not have been suffered. They are the afflictions of Christ—not, of course, his atoning sufferings; they are finished and have been since Calvary—the afflictions of the Lord for his body's sake. Sufferings and afflictions involved in care for his church. Ephesians chapter 5 has a delightful phrase. In the course of exhorting husbands how to behave Paul says your wife is part of you—you are 'one flesh' (v. 31). 'For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church' (v. 29). This is not about Christ's sufferings at Calvary but of his present ministry in nourishing and cherishing the church, 'so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (v. 27). Of course it involves suffering.

This process of being perfected will involve suffering for the church, as Paul well knew. In his unconverted days God allowed him to persecute that church and attack them ferociously. He drove them to prison and stood over them and tortured them in order to try and get them to blaspheme the holy and lovely name of the Lord Jesus. Why did the Lord Jesus allow Saul of Tarsus to persecute his church like that? Had he no concept of the suffering they were going through? Yes indeed he had. Listen to what he said as he shone forth on Saul of Tarsus and brought that persecutor to his knees: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?' (Acts 9:4).

You say, 'Surely the Lord is in heaven, and up in heaven they don't feel any sufferings.' What would you make out of what is said of God in Isaiah 63:9, talking of the afflictions through which his people Israel went through—'In all their affliction he was afflicted'? What, God up in heaven? I've no right to dispute it; it is in Scripture! Do you think that God sits in his heaven and, even when his people go astray, he doesn't feel any sorrow? Perhaps we should revise our notions of what heavenly joy is like. Certainly the Lord himself feels for his people, 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses' (Heb 4:15). He shares in the afflictions of his people. Of course there come times when the Lord must discipline his people and with him it is very sincere. Parents know what it is to discipline their children. They say it hurts them more than it hurts you. And they mean it!

Paul tells us he had a share in the ministry of the risen Christ for his people in order to perfect them. All his travelling, preaching, suffering, writing, praying and working, and all

the insults and the criticisms he bore—‘I rejoice in it’, he says. How could the man possibly rejoice in it? Says Paul, ‘for the sake of his body (v. 24).

I don’t know about you, but I don’t like looking after my Volkswagen. You clean it once and then in five minutes it’s dirty again. You may enjoy looking after yours but I can think of better things to do! But if Her Majesty one day delivered to you a Rolls Royce and said, ‘Look after this for me’—there wouldn’t be a spot of dust on it, would there?

Christ has delivered to us the body, his own body, to look after. Don’t get romantic ideas of what it is to try and help the Lord’s people, because there will be as many criticisms and heartbreaks as there are joys. The thing that will keep you going is that it’s the Lord’s body. Why shouldn’t Paul suffer in his flesh? How could he ever forget that the blessed Lord reconciled him ‘in his body of flesh by his death’? If you were to come into glory and see the risen Lord with the nail prints in his hands and a body that was once wounded for our sake, you’d be ashamed to arrive there without a wound that you’d encountered in the battles of the Lord.

Paul’s share in the sufferings—he’s going to fill up what is still to be suffered (v. 24). When it comes to his stewardship of God’s mystery he’s going to fulfil [fill up] the word of God¹⁰ (v. 25 KJV). He felt under a compulsion to preach this stewardship to the full, in two senses. *To preach it as widely around the world as he possibly could*, and in Romans he says that he has fully preached the gospel ‘from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum’ (15:19). Secondly, he’s going *to preach it in all its detail* (v. 29). His ambition was to preach it fully.

How much of the gospel have I preached? John, yes; Romans and one or two other books; but what about Chronicles or Ezekiel? Is it the ambition of your church to preach the whole of the Word of God? How are you getting on? It would be hard work to systematically teach the whole of God’s Word once each generation. But that is the hard work to which Paul gave himself. How shall we present God’s people mature and perfect if we are content to repeat only the elementary things of the faith?

What a marvellous mystery it is, and how it ought to get us rejoicing almost to the point of excitement. This is the mystery that was for ages and ages concealed and it is ‘now revealed to his saints’ (v. 26). Have you not thought recently how tremendously privileged you are? Our Lord Jesus at once stage rejoiced in spirit, and then explained to Peter:

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Matt 13:16–17)

We get so used to our treasure, don’t we? King David would have gone round the world and fought 10,000 Goliaths to hear John 3:16. The greatest saints in the Old Testament knew nothing about the wonderful accomplished sacrifice of Christ and how it has opened up the way into the holiest of all. They were obliged to keep outside and never entered into the holiest of all. And you know all about it! Blessed are the eyes that see what you see, and the ears that hear what you hear. In God’s providence you belong to this privileged period of

¹⁰ In Ephesians 3 he tells us more about the mystery that was revealed to him.

earth's history. The Saviour has come and you know the noonday revelation of God in Christ.

So, not only the progress of revelation and the privileged age we live in, but the potential for glorification—'Christ in you' (v. 27). When we think of this progress towards perfection sometimes we ask ourselves, 'Shall I ever get there, and what resources have I?' Now listen to the glory of it—if you are a believer you have all the necessary potential. The potential for glory is this, *Christ in you*. To know Christ as Creator is wonderful; to know him as Redeemer, that he died at Calvary for you, is wonderful. But who shall describe this glory—Christ, the Creator and Redeemer, in you! What else would you need as a potential towards perfection?

Developing our potential is another story and it won't be done without a lot of struggle and exertion. How would you go about it if you were poor and you wanted to lead the believers on and eventually present them mature in Christ? Well it can be summed up very briefly. 'We proclaim Christ,' says Paul (v. 28). That's how it's done!

Let us see to it that every energy we possess is given to proclaiming Christ. Every time you get a possibility proclaim Christ. Not only generally but individually. Think of the potential of just one believer standing perfect before the throne of God's glory. The Lord of the universe, the Redeemer and the Reconciler who died for you, he's in you now. You are calling on your potential, aren't you? You're not like the man who put his talent in a napkin, hid it in the earth and said, 'I'll come and get that when it's ready.' Some people think of salvation like that. My soul is saved and when the Lord comes I'll just go and collect what I've got deposited in a bank. No, that won't do! Salvation is nothing less than Christ in you with all his potential.

Let me admonish you to bring every power you know of to the development of your potential. There is power available, for the same Christ who made the universe, who died at Calvary, who resides in us, has a power that operates in us mightily for the development of the divine potential.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 92](#).

The True Wisdom and the False

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, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. 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 fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (Col 2:1–10)

Once more let us look at our chart of the thought flow of the epistle so that we can take our bearings. We arrive now at the central part of the letter and we find that Paul introduces a theme that is to run through the whole of this part of the epistle. He says that all the treasures of *wisdom and knowledge* are hidden in Christ (v. 3). We noticed in the first movement that the initial theme was *hope* and it went through all three paragraphs of that first movement. We shall now find that this theme of wisdom and knowledge, once it's introduced, runs through all these three paragraphs in the second movement.

1. In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (v. 3)
2. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit (v. 8)
3. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom (v. 23)

The Greek for wisdom is *sōphia* and philosophy is basically a Greek word meaning a love of wisdom—a love of *sōphia*. So then, wisdom is going to dominate this second movement—a contrast between the true wisdom, true knowledge and the false and bogus wisdom.

Let's think together therefore what wisdom is exactly. Wisdom and knowledge are often bracketed together, but they're not necessarily the same thing. Knowledge is knowing certain information; wisdom concerns itself with the proper and best use of means and methods—what would be the wise thing to do, what would be a wise answer to give? This is what we want to achieve, so how would we go about it? Somebody suggests some method

of going about it and the other person replies, 'Well no, I don't think it would be wise to do it that way.' Wisdom concerns itself with a choice of means and methods in order to achieve a desired result.

The goal of the entire epistle is to present everyone mature, perfect, full-grown in Christ. If that is the goal, what are the right methods to use in developing spiritual progress in our lives and in the lives of others? We surely shall need wisdom to know how to do that. When it comes to recipes for the development of spiritual life some are wise because they are God-given means, God-given methods. They come with the very wisdom of God's tactics and strategy behind them. But some means and methods are not wise. In fact, some are positively harmful.

Paul is going to do two things. He's going to discuss the wisdom of God's tactics and strategies in our salvation. All of us delight to contemplate the love of God and why shouldn't we? We shall never get to the bottom or the top of it, let alone the breadth and the length. But there are moments when the Holy Spirit calls us to contemplate not merely the love of God, but the wisdom of God.

You will recall Romans chapters 9–11. As Paul contemplated God's way with Jew and Gentile—the marvel of God's love in determining to save all he possibly can, the means and methods he has used and will yet use to the conversion of Israel as a whole, and the multitude of blessings that shall yet come upon mankind—he felt his heart dissolved in the profoundest worship of the wisdom of God.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen. (Rom 11:33–36)

Oh that God's Holy Spirit would use these humble moments now to impress upon our minds the positive wonder and glory and riches of the way God has gone about saving us and sanctifying us, that we might worship God not only for our salvation but for his wisdom in the ways he has used and uses.

When we have seen something of the wisdom of God, then we shall listen to Paul warning us about other recipes that are not wise and if we allow ourselves to be deceived by them that is precisely what will happen.

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments (v. 4).

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit (v. 8).

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you (v. 16).

Let no one disqualify you (v. 18).

Why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations (v. 20)?

Don't let anybody reduce you to slavery and to subjection, for this is precisely the result that false methods of holiness will have in our lives. They will deceive, make spoil, judge us,

rob us and enslave us. If we would be preserved from wrong methods and hold to the right, wise methods of God in developing holiness, then once more we shall have to listen to Paul.

In this first paragraph of chapter 2 he now explains why he spent so much time at the end of chapter 1 talking about his striving for us—for surely we are included. ‘For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you [at Colossae] and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face’—and that must include us. It’s a long while ago now but just think of it, my brothers and sisters. Paul is sitting in prison, when he lifted his hand to sign the letter the chain dangled and he said, ‘Remember my chains’ (4:18). Tired and imprisoned he took the opportunity to write a letter; in a practical sense it not only served the Colossians in their spiritual development, but here we are reading it. He had a concern for us who haven’t seen his face in the flesh. If we listen to him he tells us why he is striving for us.

1. *The positive reasons*

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, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (vv. 2–3)

We must listen to him, because it’s by listening to him that we shall find encouragement in our spiritual development and the secret of unity amongst the Lord’s people. Being knit together in love, our hearts will eventually be filled with all riches of full assurance. There will come into our lives a sense of wealth, of riches, of treasure and it will give us a tremendous assurance and encouragement.

Now I don’t know about you, but I’m one of the weaker sort that Paul talks of in his letters. When it comes to making spiritual progress I easily get discouraged. You want to do what’s right, to go on with the Lord, to conquer certain weaknesses and defects in your life. You take it to the Lord, you strive and pray and determine that you’re going to be different and better and so forth and so on—and how many times do you have to come back defeated? You feel you’re getting nowhere fast. What happens then? You get discouraged and begin to feel like giving up. If you’re not very careful you get disillusioned and begin to say, ‘Is this thing true, or is the preacher exaggerating? I’d like to know how he gets on in his own life. He preaches the theory with great gusto, but how does it work?’ Then, little by little, you get depleted in your spiritual energies, you feel poverty-stricken and the whole thing is like trying to make bricks without straw.

I was talking to a good man, devoted to the Lord like few I have known, and now after many years he says to me, ‘David, it’s like slavery. When do I earn time-off? I’m always being told I’ve got to devote 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to the Lord. When do I earn a little time off?’ This dear man of God has been so burdened with exhortations to be devoted that it’s become like slavery, like making bricks without straw. It can happen; folks get disillusioned. If we’re in that state Paul comes along and says to us, like he said to the mariners on the boat that was about to go down into the depths of the Mediterranean, ‘You should have listened to me’ (Acts 27:21).

If you're going to make progress in the Christian life, listen to Paul. He'll start by encouraging you—'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (1:27). Don't forget it! Consider the resources you have and let them encourage your heart. Let them bring a certain wealth into your life, a sense of the glory of what God has done, for in him 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:3). Forget just for the moment your strong desire to make progress, allow yourself to sit down and take the lid off this box and delve into the treasure.

If I may use a humble parable, suppose you went out to one of these famine-stricken lands. You can see the need of the people, and you say to yourself, 'Poor folks, they are so weak. How will they get to the centre for the distribution of the food? They've only got donkeys and the women carrying it on their heads.' You say, 'I know what—I'll get them a Range Rover!' So you buy a Range Rover and charter an aircraft. It lands in the middle of these dear folks and out rolls the Range Rover. You tell the Chief that the people can use it to go and fetch the wheat and that will make it easier for them. You come back in a year but you can't see the Range Rover anywhere, so you ask the chief.

'It was a great disappointment; the thing was so heavy! All that weight, tonnes and tonnes of it. We pushed and we pulled and we put the donkeys on the front. We only have a little food to eat and we're weak. It was bad enough when it was empty, but when we got it loaded it was impossible.'

You say, 'Don't you realise there's an engine in it?'

He says, 'What do you mean, *engine*?'

So you undo the bonnet and show him the engine.

'But it's so heavy, that's part of the trouble—we thought about cutting it out to make the thing lighter.'

You say, 'No wonder your progress is slow and you got discouraged, you haven't understood. Do you think I'd have given you a thing like that to make your life more difficult?'

Then you demonstrate that what he thinks is a heavy bit of iron is an engine and the potential that was there all the time. How often we can think that God's way of sanctification is slavery, like Pharaoh imposed on the Egyptians. We need to sit down and 'open the bonnet'.

You say, 'You're not going to preach Paul, are you—all that heavy theology?' Perhaps that's our trouble, we think it's heavy theology. Romans, Ephesians and Colossians, we want something lighter. Oh friend, it's only heavy in the sense that it's heavy with glory, potential and riches. Listen to Paul so that you come to see the tremendous wealth of this mystery: 'in whom [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (v. 3), 'and you have been filled in him' (v. 10). We should make more progress sometimes if we learned to sit down and take the lid off what we've already been given. When we find the riches that are in Christ it will lead to unity (v. 2). Sometimes our recipes divide Christian from Christian and that's a sad thing, but Christ unites.

This gives us assurance. Basic to all true progress it is necessary (I nearly said, psychologically necessary) to have confidence and assurance. If we lose sight of these great riches it is possible that in the end we could get so disgusted with our failures as Christians that we come to doubt our salvation. When doubt like that enters in it saps all strength for

spiritual progress. If you have care for anybody's soul do like Paul, see to it that you lead him or her to full assurance. Do your best to fill their lives with a sense of the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (1:27).

Why are the riches hidden? Why aren't they obvious? An answer to that would be found in 1 Corinthians 2. They're hidden from the world, of course—

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" —these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. (vv. 7–10; Isa 64:4)

Don't say that's a description of heaven; it's a description of now. They're hidden to the world and they remain hidden to the unspiritual believer, but God has given them to us by his Spirit. You may think Paul is heavy but there is a Holy Spirit available to interpret, to make it real, to give us understanding, for in God's Word and in this scheme of salvation we have the very mind of Christ. These are the positive reasons then, why we should listen to Paul.

2. *The negative reasons*

'I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments' (v. 4).

'See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit' (v. 8).

We must be careful of false recipes. It is possible for people to delude us with clever speaking. They may be very entertaining speakers, but watch out that none of them takes you from what Paul has said—although he says on his own account that he's not a very good speaker.

It's as if you had a friend to whom you wanted to show your love and kindness, so you bought him a bowl and gave it to him in a box. When you left he undid the box and inside there was this bowl, a sort of a dullish brown with a little tinge of blue in it. 'That's a funny looking bowl,' he thinks to himself; but he respects you as a friend so he puts it on the sideboard. Then someone else comes to his house.

'What's this old thing here, this funny old brown thing?' he says.

'That's a bowl given to me by a friend. I don't see much in it myself.'

So his friend says, 'These things have gone out of fashion. Marks & Spencer have some beautiful bowls with nice pink flowers on the side, and they'll only cost you £7.'

So your friend goes down to Marks and Spencer for the new bowl, and takes the old brown thing, puts it out in the garden and grows tulips in it.

Then you come back! 'What's this bowl?' you say.

'A friend of mine said there was a better one in Marks & Spencer, so we got this one.'

You say, 'Where's the original bowl I gave you?'

'It's out in the garden, with tulips in it.'

You say, 'Don't you know that it's a Ming dynasty bowl worth £100, 000?'

What Paul is putting before us is a Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Don't let anybody rob you of it with cheap recipes for spiritual progress. Paul isn't campaigning against *philosophy* as a method of thinking. Philosophy's a very good thing; it teaches us to use logic to examine the truthfulness of our statements. He's talking here about *theosophy*, with all its theories of the universe and angels and demagogues and all that kind of thing.

We don't have time to go into the detail of it now—let that come on another occasion. Let's just get hold of the big contrast. His philosophy, says Paul, is 'after the tradition of men' (v. 8 KJV). At its very best what would it be compared with our blessed Lord, 'for in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily' (v. 9 ESV)?

So then, let's listen to Paul and make sure that nobody by his persuasive speech takes us away from the vast treasures that are in Christ and gets us going after his man-made theories and philosophies.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 93](#).

Christ and the Wisdom of God's Strategy in Salvation

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 fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 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,¹¹ having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col 2:8–15)

We come now to a very important passage in this epistle; I suspect we shall find it contains some difficulties. We shall need patience with each other as we try to determine, with God's help, the meaning of the passage. There will come difficulties in the *terms* that Paul uses, even in such a common term as the word 'flesh' in verse 11. When it comes to deciding what it means to 'put off the body of the flesh,' we may find we have disagreements. Secondly, we shall perhaps have some difficulty with *concepts*. For instance, what does it mean when we are told that we have been circumcised 'in the circumcision of Christ' (v. 11)? Then towards the end of the chapter we might have some difficulty and indeed disagreement in determining who is *the subject of the many important verbs* that are used. Who 'made us alive' (v. 13)? Was it God the Father or God the Son? Who 'cancelled the record of debt that stood against us' (v. 14)? Who 'set it aside, nailing it to the cross' (v. 14)? Was it God the Father or God the Son? Whose is the triumph in verse 15? Is it talking about our Lord disarming the rulers and authorities and putting them to open shame, or is it God who does this thing? In those final verses perhaps you might eventually decide that it comes to the same thing, whoever is the grammatical subject—be it God the Father or God the Son. Where we find ourselves perhaps disagreeing, or not yet understanding fully, we shall need patience with each other and loving kindness. However, let us not allow the difficulties to obscure the main drift of the passage.

¹¹ Some translations read, 'in the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ' (v. 11). The better reading of the manuscript omits the word 'sins', and simply reads, 'in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ'.

So, to start with, let's look once again at the thought flow of the epistle in its major parts and see what help we can derive from that. The passage we now have to consider is the middle paragraph of the second movement. We have already noticed that it is one in a row of paragraphs dealing with the question of *wisdom*, true and false. Paragraph 2 is going to deal with the wisdom of God—the sublime and divine wisdom seen in the ways and means it used for our salvation and sanctification.

Secondly, let us help ourselves by contrasting this second paragraph in the second movement with the second paragraph in the first movement. We shall notice at once that there are similarities. In both of these paragraphs we have marvellous descriptions of Christ and then descriptions of ourselves, our past and present.

In the first movement it was Christ: first and supreme, the great Creator, Redeemer and Reconciler. Now in the second movement it's going to be Christ: sufficient and triumphant. Whether it is God the Father who triumphs over the principalities and powers or whether it is Christ, it comes to the same thing in the end. It is through Christ that God in his divine strategies has gained the triumph over the principalities and powers.

Christ: Sufficient and Triumphant

'For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him' (vv. 9–10). It is not merely when he was on earth and suffered at Calvary that it pleased God that all the fulness should dwell in him. Now risen and in glory he still has a human body. Greek Gnosticism wouldn't thank you for saying that, nor would Christian Science and various forms of Hinduism, but it is a glorious fact that we're called upon to believe. Our risen and ascended Lord has gone back to heaven with a real human body.

Now let us notice the difference that occurs between these two paragraphs when they talk about believers and what our needs were originally. In the first movement Paul describes our past in these terms: 'And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled' (1:21–22a). Therefore what Christ had to do for us, what God had to do for us, was to reconcile us.

Incidentally, in answer to my own question of last week, let me now say that when the Bible talks of God reconciling us it implies two things, not just one thing. It certainly implies that God had to change us and turn us from being enemies of God into friends and children of God. Reconciliation had to change us, but there was more to the great reconciling work of Christ than just changing us. It had also to do with God.

In the ancient Greek world, if you talked of reconciling Mr Smith to Mr Brown, you didn't mean that you changed Mr Smith, stopped him being an enemy of Mr Brown and made him his friend. You could mean that of course, but you also meant that you had to do something for Mr Brown. Mr Brown had a great cause against Mr Smith. Mr Smith had offended him, grievously sinned against him. Therefore Mr. Brown had every reason for being angry with Mr Smith. If you're going to reconcile Mr Smith to Mr Brown, you must do something for Mr Brown. You must remove the cause of his just anger against Mr Smith.

So it was with us and God. It was not merely that Christ had to change us and stop us from being enemies to God. Our sins had enraged the divine Majesty. The death of Christ had to do something for God—remove from him the cause of his anger against us and Christ

has done that. It's glorious to think about that and it fills our hearts with thanksgiving. So, to come back to the point, we were alienated from God, enemies in our mind and needed to be reconciled.

In the second movement you notice the difference: 'And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses' (2:13). Now he doesn't say we were enemies; but we once were dead, and therefore need not so much reconciliation but new life. What God has done here is, he has given us new life. So we notice the difference in the terms that are used to describe the great work of Christ in this middle paragraph of the epistle.

The problem of giving us new life turns out to be a double problem. Just let's have a look at that in a little detail.

1. *How to put off the body of the flesh*

We were dead in our trespasses and the uncircumcision of our flesh (v. 13). If God was going to give us life, then problem No. 1 was how to put off what Paul describes as 'the body of the flesh'. It was utterly unacceptable to God, but how did you put it off? The answer to that problem is, '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' (v. 11)

2. *How God could forgive us and give us new life*

There were two great powers that were contrary to his doing so.

(i) The record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands (v. 14). Christ took it out of the way.

(ii) The rulers and authorities (v. 15), which were not only against us but against God forgiving us and giving us new life. God had to deal with them.

So we come to the first problem. *How do you put off the body of the flesh?* How do you get people to 'walk in [Christ]' (v. 6), to 'walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him' (1:10)? Not merely to have forgiveness but to learn to walk to the glory of God.

That problem was brought to Abraham's attention. Said God to Abraham, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless' (Genesis 17:1). How could Abraham learn to walk before God and in this sense be perfect? In the picture language of that chapter God introduced Abraham to the rite of circumcision. He and his descendants were circumcised and Abraham learned to walk before God and be blameless.

So we had better turn aside just for a moment to help ourselves understand what *the circumcision of Christ* is and what it may mean for us. Circumcision is used in the Old Testament in a number of ways, so we shall need to pick the one that suits our particular context when we come to it.

In Romans 4 Paul points out that circumcision was an outward sign given as a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith. Abraham was justified before he was circumcised. That's very important. Circumcision didn't gain him justification. He was justified by faith, but circumcision was then given to him as an outward sign — 'as a seal of the righteousness

that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised' (v. 11). In Genesis 17 we discover that circumcision was to be practised by all Abraham's physical descendants who were male because it was an emblem of physical descent from Abraham.

Nations have emblems. The emblem of Ireland is the shamrock and the Welsh have the leek. Israel has the emblem of circumcision, denoting physical descent from Abraham, or membership of the nation that was physically descended from him.

When you come on to the book of Deuteronomy, you will find that already in Old Testament times circumcision is used as a metaphor. God's people are told to circumcise their hearts (10:16). They are no longer to be disobedient and obstinate, but show to God a willing heart, ready to obey him. The Bible is using the picture of a circumcised heart simply as a metaphor.

Then again, Paul points out that, as well as being an outward sign and an emblem of physical descent from Abraham, circumcision even for the Jew was meant to be a symbol (Rom 2:25–29). In other words, it was a symbol that declared (or should have declared) that the man who practised circumcision was thereby saying that he was willing to keep God's holy law. So much so that if a man was circumcised as a Jew but had no intention of keeping God's law it was a denial of the symbolism of his circumcision. Just as for instance a Christian who has got himself baptised but has no intention of leading a holy life is denying the very symbolism of the baptism he has undergone.

There are other passages in the New Testament where it seems to me that circumcision is employed by Christian writers as a type, in which the cutting off of the literal flesh from the body becomes a prototype of a spiritual circumcision. A profound operation performed upon the believer who trusts the Lord Jesus and is united with him. That at least is what I'm going to submit to your judgment—'I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say' (1 Cor 10:15).

We come back then to the problem, how to put off the body of the flesh. Compared with that Abraham's problem was a small problem indeed. Circumcision for him was the cutting off of a literal scrap of literal flesh. The problem with us was not how do you get rid of a little piece of literal flesh, but how do you get rid of the whole body of flesh? You say, 'Why would you need to get rid of it?'

Allow me to remind you of the terms in which God talked to Noah about his indignation and dissatisfaction with the people of Noah's day. 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh' (Gen 6:13). Had you been Noah you might have said to His Divine Majesty, 'Excuse me, what is it in particular that you don't like about my neighbour, or me either? Is it that little bit of pride I have, or could it be that my tongue is unduly sharp? What little speck is there in me that annoys you?' God would have said, 'It isn't a question of one little speck. You are so far gone in your evil that I have determined to get rid of the whole of you. Not the bad part of you, but the whole lot—the end of *all* flesh.'

As we shall presently see, that is the state of affairs that we illustrate at our baptism. When you get baptised you declare to the world what was wrong with you, for in baptism you are buried. Can you remember the day you were baptised? Which part of you did they bury—did they bury the bad bit and leave the good part standing there? They buried your pride, but they left your lovely, charming, gracious attitudes and your generosity? 'No,' you

say, 'I think when I was baptised they buried the whole lot of me.' Yes they did, and therein is a vital part of God's diagnosis of our need and how his salvation is going to work.

So many unconverted folks look upon themselves as nice red, rosy apples with just a little unfortunate speck here and there. They think that Christ has come along to help them get rid of that little speck. If only they could do a minor little operation by the help of the Lord and get rid of that speck, then what they'd have left is a nice red apple. That is a perilously wrong assessment of the situation. The more you get down to that speck and follow it, you'll find it's gone to the core and the core is rotten. Salvation is not improving, getting rid of the odd speck. God's judgment is this: 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh.' As in Noah's day he commanded that the whole lot should be drowned, finished with, so in the cross of Christ we see God's estimate of us—the whole must die.

That is a problem. If putting off the body of the flesh has got to be as drastic as that, what will survive it? In Noah's day God first issued his judgment that all flesh must be destroyed. His work of salvation showed his divine wisdom. God provided an ark and Noah was invited to come into the ark. It was not that the ark should escape the judgment, but that it should go through the judgment and come out the other side. It was so constructed that Noah could be in the ark with his family and the ark bear the judgment—the flood beneath and the storm from above—and come through the other side. The work of God in our salvation showed his divine wisdom even more. Let's not first underestimate the sorry condition we were in. God's judgment was that the end of everything had come. Get rid of them; bury them. If God issues his judgment upon me I shall disappear. How can you put off the body of the flesh and yet survive?

I take now therefore *the circumcision of Christ* to be referring to this profound thing. At one time all believers were, as the Bible puts it, 'in the flesh' (Rom 7:5). We had no other ground of our being. If God's judgment had been passed on us as we were in the flesh that wouldn't have been just the end of the flesh, it would have been the end of us. How could God execute his judgment and save us? He united us with his Son. We are 'in Christ', and Christ went through the flood. He died and we died with him, he was buried and we were buried with him, he was raised again and we were raised in him (Rom 6:3–4). A great miracle has taken place. As Paul puts it, 'you, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit' (Rom 8:9). How has it been altered? By the circumcision of Christ! You are in the Spirit, you are *in Christ* as the very ground of your being. If that is the true interpretation of it you'll begin to see that salvation could be in none other than in Christ.

If I stood here and talked about your being *in* the archangel Michael, or even *in* Socrates, you would think I'd gone astray in the mind. How could you be in Socrates, or even in the Archbishop of Canterbury, or in Michael the archangel, or in anybody else? That's why Christ and only Christ could be your Saviour, *because you can be in Christ*. Consider who he is in all the wonder of his person—not just a man but the great representative man. God incarnate, truly human, truly divine, and he can take us up into himself. Just as we were his idea in creation and were made, in that sense, in him, so now in redemption there is this great new thing in God's universe, we are put into Christ.

Problem No. 1: The putting off of the body of the flesh through the circumcision of Christ. It has cut the roots of our personality and transferred us from the flesh to the Spirit, given us life and standing in Christ. For the believer the judgment is past. You have come through the flood, as signified in your baptism—buried with Christ, raised with Christ. When you were buried with Christ you were saying you deserved to perish—Christ died for you and you died with him. When you rose from the water at your baptism, it wasn't just a promise that you were going to try and live better. You were illustrating a great fact; God in Christ has quickened you, given you new life—the very life of the risen Son of God.

Problem No. 2: If we were dead through our trespasses, going against God's holy law—on death row so to speak, simply waiting for the day of execution with no hope—how could God forgive us and give us new life? 'And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses' (2:13).

You say, 'Well if he's God he doesn't have to ask anybody's permission. He just says, "Let's forget this trespass of yours. It's a long time in the past now, so let's brush it under the carpet and forget it. You can come out of your condemned cell and I'll give you new life.'" Why couldn't God do that? There were two mighty forces against him doing it. There was what is here called 'the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands' (v. 14). That great handwriting was against us, and it is talking about the charge of God's holy law.

Let's take that difficulty first. How was it contrary to us? When we think of God's holy law, it was God who gave it at that great public demonstration on Sinai. The transcendent Lord came down on to our planet, his feet touched Sinai and the whole mountain was ablaze with smoke from the presence of Almighty God. How could our little planet contain him? He gave his law, and now here is the long, long list of our trespasses against it. How can God say, 'Yes, I did come down to Sinai, that's true. But that's a long while ago. Moses was living then, but things have changed and society has altered. We take a different view of things these days, so let's forget all that old fashioned stuff.' If God were to do that, don't go to heaven! He could get tired of heaven one day and say, 'It's a long time since you came up here, I think we'll turn you out now.'

How can God go against himself? He has no intention of going against himself. Forgiveness does not mean that God has grown easy on sin and has taken a more liberal view of it. Thank God he hasn't. Heaven will be heaven in all its glory because of God's eternal and undying hatred of sin. The glory of Sinai was a real glory for which we do well to worship his divine majesty. How could God go against his own protest against sin, his demand for holy living? He has no intention of going against it!

How then can he give us life, if our trespasses stand written in such great detail? Listen to the wonder of it. He took that record of debt with all its legal demands and he sponged it out—he took it out of the way, set it aside. Then he showed it to the entire universe. He hammered it to the cross of Christ, showing that every trespass was paid for and thus forgiven. The universe will never forget Calvary. Our little planet has that unique honour that to all eternity it held up the standards of God's holiness and heaven shall be heaven because of what Christ did at Calvary. Listen to the hammer—it wasn't merely the sadism of rebellious men that drove the nails through the hands of Christ. The noise you hear is God

himself hammering the list of our sins and his broken law to the cross of Christ where it was paid in full.

It wasn't merely that the law and our trespasses stood against us; God had to find a way of forgiving us that upheld his law and maintained God's justice. He has found it in Christ. The 'rulers and authorities' (v. 15) were arraigned against him. The greatest of those is Satan and we are told that he is 'the accuser of our brothers' (Rev 12:10). How should God shut his mouth? You say, 'Squash him out, he's only a creature anyway. Don't listen to him.'

But the charge had an element of truth in it. Said Satan, 'God, are you going to forgive this fallen human race? What's this I hear about you raising them and putting them above angels? Look at their sins! You're going to throw me out of heaven because of my sin and then let them in—what about their sins? Cross me out if you like, God, but what about your character? I'm afraid that your whole experiment with the human race has come unstuck. I've destroyed it beyond your ability to repair, because I tempted them to sin. They've trespassed against your law and your own righteousness forbids your forgiving them.'

They gathered around the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord, thinking it was the last step in their victory. That fair flower of humanity was dying as a reputed sinner on the tree. None of the princes of this world knew it, did they? Not Caiaphas, Herod or Pilate, nor his satanic majesty. 'None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8). In their ignorance and folly they went and crucified him. God raised him from the dead and you with him. Every spirit opposition was silenced eternally, not by destroying them but by the great answer of the cross of Christ.

What a magnificent salvation it is. No angel could have done it for you. He hung there solitary, your only Saviour, and he triumphed because he is God's incarnate Son. Then let us take heed to the message: 'Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him' (Col 2:6). He is your only hope, your only Saviour—find everything for your sanctification in him.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 94](#).

The Strivings of the Religionists, Mystics and Ascetics

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 fulness of deity dwells bodily . . . Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. 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. (Col 2:8-9, 16-23)

Once more let's look at our layout of the general thought flow of the epistle so that we can take our bearings as to where exactly we have come. On our last occasion we were trying, however briefly, to deal with this wonderful paragraph 2 in the second movement. It talked of our need as 'being dead in trespasses and in sins,' and how God in his wisdom has 'made us alive' through the marvellous strategies and tactics of the cross.

Now we come to paragraph 3 in the second movement that has to do with the strivings of the religionists, mystics and ascetics. We noticed in an earlier session how the final paragraph in each movement deals with the topic of spiritual striving.

Paul is going to deal with recipes for the development of spiritual life that are unhelpful, to say the least, and some of them absolutely false and bogus. At the very start of our study I suggest we notice the proportion of the letter he devotes to exposing what is false. How many lovely, positive things he has told us about the Lord Jesus and the glories of our salvation before he starts mentioning these false things. And when he has mentioned them he will have yet more lovely things to tell us about the Lord Jesus and the true methods of spiritual discipline. His example is one that perhaps we are wise to follow, but from time to time we must mention false and unhelpful things to expose them. God give us the wisdom to do it in the proportions that the apostles themselves employed and the grace to do these things in their true context.

Paul is saying that none of these recipes for spirituality is helpful; some of them are false. We must understand him in the context of what he's talking about. If we read some of his other writings we should find him mentioning a lot of considerations that will lead us to a balanced view in this whole debated area. We mustn't suppose that this paragraph is the only thing that Paul ever wrote that impinges on this topic. God give us likewise, in our exposure of what is false, to seek to develop a balanced mind and not become extremists.

So let us look at some of these false methods of holiness and see how they are contrasted with the true. First, we have the question of *philosophy* (2:8–9). It is better nowadays to call this *theosophy* rather than philosophy, for philosophy itself is a highly respectable art if not a science. If we notice the contrast he makes it may help us to sum up what is right and what is wrong. He says that this empty theosophy is 'according to human tradition'. Why would you go after the tradition of men when all the vast treasures that are in Christ are available to you? 'In him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily.' You only have to put them together to see the folly of going after something that is merely of human origin, instead of something that is divine.

Next he talks of Jewish *food laws and festivals*: food and drink, festivals and Sabbaths, which are 'a shadow of the things to come' (vv. 16–17). He immediately contrasts this with the substance ('body', KJV)—'but the substance belongs to Christ'—*substance* in the sense of the reality. At best these were but the shadows that pointed forward to the coming great reality of Christ and his great salvation. Once more, you only have to put them side by side to see the answer to the question, 'Why would you go for the shadows when the reality is available?'

Then he comes to the question of Jewish and perhaps also pagan *mysticism*. Techniques for inducing visions, out of the body states, and so forth and so on (vv. 18–19). Once more he contrasts these with the reality. Anyone who goes in for this kind of thing is 'puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.' Granted there's something going on inside his head, but it's empty and to no purpose in contrast with 'holding fast to the Head'. Watch your heads, my brothers and sisters, and what goes on inside them. We mustn't be misled into thinking that everything is worthwhile or real. As distinct from being puffed up by a sensuous ('fleshly', KJV) mind, we want to make sure that we hold fast to the Head, which is the Lord Jesus.

Finally he comes to what you might call *asceticism*, legalistic asceticism (vv. 20–23). Ranges of disciplines: 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.' Asceticism is the technical term for the development of willpower and severity to the body. It is common to many religions and it has long since invaded Christianity. Again, notice the contrast he makes, 'These have indeed an appearance of wisdom.' It looks very impressive when you first meet it, but in actual fact it isn't of any value.

Theosophy

I don't want to say much about it and I suspect that few of us here are liable to be involved with it, though you may have some friends in Christian Science or other such things that are

based on Hindu philosophy and come very near to theosophy itself. It is an age-old theory that pretends it knows all about the principalities and powers that lie between humankind and God. It will eventually tell you that it believes in the great world spirit. But if you were to ask them straight if Jesus is the Christ, and you really pushed them hard, they would say, 'No! The Christ is the great world spirit. Jesus lent himself to the Christ and the Christ used Jesus as he has used many other religious leaders. But Jesus isn't the Christ, he is now a refined spirit of the seventh degree' (or what other degree they put him in). They will tell you that amongst the advanced spirits there is a white brotherhood of men and women like Jesus who finished their life on earth in such a state of perfection that they are now available to help you on your road—don't ask to where. Some of them may be very real, but you would be unwise to follow such a so-called white brotherhood.

In the ancient world, among the Greek philosophers, there were serious men who contemplated the imperfections of our created universe around us—disease and sin and devastation. As they tried their best to work out these things, without the aid of revelation, they decided that the great God couldn't possibly be responsible for this universe in its state of imperfection. They thought it would be a slander to suggest that the Almighty was responsible for it, so they suggested there must be many beings, less able and perfect than God himself, who created this world and control it. In some circles that kind of philosophy was taken over and made into a religion. They held that if you wanted to come at last to fellowship with a supreme deity you must come through the mediation of these intermediary principalities and powers.

So they spun their theories and Paul is telling us straight that this is false (vv. 8–10). Don't be taken in by it—it will carry you away like plunder. It will carry you away from the Lord Jesus Christ and all the tremendous riches that there are in him. Paul asserts the difference between the two. These theosophies are the traditions of men, but the fulness of deity dwells bodily in Christ, and you are complete in him. He is the head of all principality and power. In this universe there are great spiritual beings, their powers originally delegated to them by God. Christ was their creator, as the middle paragraph of movement I reminded us. The middle paragraph of movement II is now going to tell us that he is the Head of them all. In the practical question of our fight against sin and developing holiness, that is exceedingly important.

The idea that the world was not made by God but by some subordinate powers can have devastating effects on anybody who believes it. Zoroastrianism teaches that the power for good and the power for evil are equal and independent. There are two equal gods—one good and one bad. In wrestling against evil you wrestle against something that has the status of the ultimate, deity itself. It isn't true—thank God it isn't true! Evil may be strong, but is not absolutely strong. The devil himself was originally and still remains a creature of God. Our blessed Lord was his creator and at this moment our Lord is Head of all principality and power.

If you want to get anything done in business don't go to the new errand boy or to the clerk at the reception desk, go to the top. When it comes to spiritual life don't bother about principalities and powers, go to the top. Go to the blessed Lord Jesus—he's Head of all principality and power.

I'll tell you something else that's marvellous about him, he still has a human form. When his disciples saw him go up, he went with a body that they could feel and touch. Enthroned at this present moment he's still a man. How kind of God to give us someone who is human as well as divine to concentrate our attentions on. We are humans and in our present state too much concentration on spirit powers can have harmful effects. Set your mind on him, who, though he is God, is God incarnate and veritably human.

Jewish Food Laws, Festivals, etc.

Let's move on to the next things that are unhelpful—the Jewish food laws and festivals (vv. 16–19). Paul says, 'they are a shadow of the things to come.' The writer to the Hebrews will explain in more detail what is meant by that phrase (ch. 10). Israel's religion was given by God, including the food laws and festivals (most of them at any rate). But they were *shadows* of the good things to come. They were good in their day and taught Israel a number of important lessons. But now you've got the reality why would you still want the shadows?

Here's a little four year old in his bath and he's surrounded with a lot of toy ships. He's getting a lot of fun now, but who knows he might grow up to be an admiral, the captain of a real boat! Getting to know about hydrodynamics in the bath, the sinkability of boats and things, isn't a bad lesson to learn even at the tender age of four by the medium of what are only toys—shadows of the coming big thing. But you'd be distressed to see him at forty in his bath with toy boats, wouldn't you?

Why go in for the shadows now, when you can have the reality? Under the law, says Paul in Galatians, God had to treat his people like infants and put them under all sorts of rigorous disciplines. Now that the Son of God has come and has sent his Spirit into your heart, you're grown up sons. Be grown up sons and act like grown up sons. Embrace the reality and let go of the shadows.

Notice that Paul isn't saying that the shadows were bad. If you had pressed him he would have admitted that the shadows were laid down by God, and we must bear that in mind. When he says, 'Let no man pass judgment on you' in these matters, he is talking about people who are so immersed in the shadows—keeping their food laws, their days of festival, holy days and things—that they get upset if they see a Christian not observing these things. In other parts of his writings Paul will tell us that we must be careful with other people's genuine consciences, if they feel that they must still observe certain special days. One person thinks he can eat meat, the other eats only vegetables. We must learn to be gracious and careful and not judge the one who does eat, if we think he oughtn't to. And he mustn't despise us either. God give us that balanced heart and mind.

There are still some people who feel under obligation to keep some of those Old Testament rules and regulations about food and the keeping of special days, like the Sabbath day. Paul is talking here about the value of these rules and regulations for the promotion of spiritual life. What is the use of the shadow when you've got the reality? He's saying that people can get so enamoured of the shadow that they don't want the reality.

It happened in our Lord's life. One of the major themes of the Gospel of John reminds us of how our Lord Jesus went up to the temple from time to time on the occasion of some of these festivals. For instance, in chapters 7–10 John records an occasion at the Feast of the

Tabernacles. There were the priests, daily taking the water from the pool of Siloam and pouring it at the base of the altar in memory of the day, centuries before, when Israel had been in the wilderness. God told Moses to smite the rock and the physical water came out to satisfy their physical thirst.

It was a lovely thing to remember, but when all is said and done it was by now a shadow of the coming good thing. What was that? It was our Lord, who stood and cried on the last day of the feast, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." Now this he said about the Spirit' (John 7:37–39). He was the reality of which that was but the prototype and shadow. When our blessed Lord offered himself as the reality, able to dispense the satisfying gift of the water of the Holy Spirit, many of them didn't want it. Caiaphas was furious at this young man from Nazareth daring to suggest that, after a week of pageantry, ceremony, ritual and robes, lights and incense and sacrifices galore, anybody could possibly be left unsatisfied. He was furious and plotted the death of the Lord Jesus.

Sometimes people get so enamoured with the shadow that when the reality is offered they don't want it. We must watch that, even with our own Christian observations. There are many people who have kept the Sabbath Day as rigorously as possible in these Northern parts, thinking that God requires Christians to keep a Sabbath. Yet if you asked them if they know what the glorious rest of salvation is, in which they cease from their own works and trust the Saviour, absolutely certain of entering one day into the great Sabbath rest above, they'd shake their heads and tell you they don't have that rest of heart. Oh friend, what is the good of the shadow if you don't have the reality? Let's not throw too many big stones in the direction of Judaism. It's possible for us Christians rigorously to attend the Lord's Supper and take its symbols, but not have the reality. It's the reality we want, isn't it?

Mysticism

Then we move on to the next division—Jewish, and possibly pagan, mysticism (vv. 18–19). None of the scholars—that is, the good scholars—can be absolutely certain as to what kind of religious exercise these verses are talking about. Being a very poor scholar I shall not attempt to decide it for them. But it would appear perhaps to be a reference to Jewish mysticism and also to some pagan mysticism. Many religions, certainly Judaism, Islam, some forms of Christianity as well as Hinduism, will talk to you about the possibility of having visions and ecstasies.

In Judaism at one stage, whether contemporary with the apostle or later who knows, there were sections of Judaism that cultivated what was called in their tongue *Merkabah mysticism*. It was based, so its advocates said, on the vision that God gave to Ezekiel where he was given to see the throne of God with its attendant cherubim (ch. 1). From that, some of the sects in Judaism said they could teach people how they too could achieve this vision. The techniques and preparation would be rigorous; but they could take you on an out of the body trip, in which you ascended through the various levels of the planets, past the principalities and powers and the serried ranks of angels, until you actually could see the throne of God.

They would further add that, in this great mystical ecstatic experience of a vision, you would have to cultivate the principalities and powers and see that you revered the angels. For your spirit to rise from the body and go on its journey through the ranks of principalities and powers and arrive at the throne of God, you would have to pass through good angels. They would expect you to reverence them, to help you on your way. You would also have to pass through evil spirits and angels, and you'd have to be very careful about those and placate them all you could; for if they didn't harm you on the way up, so to speak, they would certainly try to harm you on the way down.

It all seemed so marvellous. Could I have an out of the body experience, and in my spirit rise up through the planets and the angels and see the very throne of God? Oh, that must be the real thing! It isn't the real thing—it's either false, or worse.

Still, to be balanced, we should have to remember that God does sometimes give his people real visions, though how frequent the occurrence is who would like to say? There's only a few recorded in the New Testament. Paul had a vision (2 Cor 12). He didn't tell anybody about it (in his letters at least) for fourteen years, and what he says is very brief. Peter had a vision (Acts 20) and John had a whole series of visions (the book of the Revelation). We mustn't forget it, but there's a very big difference between a vision that God gives his inspired apostles and so-called visions that people work up by their techniques. In the Middle East you can go to all sorts of religious practitioners who will teach you the techniques necessary to have these out of the body experiences. It'll be a sad day in Christendom if Christian leaders borrow those techniques, as in some quarters they seem in danger of doing.

What's wrong with it all? Well you might be suspicious when you hear about the need to placate angels and worship them! What are you doing worshipping angels anyway? If they were good angels they would protest if you tried it. It's a derogation of the honour of the Lord to worship angels. How much more if you start worshipping the saints? If you're thinking of placating the devil, don't try. Have you forgotten what the previous paragraph said? It would take more than you to silence him, wouldn't it? It's Christ and his great work that has fought that fight (2:15).

What about the status of the visions that they work up—are they all genuine? Do they actually see principalities and powers and the throne of God? Or is it a little like Scrooge when he saw the ghost? He didn't know whether he was really there, or if it was 'a bit of undigested cheese,' as he put it! Paul urges us to notice the difference. It's all to no purpose—[man] is 'vainly puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind' (v. 18). There's something going on in his head subjectively, but what use is it? 'No use at all,' says Paul. What relation does it bear to reality? It's nothing to do with the Lord Jesus—'[he is] not holding fast to the Head' (v. 19). In that unseen world someone is sitting in God's presence for us, and what we need to do is to make sure that objectively we hold fast to the Head—the blessed Lord Jesus. It is from him that all the increase comes that is necessary for our spiritual growth and progress. If you go in for these other things they'll rob you of your prize, the progress that you would make if you came to the Lord Jesus. We are to hold the Head in all his objective reality and we shall find that he supplies enough for our spiritual growth.

Asceticism

Finally, we come to this business of asceticism — severity to the body and so forth (vv. 18–23). Paul is going to say it is of no value whatever.

Perhaps first we should remember what he says elsewhere, ‘I discipline my body and keep it under control’ (1 Cor 9:27), so he was pretty tough with his body. He was talking there about keeping his body and its appetites under control. He’ll say the same thing in this epistle, ‘Put to death therefore what is earthly in you’ (3:5). The man or woman that is in touch with the risen Lord will find in him the power to discipline and control the body and put an end to its unlawful desires and actions.

But here he’s talking of a different thing completely. He’s talking of people that would be severe to their physical body in an attempt either to gain salvation or the power to lead a holy life, like the dear woman who’s climbing a mountain in her bare feet to gain salvation or release from the temporal consequences of sin for herself or for some loved one in purgatory. Sincere as any woman can be, she is enduring this suffering and striving to get salvation. Doesn’t it make your heart go out for her? She could have salvation here and now and the assurance that she’ll never come into purgatory anyway. You don’t get that assurance by being severe to your body. It doesn’t deal with what the Bible calls ‘the flesh’. The Revised Version translates this verse, ‘[these things] are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh’ (2:23).

It is not the body at fault, is it? Let’s think about the body for a moment. Our Lord is its creator and matter is not basically evil, it’s good. The believer’s body is for the Lord. We’re to control it but not to injure it.

Suppose you have a motorcar and it isn’t going very well. I come along and I’ve got enough grease on my fingers to suggest that I’m an expert in motorcars. I say to you, ‘I have a sledgehammer here; hit it hard, that’ll teach it to go!’ There’s one thing you will conclude at once, I wasn’t the engineer who made the car. If you have filled it with too much oil and bunged it all up, then you’ll have to learn restraint and discipline in putting the oil in. If you put too much in the thing will go bad, and if you put too little in it will go bad as well. You have to learn to be disciplined.

So it is with your body. Don’t eat too much food, or too little. You’ve got to learn sense in controlling it. Let me introduce you to the engineer of the human body, our blessed Lord himself. He’ll never tell you to put sand in the petrol or to get out knives and whips and discipline the body like that. He made it; we are to keep it. The body of the believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit. We preserve it as well as we can and we honour it. Hitting it with whips will not subdue the evil desires and passions within. For that, we shall need the salvation of Christ and the power of his Spirit—we shall need the Lord within us. This asceticism is ‘of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.’ Another translation could be, ‘it is of no value, it leads to the indulgence of the flesh.’ If I produce this by my great willpower, the danger is that I become proud in my achievements and that’s the worst of all the works of the flesh.

What shall we do then? Well, the best thing is to be positive. How did you get converted, how did you get saved? By putting peas into your shoes or by observing the Sabbath? — Of course not!

'I saw I was utterly ruined,' you say, 'I accepted God's sentence on me and I died with Christ. That's finished me as far as this world is concerned. Now that I've received the Lord Jesus I have a life that's hidden in him. Food and drink and those other things could never have obtained me that life, nor all the asceticism in the world. He gave it to me and now the living Lord lives in me.' Listen to Paul: 'Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him' (v. 6). That is 'in him' and not outside him, for he who saved you initially is the one that's able to save you 'to the uttermost' (Heb 7:25) as you continue in him on your way home to God.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 94](#).

Enjoying the Triumphant Life

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. If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col 2:20–3:4)

We have noticed in our previous studies that there are three major thought flows in the epistle and at the head of each of them there is one leading theme.

In the first movement we noticed the emphasis that the apostle places on *hope* and how the question of hope then follows all the way through the three paragraphs of the first movement.

In the second movement we noticed that the leading theme was a question of *wisdom and knowledge*, and the emphasis upon the wisdom of God in the means of our salvation, as contrasted with the pseudo wisdom of false religious teachers.

Now we come to the third and final movement and we notice that in the first paragraph reference is made to the question of *our life*. ‘Your life is hidden with Christ in God’ (3:3). To appreciate that life—its nature, source and so forth, so that we may enjoy it the more fully—let’s look back just for a moment to what has been going on in our experience.

In the second paragraph of each movement we are reminded of our past, what God has done for us, so that now we are different from what we used to be.

- I. ‘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’ (1:21–22).
- II. ‘And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses’ (2:13).
- III. ‘Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator’ (3:9–10).

So there is not only a new life but a new lifestyle and a new quality of life; and we noticed the part that Christ played in this tremendous change in our lives.

I. When we were alienated and enemies, as the Creator incarnate with all the fulness of the Godhead dwelling in him, he reconciled us to God. Now that he has risen he is the head of the body, the church, that in everything he might be pre-eminent (1:18). First in that new creation, as he was first in the original creation, which was made by him and through him and for him (v. 16).

II. When we were dead in our trespasses and sins God's intention was to give us life (2:13). But there was the problem of the two great powers that stood against us: the power of God's holy law standing against us and our trespasses (v. 14), and the moral challenge of the rulers and authorities defying God to dare to forgive us (v. 15).

God met both challenges through the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. All the fulness of the Godhead dwelt in him bodily, and he is head of all principality and power. He became man so that we might be joined to him. His death counted as our death, his burial as our burial, his resurrection as our resurrection. Christ therefore is sufficient to redeem us—sufficient and triumphant over all opposition.

III. When we have put on the new man, what's the difference between the lifestyle of the old and the lifestyle of the new? The lifestyle of the new man can be characterised by this—'Christ is all, and in all' (3:11).

So now we're going to intelligently think through with God what the implications are of this new life and how it is expected to work itself out in our daily behaviour. We noticed that chapter 3 begins by saying, 'If then you have been raised with Christ' —and then we are told of things we have to do. It would be very important for us to understand exactly what Paul means by 'having been raised with Christ', so let me spend some time on it.

Let me ask the question to start with, 'Have you been raised with Christ?' It's no good proceeding if you haven't, because the whole of the outworking of what follows depends on this initial thing. If you haven't, it's no good attempting what is later discussed. Some of you might say, 'Of course I have been!' And perhaps others would be inclined to say, 'Well, I think I am a little bit! I have been praying recently and reading quite a lot of the Bible. I've been trying hard and I think I've managed to raise myself just a little bit. At least I've got my head above the ground, *above the water* as they say. The trouble is, it's so easy to slip back again so I don't really know whether I am or I'm not.'

That is a very understandable reply, but it shows that you've not yet quite understood exactly what the apostle is saying. Being raised with Christ is not a condition to which I have to gradually attain by my effort. For the believer, being raised with Christ is a *literal* fact. I nearly said, a *historical* fact—'you have been raised with Christ', says holy Scripture. When Paul says, 'If then you have been raised with Christ,' he's not asking you to entertain a doubt. It's not the *if of doubt*, it's the *if of argument*. That is why some of the newer translations (such as the NIV) have, 'Since you have been raised with Christ.'

If I were to say to a woman, 'If you were born a woman with a woman's instincts you would know such and such a thing,' I'm not questioning that she was born a woman. I'm simply saying that as a woman she will know how other women feel. Paul is not questioning

whether you are a believer or not. He's saying, 'Since you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have been raised with Christ and these things will follow.'

The same thing applies to that earlier statement—'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? (2:20). We could afford just a little time to make sure we've got that in our minds. When did you die? The Scripture has told us that we died when Christ died. When we received the Saviour his death was counted ours. When he rose from the dead his life is ours as well, because we are joined to him. If we don't understand clearly how we get this new life, then we're going to run into great difficulties, disappointments and frustrations when we try to live it out. If you died with Christ you're raised with Christ and this is how we get the new life. Paul then goes on to explain how we should live. Let's first use an illustration to get the point more clearly.

Here's a multiple murderer. He has been condemned to the electric chair and is in his cell on death row. The guards allow me in and I say,

'What made you so hostile to everybody? Was your liver out of order? What you want to do is take up vegetarianism. That will put your liver right, and you won't be so inclined to see red and be so pugnacious and hostile anymore.'

What do you suppose the man would reply?

He'd say, 'What's the good of your dribbling there about vegetarianism? I'm as good as dead. Vegetarianism isn't going to stop the execution.'

So they lead him off eventually to the chair, and after he's dead the guards allow me to go in and see him and I say to the corpse,

'You ought really to consider taking up vegetarianism.'

The guards would consign me, if not to the electric chair to the lunatic asylum! Vegetarianism is never going to give the man life now that he's dead.

How do we get our Christian life? 'If you died with Christ', says Paul, 'why are you still thinking that little regulations like "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" are going to give you new life?' That's as foolish as telling the man who's been electrocuted to take up vegetarianism. We don't get life that way. We get life when we agree first of all with God that our sins demanded that we should be executed. Instead of waiting until the final judgment for the sentence to be carried out and for us to be consigned to eternal perdition, we come round to agreeing with God. 'Yes God, you're right. I agree to the sentence being carried out.' That's what repentance is and when we agree to that God has a Saviour ready for us. He says, 'Be joined to my Son, then my law can count it that when Christ died you died, when Christ rose again, in giving him life, I give you life.' That marvellous presupposition is the foundation upon which we shall build everything. God has given you life because you have received Jesus Christ his Son.

According to Colossians, what is the source of our life? Its source is God. 'Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead' (2:12). In raising Christ from the dead and giving life to that corpse, God gave you life.

How would you get a little electricity? Put your hand on a live wire and you'll find some! How would you get new life? By receiving Christ: 'You have died, and your life is

hidden with Christ in God' (3:3). The life comes from God. How do I get it? Now let's get this clear. It is simply through faith, not by effort or discipline. 'Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead' (2:12). Who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead? Who gave him new life—was it my faith?

When they read that we receive eternal life by faith, some people say that their faith isn't quite strong enough. What they're really thinking is that somehow our faith produces this life. So let's go back to the beginning of things, when our blessed Lord Jesus had died at Calvary and his body is buried in the tomb. I say to you, 'Your only hope of ever having eternal life is if the body of Jesus Christ comes up out of this grave.' You say, 'I know that, and I've been doing my best to get it out. I'm believing and believing and believing, and I hope if I believe enough the miracle will happen and Jesus' body will come out of the grave.'

You'd be very foolish to say that, wouldn't you? It isn't our faith that brought Jesus Christ from the dead—it was God's work. How do I get it then? I get it like a can of petrol gets the petrol, it just opens its lid and takes it in (excuse the crude metaphor). By faith, with my empty hands, I just receive the gift that God has to give me.

What is the nature of this life when I get it? The life we have as believers is nothing other than the Lord Jesus. 'When Christ, who is your life appears . . .' (3:4). It is the life of the living Lord, living within us. Anything other than him isn't life in this sense.

So we ask the next question—how is this life imparted to me? The answer that Colossians gives, not once but many times over, is that we get this life through our union with the Lord Jesus. What a lovely chorus they make:

- 2:20 you died with Christ
- 2:12 you were buried with Christ
- 2:12 you were raised with Christ
- 2:13 you were made alive with Christ
- 3:3 your life is hidden with Christ
- 3:4 when Christ appears, then you also will appear with him

That's how we get the life then, in our union with him. We're going to hear how that risen life is waiting as the mainspring of all our future development. It is nothing less than the blessed Lord Jesus himself working himself out through us in our daily living.

One more question remains. Where is the source of this life? 'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God' (3:1). That's where the source of our life is located. We have no life but him. Now this is very important. Notice the practical advice—you must constantly set your thoughts on where the source of that life is, on 'the things that are above, where Christ is.' Now I know there are some people who are afraid of this advice. They say, 'If I were to do that I should become so

heavenly minded as not to be any earthly good.' But it is foolish and mistaken to talk like that.

During the Second World War the Netherlands were overrun and their sovereigns fled, some of them to England, leaving behind the resistance movement. How vital it was for that resistance movement to tune their secret radios into London. They could hear, 'This is London calling—this is your sovereign and king speaking.' They were coordinating the resistance and setting their minds on where their king was. That was the very nerve centre for carrying on an effective resistance.

If you are raised with Christ and yet have to live in this ungodly world, then set your thoughts and your minds on where the very source of your life is—where Christ is, at the right hand of God. You don't have any other life but him.

I wonder how you treat your car mechanic. I can tell you how I treat mine—I never go near the man! Well, I don't go if I don't have to. He is there as a resource man whenever I need him. So long as the car goes moderately all right I don't think of going anywhere near him. It's when the car goes wrong that I go to the resource man and ask him to put it right. He does his best and I get it back again. He says that it's good for the next ten years. But then do I say that I'd like him to come in the car with me wherever I go, to tell me how to drive it and where I ought to go—and please can he come home and live with me? Of course I don't! When he's put it right I say, 'Thank you very much, goodbye!' I have got the car from him, but I want to live a life independently of him.

There is a danger that we treat the Lord like that sometimes. He's a kind of *resource person*. When we come into difficulty and the marriage breaks down or things go wrong, then we come to him and we want his help. When he puts it right we don't say goodbye, but off we go. We don't constantly set our thoughts on things above; our heart is not there. We still want the old independence that we used to have before we were converted, and that can be disastrous of course. We don't have any life apart from the Lord Jesus. Therefore we are to set our thoughts where he is, at the right hand of God.

That's a bit difficult because the verse says 'your life is hidden' (v. 3), and it would be easier if we could see it and really believe that it's there. Faced with the cold light of a Monday morning, sometimes it seems like a little bit of imagination and this 'heaven thing' seems a bit remote. It's difficult to set your thoughts on it.

The Old Testament has a lovely story of a king called Joash (2 Kgs 11). It was a difficult time in the history of Judah. There had come an imposter on the throne called Athaliah, and for political reasons she rose up and murdered all the seed royal in Judah, every prince that she could lay her hands on, except one little fellow. His nurse stole him away and took him to the high priest, who hid him in the house of the Lord. Athaliah was ruling and reigning, thinking she was supreme, and actually hidden away in the temple was the young king nobody knew about. But there came the time when the high priest felt there were certain men in Israel that he could trust. He called them together and took them into the temple. When all the doors were shut he went and got the little king, and he showed them the king.

I wish I could do it now. I wish I could open the doors of heaven and show you the king. He's there—this is no imagination. It's more real than we are, in a world that is more real

than our world. '[He] is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man' (Heb 8:1-2). Our risen Lord at this very moment sits in that heavenly temple. But what I can't do, the Holy Spirit will do. Christ is your life and he's literally there, so set your mind on things that are above.

There came a marvellous occasion. King Joash had grown up. The people who had been loyal to the high priest prepared themselves and they arranged for the multitudes to be assembled. The soldiers stood in their serried ranks, the door was opened and the king was brought out. The trumpets played 'Long Live the King', and the king was manifested.

It's going to happen—who knows but it could be this very day. The heavens shall burst asunder and the King that's been hidden will appear. 'When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (3:4). Let the Holy Spirit cause you to soak up the reality of the existence of our Lord at the right hand of God and the glorious fact that one day he will come—'Set your mind on the things that are above.'

It is obvious that the early Christians did it. That phrase, 'Where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God', is an allusion to Psalm 110:1—'The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."' It was a verse that the Lord Jesus first brought to the attention of his disciples, and indeed of his enemies; but it is a verse that is quoted all over the New Testament and shows us that the early Christians 'set their minds on the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.' Using this verse as their guide, they saw the wonderful implications of God's Word to the Messiah.

In Matt 22:41-45 it is used to teach the deity of the Messiah—'Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?'"

In Acts 2:33 it is used to teach his resurrection and ascension—'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.'

In Hebrews 10:12 it is used to preach his finished work—'But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.'

Hebrews 8:1 uses it to remind us of the majesty of the place in which our Lord now ministers. It is not in a tabernacle made with hands—'We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.'

Hebrews 1:3-5, 13 use it to indicate our Lord's superiority to all angels—'He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"? . . . And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?'

Hebrews 12:1-2 uses it to encourage those of us that are in the Christian race and finding the going hard, the triumph of our Lord's life of faith being an example and incentive to

us—'Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.'

Hebrews 10:12–13 uses it to show that the Old Testament indicated that there was going to be a period between his ascension and his final triumph over his enemies—'But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.'

It's very important that we get hold of it. I have a good many unconverted friends who want to tell me that faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah is misplaced. They say, 'If Jesus Christ is the Messiah risen from the dead, why doesn't he proceed to do what the Old Testament said the Messiah would do—put down evil, judge the world and bring in an age of peace? If he's the Messiah, where is he, what's he doing?'

The answer that the Old Testament gives, as well as the New, is that the programme and timetable for our Lord's putting down of evil was to be as follows. He should become incarnate, be dead, buried, raised, and bidden to sit at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Would he immediately put down evil? No, he was to sit at God's right hand—*until*. There was to be an interval between the ascension of the Lord Jesus and his coming again to put down evil. Things are going according to the plan. The Lord has ascended, so set your minds on things above for very soon he shall rise up and his enemies shall be made his footstool.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 95](#).

[Life in which Christ is All, and in All](#)

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:5–17)

We concluded our last study session with the words of the apostle ringing in our ears — ‘Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God’ (3:1). Now we to come to the practical part of the epistle that outlines our duties and the way salvation is meant to work out in our lives. I trust we shall see the importance of this particular piece of advice. Vital to the practical outworking of our salvation is that we seek those things that are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God. We may help ourselves to see that, if we go back briefly over the epistle and notice in the second paragraph of each section what the Holy Spirit says God has done for us.

We emphasized to ourselves the wonder and glory of that past tense.

Chapter 1: ‘Giving thanks to the Father, who *has qualified you*’ (v. 12), and he has actually qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light, so that even now we can begin to enjoy its riches.

Chapter 2: ‘You *have been filled* in him’ (v. 10). That is a past fact. In giving us Christ, God has given to us all the fulness that there is in Christ.

Now notice the present tense.

Chapter 3: ‘the new self, which *is being* renewed’ (v. 10). To put it in its context it tells us, as a fact, that we have put off the old self with his doings and have put on the new self.

If I might use a faint analogy. Our bodies are constantly changing, the old skin wears off and new skin takes its place, old cells are replaced by new cells. While there is nothing corrupt with the eternal life that God has given us, yet we are told that the new self is constantly 'being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.' For the purpose of that renewing, it is important that we seek the things that are above.

We have the living Lord living within us. If his life is going to express itself through us, it will often require that we understand what God is doing. He will not make us like Christ in spite of ourselves. It won't be that one of these mornings we wake up and say, 'I feel a bit funny; I wonder what's happened! Oh I know—I've been made perfectly like Christ.' While you were asleep, and you didn't know about it? No, it won't happen that way. It will happen as the blessed Lord within us begins to inform our thinking and our moral judgments.

We shall not become less responsible as believers because the Lord dwells in us. We shall become more responsible, more self-controlled and not less self-controlled. Not less in control of our thinking than we were before, but more in control of our thinking. Not less sharp in our thinking, but more sharp in our thinking. Not muddled in our moral judgment, but clearer in our moral judgment and able to make a distinction between things that look the same but are different (Phil 1:9–10). The work of the Lord Jesus is not to destroy us, turn us into machines, irresponsible and out of control, but to make us more responsible men and women than ever we were before. He uses our moral judgment and our intellectual capacity. If we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice as we should (Rom 12:1), then the way those bodies are used will be controlled as our minds are constantly being renewed.

Therefore we are to set our thoughts upon the blessed Lord, because this new life that we have is 'being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator' (3:10). Similarly, when we come to v. 11, we are reminded of the implications of Christ being in us. 'Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.' Why should you not lie to your Christian friend? You are meant to be in the image of the Lord Jesus, who is the image of God; would you so misrepresent and be untrue to the Lord that is in you? If the person you're lying to is a believer the Lord is in him or her; will you lie to the Lord? 'You're talking airy-fairy stuff now,' you say. Well that's just the point, isn't it? Do you *really* believe that the risen Lord is in you and in your fellow believer?

As we set our minds on things that are above they are renewed, made again, refashioned. The old dirt, the clogged thinking, the insincerity, the untruths and the selfishness begin to yield, like a fresh spring of water bubbling up through the mud, cleaning away the things that have choked the tap of our thinking and our moral judgment.

So we come to our practical duties therefore, as people that have put off the old self and put on the new.

The negative duties

There are two actions required of us:

1. 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you' (v. 5)
2. 'But now you must put [these] all away . . .' (vv. 8–9)

We are to put away all sins, of course, but Paul specifies two groups in particular. In verse 5 he talks about perverse desires—'sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.' Then in vv. 8–9 he talks about evil hostilities—'anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another.'

Then he gives us two reasons:¹²

1. God's wrath—'On account of these the wrath of God is coming' (v. 6)
2. God's image—'[You] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator' (v. 10)

I want very briefly to run over those. When it comes to these practical matters, it is more helpful that you consider them and thrash out the practical implications in your studies, rather than listening to me preaching sermons on them. For the question is not, 'What does the preacher say in theory?' but 'How are these facts going to work out in practice in my life?'

So, the first action that is required of us is to 'put to death therefore what is earthly in you' (v. 5). Just let me repeat that this is not how we get new life, this is how new life will express itself. A way of illustrating it is by pointing to certain trees that keep their dead leaves on all through the winter. When the sap in the Spring begins to rise up through the trunk, the branches and the twigs—the new life—pushes out the old leaves. They're not putting off the old leaves so that they can get new leaves; the old leaves are being pushed off because they've got new life in them. So it is with us.

The other action required of us is to put away wrong and perverse things (vv. 8–9)—deliberately to put away. Let me use another illustration. You come in from mending the car, grease from head to foot and the old dungarees are impossible. So your wife makes you take them off in the shed. You go to the bathroom and scrub yourself from top to toe until you are perfectly beautiful, sweet and pure, and put on a whole range of new clothes. Do you then go down to the garage and say, 'I like those dungarees,' and you put them on, on top of the new? No, of course not! You have put them off—so keep them off then. You say, 'Your analogy is too slick, Mr. Preacher. If I could put off my old deeds, like my husband puts off his dungarees, I'd put them off right now. The trouble is I can't undo the buttons! I can't get them off, and once I get them off they come back again.' Yes, I know, but nowhere are we told it's going to be magic.

This is where the matter arises that we talked about in our very first session: 'May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy' (1:11). *Stickability!* It's like the grain of wheat growing up, first as a blade having to push its way through the unhelpful lumps of clay (Luke 8:5–15). Rainstorms and winds and dogs pounce upon it, yet it persists. And so must we, and learn to take hold of his

¹² The Christian life is reasonable!

glorious might. The great God, who created and redeemed us, strengthens our moral resolve in the continuing battle against sin.

There are some preachers that discourage their audiences. They don't mean to, of course, and I doubtless have been guilty of it myself. They give the impression that you've only got to devote yourself today and all the opposing forces of sin will be pushed on tomorrow. It isn't true, is it? Let me remind you of a biblical analogy.

When Joshua brought the people of Israel over the Jordan to face Jericho, what did they do? (See Josh 6.) 'They had a prayer meeting,' you say. 'They claimed victory, and the walls of Jericho fell down at once.' Your Bible must be different to mine. No they didn't! The first day they went round the walls of Jericho and when they got back at night the walls were still there. The next day they did the same and the walls were still there. You say, 'They didn't have enough faith.' But God didn't tell them that the walls would come down on the first day, nor the second, nor the third day. In fact, God left the walls in place for six days and it was only on the seventh they came down. Why did he leave them there for six days? I don't know—I've no verse for it. But I imagine if you'd been an Israelite and had to walk round the walls of Jericho six days on end and see those enemies looking over the walls, by the end of the sixth day you'd have hated those walls!

Sometimes God makes us march around the ugliness of our personality until we wish it would go. Thank God for the hatred of sin that God thereby builds into us. You'll be all the safer in heaven for eternity for the hatred of sin that God works into your heart, as in faith you continue the battle and determine with God to unresistingly and uncompromisingly see it through to the end.

There are two groups of sins:

1. *Perverse desire*

The first has to do with love gone wrong. Love is a very good thing, but I've no need to remind you how terribly it has been perverted in the human personality and in the world. We are to let the risen Christ purify our love. And let us notice that covetousness is included along with the so-called sins of the flesh that come from a perverted desire. That impeccable Christian businessman who wouldn't be seen anywhere near the red light district could be guilty of a sin that should be bracketed with those other sins. Loving things more than loving God—we need to watch our affections and our loves.

2. *Perverted hostility*

We need to guard our hatreds. Not all hatred is wrong. Writing to the church at Ephesus our Lord Jesus says, 'Very well done, you hate the things I hate' (see Rev 2:6). Hatred can be a positively healthy thing. If we would be healthy, we too have to learn to develop a hatred of all that is evil and sinful. But hatred can go wrong and we have to watch ourselves. There is a thing, very well known to reviewers of theological books, called *odium theologicum*—the hatred that theologians indulge in. You should listen to them reviewing other people's books. As far as they know they're concerned simply for the truth, but in their campaign for the truth sometimes other people would discern a lot of pride and self will. So that if we're not careful we stand for the truth of God with a spirit that is utterly fleshly, and sometimes

with a hatred that is inspired of hell (Jas 3:6). We have to watch our hatreds as well as our loves.

Then the two reasons:

1. *God's wrath*

We need to notice very carefully what verses 6 and 7 say. They're not saying that if a believer misbehaves he or she will suffer God's wrath eternally. God's wrath comes upon 'the sons of disobedience' (RV). If you are a believer you mustn't go on doing those things. Why not? Consider God's feelings about it. Once you lived in them, but not now if you are considering what pleases the Lord and what displeases him. That has got to be our chief motivation—'Is what I'm doing pleasing the Lord?' Not negatively—'How far may I go?' But positively—'Will it please the Lord, or will it offend him?'

2. *God's image*

We are meant to represent God, to express him. It's not merely, 'What could I get away with and God not take steps against me?' It's that I have been given the supreme honour of being in the image of God. When mankind was put into the garden of Eden he was made originally in the image of God and what a high order of office that was. To organise this world for God, to subdue it and make something of it as God's viceroy—God's representative, made in the image of God, to have dominion. The wonder is that, when mankind rebelled against God, he didn't destroy them but offered them redemption. Not only has he reinstated us and put us in another garden of Eden, but infinitely higher than that. He has joined us to his Son and we're seated with him in the heavenly places, far above all principalities, powers, might and dominions. Along with the Lord Jesus we have to be the image of God in redemption, the queen to Jesus the king. We must judge angels and we must judge the world one of these days. We are God's representatives, made in his image. It's difficult to remember, when you've lived all your life as a spiritual pauper, that you are in fact made in the image of God and joined with the risen Lord.

As I said earlier, it comes down to practical things. This new man that you have put on 'is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all' (vv. 9–11). This particular list is not to be confused with other lists. It doesn't say here 'not male or female'—while of course there is. Certain distinctions are annulled here:

Ethnic:	Greek and Jew
Religious:	Circumcision and uncircumcision
Social:	Barbarian, Scythian, slave and free

With that arrogance suitable to them as being the inventors of nearly everything that's important in Western civilization, the Greeks regarded anybody who couldn't speak Greek as a barbarian. It sounded to the Greeks as if they were saying 'blah, blah, blah,' and they thought they were babblers. They even held Cicero to be a barbarian because he spoke Latin. He may have been very learned, but he wasn't Greek! To the Greek mind the Scythians were impossible savages and uncivilized. They came from the edge of the world, where if you

went a few inches further you would drop over the side! Then there were the social levels within their city, slaves as distinct from free men. The distinction was obvious, they wore different clothes and so on.

But in Christ those distinctions disappear. I know I rub you up the wrong way and bring out the worst in you because I am an Englishman! But do be careful, because in me is that new self, which is Christ—‘Christ is all, and in all.’ We shouldn’t be having such ideas any more—he’s a Southerner and he’s a Northerner, he’s a Jew and he’s an Arab, he’s not a grammar school person he only went to, what they call in Suffolk, the elementary school. *He’s in Christ*—the blessed Lord of glory is in him and in her.

The positive duties

There is to be God-like love (v. 14). Consider your status, says Paul—‘Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience’ (v. 12). We are beloved of God, his chosen people and holy—do remember your status. That can be a little trying! Any royal family finds it very difficult to get away from things and let their hair down. We are never given permission to get away from our position of being ‘God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.’

We must show that kind of love in our hearts. Not only that we are loved of God, but loved of the Lord who has forgiven us (v. 13). We are to forgive as he forgave. Notice the realism. He didn’t forgive us before we repented. He put up with us, he bore with us and we’re to do the same. We are to have ‘compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive’ (vv. 12–13). The moment the offender repents we are to forgive, always willing to bear with each other and be patient.

‘And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts’ (v. 15a). Not just our own subjective state and enjoyment of peace, but the Lord’s peace. If I were to get drunk tonight and noisy and break a few windows and upset people, the police would haul me in. Why? For breaking the Queen’s peace. Not my peace, the Queen’s peace. Christ has established peace through his reconciliation. He joins his people together in one body and the old enmity’s gone. Don’t let me break the peace. In all the decisions that I take I must have that in mind, and work for peace. It doesn’t mean that I shall compromise with evil and have peace at any price. My motivation must be to keep, preserve and foster the King’s peace and the peace of the body of Christ.

‘And be thankful’ (v. 15b). Isn’t it tremendous how easily we forget to be thankful and are full of criticisms. I go to a lot of Christian tea parties and most of them are nice! I have no meter to record the proportion of conversation that is saying how wonderful Christ is and how marvellously his people have done, to the proportion of, ‘Have you heard what they’re doing in such a church, or what she’s doing?’ Sometimes you get the impression that the whole thing has gone to wreck and ruin! Let’s learn to be thankful. To be full of thanksgiving and dwell on healthy, holy, wholesome things is beneficial to our psychological health. Not only to the absence of hostility, but peace in the sense of wholeness.

‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly’ (v. 16a). My brothers and sisters, we need to take it seriously. My old granny knew her book—more, I think, than sometimes our modern generation knows it. We must be careful of talking of holy Scripture as though it was sometimes a little unspiritual to know too much about it. It’s the Word of the Lord, isn’t it? You can’t soak yourself too much in it—let it dwell in you *richly*.

How do you suppose you’ll come to see the wonderful things Shakespeare is saying, if all you read of Shakespeare is a potted edition for two minutes each day, and the odd talk on the radio? To understand the heart of Shakespeare you must soak yourself in Shakespeare. If you want to know about computers you’ll have to soak yourself in computers. If you want to know what God thinks you’ll have to soak yourself in his Word and let it dwell in you richly. You may have every hobby under the sun but let’s ask, ‘Do I know more about my hobbies than I do about the word of the Lord Jesus?’

If the word of Christ dwells in us richly in all wisdom, it will do lovely things to us—‘teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God’ (v. 16b). When you remember what this epistle has been about—how once we were enemies and Satan had persuaded us that God is a terrible old tyrant and a bore (that’s the worst accusation our modern generation could hurl at God, isn’t it, that he’s a bore?)—how Satan must gnash his teeth when he hears you going around singing to the Lord in your heart. What a lovely thing it is if you’ve got rheumatism or something, or you have to lie ill in bed, that you can still sing to the Lord. Satan, with all his hosts and his slander, is defeated already! Singing to the Lord, the supreme commander, because you love him and admire his wisdom and rule.

‘And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (v. 17). I’m never to act upon my own authority, but I shall have to be careful here. Terrible things have been done in the name of the Lord. If I’m going to fulfil my responsibility and privilege of acting in the name of the Lord Jesus, then I need to let the word of Christ dwell in me richly, so that when I act in the name of the Lord my actions shall be according to and in line with his word.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 95](#).

[Life under the Lordship of Christ](#)

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master¹³ in heaven. (Col 3:18–4:1)

It will be obvious to us all that our epistle is now progressively becoming more and more concerned with practical things. We are considering Movement III, the second paragraph. In this talk we must cover the rest of that paragraph and the final paragraph as well.

Running through these paragraphs, therefore, is not merely the question of our lifestyle as it used to be before the Saviour found us and as it should be now that we have put on the new man, but there is a tremendous emphasis upon the lordship of our blessed Saviour.

In the first paragraph we are told to set our minds on things above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God (3:1). That is an allusion to Psalm 110:1, where David says prophetically—“The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”” In thinking of our blessed Lord in that high and elevated position, we cannot but think of his lordship.

As we come now to the second part of this middle paragraph, we are going to be told how the lordship of Christ works itself out in the daily life of family and business. The final paragraph talks to us about life in the work of the Lord in the gospel and in the church: ‘And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfil the ministry that you have received in the Lord”’ (4:17).

I want to say now that I shall be speaking briefly. In the first place, when we come to this question of working out lordship in the family and in business, I have very little experience in these particulars. I belong to that honoured group who have the gift of celibacy. It is not above the honour given to those who are called to marriage, but those who are called to marriage would be the experts in saying how the lordship of Christ ought to be worked out in married life.

I was a child once, but it’s a long time ago. I have certain vivid memories of what obeying parents involved—or at least what disobeying parents involved. I thank God for parents who did the best they knew how to instil into my mind the Word of God. But I have

¹³ This is the same Greek word as ‘Lord’.

not been a parent and I leave it to you who are parents to talk frankly and positively and constructively on how the lordship of Christ is to work out in this relationship. As far as being a slave is concerned, I've never been one. I have been an employee, but I have never been a master. Here, perhaps, I might be allowed to say some things, and I will say what I can with all due brevity.

There is another reason, however, why perhaps I should be wise to confine the length of my comments. In many circles nowadays these verses, and particularly those concerning husbands and wives, are felt to be somewhat offensive survivals from the age of male chauvinism. If I were to expound them too much I might easily be dismissed as somebody who, through lack of experience, doesn't know what he's talking about; and if anybody were liable to be a male chauvinist it would be he!

Developments in modern society have made some of these biblical precepts appear to be offensive. Some of them would have been very difficult to take. Imagine being a slave under an unreasonable slave master and being told you have to obey that master and submit to him, 'with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.' For Christ's sake you are expected to submit rather than listen to those that would provoke the slaves to disobey their masters and try to get their freedom by force. In other words, these precepts have not always been light and sweetness to everybody. To some people they have always seemed offensive.

As we face them let us certainly be considerate one for another, but remember what this epistle has taught us and do our best to remember who our blessed Lord is. He is the first of all creation and he is the first in redemption. Sinners though we were, for our sakes he bore the pains of the cross and gave his life for us. If anybody has a right to talk and to lay down rules and regulations, who of us would be willing to dispute the rights of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ?

Let us notice the three groups that the apostle mentions here in which the lordship of Christ is to work itself out:

1. Wives and husbands
2. Children and parents
3. Slaves and masters¹⁴

Did I hear a good Christian women say, 'Look what the man has done now! Did he really mean to group the wives with the children and the slaves? What an insensitive thing to do. Women grouped with the children and slaves, and husbands with the masters and rulers! Isn't that a summing up of the offensiveness of the whole business?'

Well, in my first line of defence, I didn't write it. I'm merely pointing out what the apostle has written. Secondly, let's not jump to too many conclusions. Yes, if they are married women, they are in the groups whose virtue it is to obey. But of course, when it comes to this second group the ladies are on the other side, included in the parents. And

¹⁴ With their modern day analogies of servants and employees on the one side and employers on the other.

when it comes to the third group, not all ladies are on the left hand side and all gentlemen on the right. Some ladies could be on the right hand side.

You will remember that glowing tribute to the virtuous woman at the end of the book of Proverbs (31:10–31). A delightful picture of that masterful woman, who rose up before it was daylight, organised the house and the servants and gave them each their task. She ran what would have been in those days quite a large domestic establishment, not only with husband and children but all sorts of servants and slaves. Having organised the household, she went down to the marketplace and bought a field. She was in quite a big way of business, and mistress over the slaves—men and women.

You will also remember the story in the New Testament of Lydia, who was in the fashion business in Philippi, though she was born in Thyatira. The purple material she sold was very expensive and therefore she was in Philippi where people normally had a lot of money and could afford to buy expensive clothes. She was head of an establishment of importers, wholesalers and retailers and doubtless had many servants and maybe some slaves under her control.

Of course it is still true, and never more than in modern society. The manager in the hospital who has the other nurses under her command, the schoolteacher or the company secretary, could very well be a woman. And some of you women have daily help in your home. She doesn't tell you what to do always, does she? You tell her what to do. So that should redress the balance just a little bit. It is not everywhere and always that the womenfolk are on the left hand side of this divide and the men on the right. There could be situations where the good lady would be the master and the gardener, whom she has every right to control, is a man.

When it comes to wives and husbands, then Scripture regards it as fitting that a woman should submit to her husband, whatever that means. If women feel that is offensive, all I can say, as a theoretical theologian and a bachelor, is that for our sakes our blessed Lord, being equal with the Father, was pleased not to grasp hold of that position. He humbled himself and became a servant, took God as his head and became obedient unto death. It is that blessed Lord, who learned what it cost to obey, that is asking Christian wives to submit to their husbands.

We might go further along that line. Suppose you had been the Virgin Mary and the incarnate Creator of all things was given to your charge. It is written of him that, when he went home, he was subject to his parents. If you had been the Virgin the blessed Lord Jesus would have been subject to you. This is not a lord who lays down commands without knowing what they mean. He first practised what he preaches.

However, difficulties have arisen because both men and women, when placed in positions of decision, leadership and rule, have sometimes behaved as tyrants and taskmasters and have become unreasonable. So that, if sometimes the people on the left have been wayward, sometimes the people on the right have been unreasonable. I'm afraid that is true.

Looking back over the years, I don't know that every parent would feel that they always acted the best way with their children. Some parents live with lifelong regrets about what

they did or didn't do. They were too strict or they were too liberal—and would to God they had been different. I can imagine what they feel.

We may comfort ourselves somewhat if we think how this matter of the lordship of Christ works. Someone may say, 'Do I always have to obey?' Suppose your parents ask you to do something that is wrong, do you have to obey them? Not if it is contrary to God's law. The teenagers in some countries who find the Saviour through hearing the gospel, maybe in their Christian Union at school or university, have to face this practical question many times. When their parents demand that they take part in the household worship of the gods, what is the teenager to do? It is a very difficult situation to have to face. One will often be asked by such people, 'What ought I to do in order best to be faithful to the Lord?'

Obviously there are situations where we must obey God rather than men, and if the person in charge of us is demanding that we do something contrary to God's holy Word then we have to obey the Lord. But does that mean that if I am asked to do something that I don't like to do I can always say, 'No, I'm not going to do that—I don't think the Lord would have me do it'? A father says to a fourteen year old, 'You're not going out to play football yet again, you're going to stay in and do your homework.' The fourteen year old says, 'Why should I? George's parents don't make him do that and I don't think God would have me stay in!'

If it's open to the people in the left hand group always to decide, then why do we have any control at all? Surely the lordship of Christ will mean that the people whom God appoints as leaders do have authority to decide. If we are asked to do something that we don't like and it's not contrary to the Word of God, it's for us to obey rather than to decide. Would that really fill life with a horrible and distressing bondage?

Let's take the extreme case of the slaves and listen to what Paul says to them. 'Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord' (v. 22). The slave is not merely to look to the master that is over him, but beyond that master to *the* Master, the Lord. Suppose the earthly master asked him to do unpleasant things and is unreasonable. If he really believes that behind that master stands the Lord himself, he can do it for the Lord, can't he? Would he grudge doing it for the Lord? How many unpleasant things did the Lord do for us?

What is more, if we do it heartily for the Lord, it is from the Lord that we shall get the reward (v. 24). He measures not merely what we have done, but what it cost us to do it. For his sake we may have to do things that we feel are unreasonable and unpleasant, but we do it for the Lord's sake and we shall get the reward of the inheritance from him. We shall all reign with Christ but we shan't all have equal responsibility. The people who will have the most responsibility are the people who have learned to obey the Lord most.

Of course, if we misbehave, the lordship of Christ is a real thing. He that does wrong may expect to receive discipline from the Lord now and lack of reward in the day to come (v. 25). So it seems to me that a real and vigorous faith in the lordship of Christ, instead of making life more difficult for the slave, would in fact make it easier. Presumably that is so in all the other relationships of life. A vivid faith that sees that the Lord himself stands behind those whom God has put in charge of us, and that I work for him, takes some of the smart

out of the difficult situations in life. In their place there is the balm of knowing that I work for the most reasonable of masters.

Then there is the other side of it. The lordship of Christ is a real thing, if these husbands, parents and employers abuse their authority. Listen to what Paul says. 'Masters¹⁵, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven (4:1). They are not to be autocratic tyrants and do as they please. They have a master to whom they must give account. He has a very long memory and a very exact ledger.

I wish to turn briefly to the next and final paragraph in the epistle. It concerns not merely obeying the lordship of Christ in the family and in the business, but our concern for the work of the Lord.

We have been thinking throughout this epistle of the struggle towards Christian maturity and progress towards complete sanctification. We noticed earlier that, at the end of all three movements, a paragraph is devoted to this matter of struggle and striving and exerting oneself.

At the end of Movement I it was a question of Paul's sufferings and strivings on behalf of the gospel, and on behalf of the church, which is the body of the Lord Jesus.

At the end of Movement II we had described to us the struggles of the religionists, mystics and ascetics and heard the verdict of holy Scripture that their strivings, however well intentioned, were unprofitable and useless.

Now, as we come to the end of the epistle, we are reminded that there is struggle and striving and exertion for us who love the Lord. It is not merely a question that we have been redeemed and can rejoice in our redemption; that we have put on the new man and have the living Lord inside us. If that is real, then none of us will be content simply with the salvation of his or her own soul. If we have really got salvation we shall not be content to sit at ease. We too shall join that dignified, glorious company of the saints who strive, with every ounce of their energy and vision and thought and giving, to promote to the world the gospel that has saved them. Holiness that does not result in a keen interest in the spread of the gospel, both at home and abroad, is a very questionable type of holiness. Let us show that our interest in intensive study of holy Scripture does not take away from our zeal in the gospel, but impels us the more energetically to strive and struggle for the Lord Jesus in the extension of his work and his kingdom.

The last paragraph then of Movement III is to do with life in the work of the Lord. Paul indicates that the believers should have a concern for the spread of the gospel (4:2-6). Firstly in their prayers for him, 'that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak' (vv. 3-4). Then they ought to have a concern for their own witness for the Lord. 'Walk in wisdom towards outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person' (vv. 5-6).

¹⁵ Greek: 'lords'.

Then he tells them that he's sending his friends Tychicus and Onesimus to them, in order to give them up to date information. The Colossians were expected to take a practical interest in the conditions that surrounded the missionaries on the field. Wasn't it a happy thing that there were men and women in those days who were prepared to journey from the mission field to the home church to keep them informed of the state of things and how the home church could help to meet the need. It's no good simply praying in a sort of impractical way, 'Lord bless the missionaries,' without knowing what the missionaries stand in need of. We're expected to inform ourselves of actual conditions on mission fields in which the Lord has given us an interest and a responsibility.

The final paragraph is delightful. I sum it up as *the love and prayers of the brotherhood*. It's easy to sign one's letters, 'love and prayers'—let's hope we always mean it. Here is a delightful example of what love and prayers meant in the early church. What a magnificent, enriching thing it is to be a part of the great brotherhood of Christ all round this world. Not only saved by the same Saviour, but involved in the work of the Lord together with those magnificent men and women who serve the Lord so well and so sacrificially. You get to know them. They're part of a great family around the circle of the earth. You get to know their needs, their triumphs and their weaknesses, so that you can help them and pray for them, and they for you.

Listen to Paul as he recommends Mark, the cousin of Barnabas: 'If he comes to you, welcome him' (v. 10). No great splurge here about the way he ran away from the work and let the apostle down—that's forgotten. Don't forever be harping on about people's faults in the past, but receive them because of their present work for the Lord and what they can do.

Then his Jewish fellow workers: 'They have been a comfort to me,' he says (v. 11). This is not the word that is often translated *comfort* and means *encouragement*. It is the word from which we get *paregoric*, the soothing medicine that a mother gives to her sick child.¹⁶ The great apostle, lionhearted though he was, sometimes had very deep wounds. Not only physical but spiritual and psychological as well. He was grateful for brothers and sisters who could come along and comfort him. That's tremendous, isn't it? If you can't be an apostle, do the next best thing and comfort an apostle when he sits licking his sores.

Then he talks of Epaphras. 'He is always struggling on your behalf in his prayers' (v. 12). Paul could bear witness as to how incessant Epaphras was in his prayers for the believers in his home church (even though he was on the mission field), that they might be saved from false recipes for spirituality, and may grow mature and stand fully assured in all the will of God.

'Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas' (v. 14). Who couldn't feel the pathos of that? Luke would go on to write two inspired volumes in the New Testament. Marvellous man, Luke! Then there's Demas, what's he going on to do? He once ran well, but grew cold, loved the world, and deserted the apostle (2 Tim 4:10). May God save us, for we don't know which way any of us shall go in the future. May you rise up from today to do great things for the Lord in your own sphere of activity. God forbid that any of us should

¹⁶ From the Greek word *parēgoreō*, to soothe.

leave these studies and become cold of heart, and go on to abandon the Lord's work and his servants.

'Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans' (vv. 15–16). I hope they did. Why do I question it? Well, this letter is full of riches, a wealth of untold riches. Some years later the Lord had to write to them, 'For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked' (Rev 3:17).

Then there's a little word to Archippus, 'See that you fulfil the ministry that you have received in the Lord' (v. 17). It's easy to settle down and leave unfinished what you should be doing.

The Lord speak his word to our hearts, so that our grasp of the glories and the wealth of the salvation that there is in Christ shall express itself, not only in glad submission to his lordship in family and in work, but show itself in our vigorous and unsparing devotion to the Lord's work and to his servants.

Study Questions for this talk are on [page 96](#).

How Dead is the Old Self?

You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col 3:9–10)

Now to come to a very practical matter. I have been asked to say something more about what the Bible calls *the old self*.¹⁷ To many people this thing is very difficult, because practical everyday experience seems to tell them the very opposite.

‘What is the use,’ they say, ‘telling me that my old self was crucified with Christ, when on Tuesday mornings generally, and very often on Fridays as well, sometimes on Mondays and Wednesdays in addition, and most Thursdays, not to talk of Saturdays and Sundays, I find it very much alive! What is the point of theologians trying to tell me that my old self has been crucified with Christ? It doesn’t make sense! If you’re going to ask me to ‘consider myself dead to sin,’ that’s also nonsense because sin is very much alive in my life. If it isn’t normally erupting all over the place, sometimes it does; and when sin begins to erupt and show its vigorous, very much alive, old self, it makes matters worse when you come along and tell me to consider myself dead to it.’

I think I understand your difficulty. Certainly we may start our observations from the fact that God is never going to ask you to consider anything that isn’t true. If God says, ‘Consider yourselves dead to sin,’ he’s not giving you some psychological advice. He’s not asking you to say ‘I’m dead’ over and over again, so that if you say it enough times you’ll become dead. When God asks you to *consider*, he asks you to consider things that are facts.

It’s a long question and much longer than I have time to deal with, but I find it helpful to start thinking on these matters in Romans.

We know¹⁸ that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. (Rom 6: 6–12)

¹⁷ Older translations refer to this term as *the old man*.

¹⁸ NB. It is not *feeling* but *knowing*. Progress in sanctification starts with knowing certain facts.

So here we start with the statement, 'our old self was crucified with [Christ] (v. 6). At this point Paul is asking us to understand a legal fact, so for the moment we've got to be amateur lawyers. That sometimes goes against the grain. We're so eager to be practical and get on with practical Christian living why should we bother about legal facts and the law?

Let me give you an illustration. When I was a boy I often heard my father speak of what used to go on in his town, as in many English towns all those years ago. The recruiting sergeant from the army would come round and he'd get a lot of lads in a pub and offer them *the King's shilling*, which they took and they were then in the army. They were legally bound, so that if now they didn't turn up, or ran off, they could be put in jail. They had taken the King's shilling and bound themselves legally to be in the army. So these poor Ipswich fellows would go off to the parade barracks. When they came out to drill the drill sergeant would bellow and rage and thrash them within an inch of their life, so that by the time they had done six months under him they'd be more afraid of him than ten thousand Germans. He'd only got to shout and they would jump to attention. If he said, 'Get out of the trench and go and face the machine guns,' they'd go and do it.

Imagine that a rich man comes from the United States and discovers his nephew is in the army. He decides to buy him out—in those days you could buy people out of the army. He goes to the army officials and says that he's come to buy Private So-and-So out and he pays the money. So he comes along to his nephew and says, 'Come with me. You're free now. Take off that old uniform. You're free to go where you like and do what you like.' The lad is delighted and goes down the street, and for that night he is very happy. Then he happens to be walking on the street in the morning and here comes the Sergeant Major. 'What are you doing here? Get back to the ground!' So he goes off back to the ground. He's toiling round the ground when his uncle comes along and says, 'What are you doing here?' So he tells him that the Sergeant Major said that he'd got to come. 'You don't have to take any notice of what he says; you're free, legally free. Come on!' 'But the Sergeant Major said I had to come back.' 'No you're free, I bought you. As far as that Sergeant Major's concerned, you're dead.' He takes him by the arm and walks him out. When the Sergeant Major comes and tries to bully him, he says, 'I'm free; I've got the receipt from His Majesty, I was bought out.' It would be important to get the legal things straight, wouldn't it?

What is the first step to breaking the dominion of sin in a person's life? 'Sin will have no dominion over you' (v. 14a). Why not? 'Because the Holy Spirit has come to reside in me,' you say. That's surely true, but it isn't what the verse says, is it? What is it that has broken the dominion of sin? It is this legal fact: 'since you are not under law but under grace.' How did you get out of law then?

Consider what law is. God's holy law is not a little friendly advice—'I should do it this way if I were you. But of course if you prefer to do it some other way, that's okay.' God's law is a command plus penalty if you don't do it. The penalty is death, eternal death. My dear fellow believer, if you were still under law I should tell you straight that you might as well give up. If you were under law that says, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and the very first time you come short of that you must be condemned to eternal perdition,' what would you do?

If the Lord woke me up one morning and said, ‘Gooding, get up and keep the law—“you shall love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul and strength”, and if you don’t I shall curse you and that will be eternal perdition’—do you know what I would do? I should just stay in bed. I know myself well enough and I’d give up straight away. But then the law would curse me for staying in bed!

It’s no good pretending—God’s standards of holiness are God’s standards of holiness. If ever God is going to take us seriously and start us on a course in which progressively we become more holy, first of all he has to deal with the legal side of it. You’re not going to be one hundred per cent holy, are you? Tomorrow you’re going to come short. What about the legal implications of that? Before God can launch us realistically on a course of progressive holiness he’s got to put the legal side on a right foundation.

Thank God, that’s precisely what he has done. ‘Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are no longer under law’—that is, under command plus penalty. If you were still under law, you’d only have to do one sin and that would be the end of you. Now, as a believer, when you come short you can tell the Lord about it; you can confess your sin. There is forgiveness and you can get up and go again. But if you were still under law, the first mistake and you would be finished.

So it is very important for me to know that I am not under law. How did I get out of it then? The verse tells us that ‘our old self was crucified with [Christ]’ (Rom 6:6). Now we come to the point: Who is the old self? This time we’ve got to be careful we don’t fall into the popular mistake that I mentioned in the first talk. Lots of folks think that before they were converted they were composed of two parts—the nice part and the nasty part. The nasty part was the old self, mostly kept discretely under cover. When people get converted they think, ‘How can you tell me the old self has been crucified when that nasty little bit of me is still very much there?’

But that’s a complete misconception of the old self. What part of me was crucified? Let me put the question to you that I put in an earlier talk.

‘When you were baptised and they put you under the water, which part of you did they bury? Did they bury your feet and leave your head out?’

‘No,’ you say, ‘they put me right under.’

‘Did they bury the nasty bit and leave the nice bit?’

‘No, they buried the whole lot of me!’

‘The whole lot of you was the old self, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head, and that’s what in God’s sight has been crucified, finished.’

‘Isn’t that rather severe, because I was pretty decent!’

‘Try telling that to the judge if you’re caught doing 80 mph in a built up area—

“Please, Your Honour, it wasn’t me really. There was a bad driver in front of me and whenever I went to overtake I lost my temper. I’m a decent person—it was my temper, my old self!”—

Do you think the magistrate would say, “Then I’ll fine your old self”?

He’d say, “That’s the point of the law and you shouldn’t have let your old self do it!”

Nice people that we were, we have broken God's law. Blame it on who you like, God's law said that the penalty is death; and it's not just the old self that dies, it's the whole person.

We're talking about the demands of God's law and the only way to get free of God's law is by suffering its penalty—by being executed. When you trusted Christ you were joined to Christ and his death became your death. If you went up into heaven at this moment and were allowed to go into the recording room where the ledgers are kept, you'd like to have a look, wouldn't you? When you looked at your own page, you'd maybe like to look at the page for Gooding! You'd see long pages of red ink. Then you'd see the whole thing struck through and written across it 'Culprit dead'. You say, 'He can't be, because I saw him alive in Belfast the other day.' But as far as God's law and its penalties are concerned, they've already been executed—the criminal is dead, he died with Christ. The old self suffered the penalty he deserved and was crucified with Christ. So now I'm free from the law.

We've been raised with Christ and given a new life that we didn't have before. That new life is the new self, nothing short of Christ himself come to live within. So, as far as law is concerned I'm dead, but I stand at the other side of the grave with a new life in Christ.

What is this then, about 'putting off the old self'? All I was, that complex thing that I used to be, is finished. God has said that it's no good. In repenting I've agreed with God about it. Where does the real me stand now? Do I still agree with all those old ways of thinking—those resentments, fears, jealousies, envies and those lusts? Or do I say that Christ has actually taken the roots of my being and placed them in himself? 'I'm *in Christ* and *Christ is in me*—I'm finished with that, and I'm alive with Christ.'

In repentance we put off the old self, but day-to-day it keeps coming back. We have all sorts of memories, childhood wounds, natural darkness, but that won't undo the fact that we are now in Christ. We have died to all that, now we've got to put it into action. That old stuff may seem to be very much alive, but Paul says we have to 'put to death therefore what is earthly in you' (3:5). The power to do so is to remember that you're not any longer rooted in it. The real you is in Christ, and the power of Christ is available for you to stand up and say, 'I've finished with that, I yield myself to Christ.'

APPENDIX 1

Outline of Colossians

Movement I	Movement II	Movement III
1. 1:1–8 THE HOPE LAID UP FOR YOU IN HEAVEN Its effectiveness (1:5)	1. 2:1–5 ALL TREASURES OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE HIDDEN IN CHRIST Their sufficiency (2:3)	1. 3:1–4 YOUR LIFE HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD Its source and location (3:3)
2. 1:9–23 A. CHRIST: FIRST AND SUPREME The image of God: firstborn of creation; creator of principalities and powers and of all things; firstborn from dead; Head of church; all fulness in him; reconciler of all B. BELIEVERS 1. Past: alienated; enemies 2. Now: reconciled (1:22) 3. Made sufficient (1:12)	2. 2:6–15 A. CHRIST: SUFFICIENT AND TRIUMPHANT All fulness in him; head of principality and power; circumcision. Death, burial, resurrection, victory and triumph of Christ B. BELIEVERS 1. Past: dead 2. Now: made alive (2:13) 3. Made full (2:10)	2. 3:5–4:1 A. CHRIST: ALL, AND IN ALL The Lord, the Master in heaven B. BELIEVERS 1. Past: old man; old lifestyle 2. Now: new man; new lifestyle (3:10a) 3. Being made new again (3:10b)
3. 1:24–29 PAUL’S SUFFERINGS/ STRIVING To make known the mystery (1:26–27) To present everyone perfect in Christ (1:28)	3. 2:16–23 THE STRIVINGS OF THE RELIGIONISTS, MYSTICS AND ASCETICS	3. 4:1–28 THE STRIVINGS OF PAUL AND FELLOW-WORKERS To speak the mystery of Christ (4:3) That you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God (4:12)

APPENDIX 2

Some Notes for Discussion Group Leaders

1. The aims of these studies are those of the epistle itself:
 - (a) Immediate aim: to increase believers' knowledge, understanding, and full assurance, leading to faith, love, thanksgiving, fruitfulness, growth, wisdom, work and witness. Note the references to these qualities throughout the epistle—see 1:9, 10, 25, 27, 28; 2:1, 2, 3; 3:10, 16, 24; 4:1, 3–4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 16.
 - (b) Long-term aim: to present every one mature in Christ (1:28).
2. The dangers of which the epistle warns us (see especially 2:8, 16–17, 18–19, 20–23):
 - (a) Note that these dangers are not those into which careless, worldly, pleasure-seeking believers are liable to fall. They are dangers that face believers who are keen to make progress in their spiritual experience.
 - (b) Recent scholarship would suggest that the false doctrines and practices referred to in this epistle are not full-blown Gnosticism (which arose in the second and third centuries) but a mixture of Jewish legalism and mysticism, with pagan mystery religions, theosophy and, possibly, incipient Gnosticism.¹⁹
 - (c) Notice the four contrasts:
 - i. Theosophy— the tradition of men (2:8): the fulness of deity (2:9)
 - ii. Religious observances, holy days etc.— a shadow (2:17): the substance (reality) (2:17)
 - iii. Mysticism and ecstatic visions— his sensuous mind (2:18): the head (2:19)
 - vi. Asceticism— an appearance of wisdom, but not of any value (2:23)
3. God's provision for our salvation, sanctification and glorification:
 - (a) Let us make sure we put by far the greater emphasis on God's positive provision, and not on the false teaching.
 - (b) God's provision, in this epistle, is Christ. In particular notice the tremendous emphasis that the Holy Spirit places on what God and Christ *have already done* for us. (Notice the long succession of past tenses in 1:12–21; 2:11–15, 20; 3:1, 9–10.) One of our main tasks will be to help believers to know and understand the wealth of the salvation that Christ has already achieved for them, so promoting thanksgiving (1:12; 3:17), assurance (2:2; 3:12), endurance in Christ

¹⁹ For helpful discussion see F. F. Bruce, *Epistle to Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians*, The New International Commentary, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 17–26.

and in the faith (1:11, 23; 2:6–7; 3:1–2) and joyful co-operation in the spreading of the gospel (4:2–17).

4. Layout of the epistle:

The outline at [Appendix 1](#) is not offered as a definitive analysis of the epistle. It is merely a practical device for presenting at a glance the main contents. But you may find it useful to compare the three Christological passages and to consider how each one *differs* from the other and how each one fits the thought-flow of its own context.

APPENDIX 3

Study Questions

1. A Treasure Hunt: Searching Out the Main Themes of Colossians

1. Read John 16:13–15. What evidence is there that Colossians is inspired by the Holy Spirit? In particular where in Colossians is John 16:15 fulfilled?
2. How many things does Colossians say that God and Christ have already done for us?
3. What false recipes for spiritual progress does Paul warn us against?
4. How many references are there to striving, struggling or some such terms? Why is this striving necessary? What is it for?
5. How many references are there to riches and treasures?
6. Find and read the references to fulness, being filled, mature, fully assured, etc.
7. How often does Paul speak of knowledge, wisdom, understanding, knowing and making known? Why is knowledge so important? What is it knowledge of?
8. How many exhortations to thanksgiving are there?

2. The nature and effectiveness of the Christian's hope

1. (a) Read Romans 8:24–25.
(b) Do believers hope that they will one day be justified? If not why not?
2. What is the content of our Christian hope (Col 1:27)? What other Scriptures would you use to explain what the hope of glory means?
3. Prove by Scripture that in the New Testament hope does not imply uncertainty.
4. According to 1:23 the basis of our hope is the gospel. How would you define the gospel in this context?
5. According to 1:27 the secret of our hope is *Christ in you*. What further progress does a true believer have to make before he or she can say that Christ is in him or her?
6. What does 1:5 mean by describing our hope as laid up for you in heaven?
7. What are the effects of possessing the Christian hope? See 1:4–5, 6 and 8.
8. According to Ephesians 2:12 people who are without God and Christ have no hope. What does that mean? What parts of Colossians would you use to preach the gospel to them?

3. Paul's Prayer for the Colossians

1. (a) From what source(s) are we to derive a full knowledge of God's will? Is there a difference between knowledge and wisdom and understanding?
- (b) What areas does God's will, which we are to get to know, cover? Is 1:19 included?
- (c) Does 'increasing in the knowledge of God' (1:10) mean
 - i. acquiring more knowledge of God? or
 - ii. that we grow in fruit-bearing by getting to know God? or
 - iii. both?
2. Read Luke 8:11–15, and then answer the following questions:
 - (a) Is it fair to say that the only class that is any good is those who 'hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience' (8:15, Greek: *hypomonē* = endurance, perseverance)?
 - (b) Can a plant bear fruit without perseverance?
 - (c) Are those who believe for a while, but have no root and in time of testing fall away, true believers (v. 13)?
 - (d) Do you see any connection of thought between Luke 8:13 and Col 2:6–7?
3. In Colossians 1:11 the word for patience (RV) or endurance (NIV) is the same word (*hypomonē*) as in Luke 8:15. It means perseverance. Do you see any connection between this perseverance and what is said in 1:23?
4. (a) Does 'remaining in the faith and not being moved away from the hope of the gospel' mean:
 - i. making good spiritual progress, as, say in Philippians 3:10–13? or
 - ii. remaining a believer?
- (b) Does 'present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him' (1:22) refer to the same thing as 1 Corinthians 3:14? or as Romans 8:33?
- (c) On what basis does 1:21–22 say that Christ will present us before God?
- (d) What is the evidence that we possess the hope? (See 1 John 3:3.)
5. What resources are available for our perseverance (1:11)? What does 'his glorious might' mean? Can you illustrate it from the context?
6. Can a believer be sure that he or she will endure, persevere? Consider Romans 5:3–4; James 1:2–3; and Hebrews 7:25.

4. The Person and Work of the Redeemer–Reconciler

1. What is meant by calling Satan's kingdom 'the domain of darkness' (1:13)?
2. What is meant by the expression 'the kingdom of his beloved Son'?
3. Explain the exact meaning of the terms

- (a) redemption
- (b) reconciliation

Is it right to talk of God being reconciled? Or is reconciliation concerned simply with changing us from being enemies of God to being his friends?

4. What does the word 'image' mean in 1:15?
5. Does the term 'firstborn of all creation' mean that Christ was the first creature to be created? If not, what does it mean? Prove it from Scripture.
6. 'In him', 'through him', 'to him' (1:16)—what's the difference between these expressions?
7. What do you take verse 1:17 to mean?
8. Why can Christ, and only Christ, be 'head of the body, the church' (v. 18)?
9. What does 'all the fulness' mean (1:19)? What does it imply?
10. In what sense will Christ reconcile the whole universe? Does Revelation 5:9–13 help us to understand how 'the blood of his cross' will put an end to all argument against God?
11. How has Christ changed you from being 'alienated and hostile in mind' (1:21), to one who 'gives thanks to God the Father' (3:17)?

5. Paul's Sufferings and Strivings for the Body of Christ

1. What is meant by the term 'mystery' in 1:26–27? Is it something
 - (a) still hidden and mysterious?
 - (b) fully revealed and common knowledge?
 - (c) revealed but not fully understood by all?
2. What was there so new in Paul's day about the idea of Christ being in the believer? Is Christ said in the Old Testament to have been in the Old Testament saints? And what was so new about Christ being in Gentiles?
3. Why, do you think, did God hide this great part of salvation for ages, and only reveal it after the death and resurrection of Christ?
4. What are 'the riches of the glory' inherent in the fact that Christ not only died for us but is now in us (1:27)?
5. Why did Paul have to strive so hard to get people to see the riches inherent in this mystery? Does it still take a lot of striving?
6. On Paul's unique importance and authority:
 - (a) 'I, Paul' in relation to the gospel. Comment on Galatians 5:2 and Colossians 1:23.
 - (b) 'I, Paul' in relation to the church. Comment on Ephesians 3:1–13 and Colossians 1:24–25.

- (c) Read Acts 7:2–3 and 9:3–6, 15–16. Do you see any similarities and contrasts between Abraham and Paul (Saul) in these passages?
7. What is meant by the phrase 'filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (or better, 'that of the afflictions of Christ which still remain to be suffered') (1:24)?
- (a) Are they substitutionary and atoning sufferings? Prove your answer from Scripture.
- (b) Paul's sufferings were for Christ's body's sake. Does Ephesians 5:29 help?
8. Is 'present everyone mature in Christ' (1:28) the same as 'present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him' in 1:22? Will all believers be equally fully-grown and mature when they are presented before God in the day to come?
9. What resources are available for us to share in the work of preparation (1:29)?

6. The True Wisdom and the False

1. (a) What theme is common to 2:3, 2:8 and 2:23?
- (b) In what connection is God's wisdom in Christ displayed in this chapter?
- (c) What do we need in addition to Christ in order to be fully saved and sanctified?
2. (a) In what sense is Christ 'God's mystery' (2:2)?
- (b) In what sense are the treasures of wisdom and knowledge *hidden* in Christ? Does 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 help?
- (c) Are these treasures hidden from us? How can we discover and enjoy them?
3. When it comes to true progress in sanctification why, according to 2:2, must we listen to Paul? What can happen if we don't (2:8)? Can a persuasive case be made against listening too much to Paul (2:4)?
4. Read 2:5–6. Would it be true to sum up their message thus?
- (a) The secret of true progress is to stay put.
- (b) All the recipes for spiritual progress must be consistent with the terms and conditions of initial salvation.
- (c) You cannot be *rooted* in Christ without being established in the faith as you were taught it in the gospel.
- (d) True progress will always result in increasing thankfulness for what God has done for us in salvation.
5. What contrasts distinguish the false philosophy of 2:8 from the true?
6. What do you understand by 'the elemental spirits of the world' (2:8)?
7. (a) What do you understand by 'thrones or dominions or rulers and authorities' in 1:16 and 2:10?
- (b) What can we, and ought we, to know about them from Scripture?
- (c) What is the main point about them in Colossians?

- (d) Is it healthy to be too much occupied with them?
8. What does, 'you have been filled in him' ('you are complete' KJV) mean (2:10)?

7. Christ and the Wisdom of God's Strategy in Salvation

1. Two problems confronted God when he set about our salvation. The first is mentioned in 2:11 and the second in 2:13. What were they?
2. Would you agree that circumcision served as a seal (Romans 4:11), a sign or emblem (Genesis 17:10–14), a metaphor (Deuteronomy 10:16), a symbol (Romans 2:25–29), and as a type (Philippians 3:3–4)?
3. (a) What do you understand by 'the body of the flesh' (2:11)?
 (b) How was it 'put off' and by whom?
 (c) If it was put off 'by the circumcision of Christ', what do you take 'the circumcision of Christ' to be?
 (d) What has baptism got to do with all this? Does it illustrate the process by which the body of the flesh was put off? If so, what was that process?
 (e) In what sense have we been buried and raised with Christ?
 (f) If the only way to put off the body of the flesh was to bury us and raise us again, why was it that God could do this only through Christ and through none other?
4. Do verses 11 and 12 teach that the rite of baptism takes the place of the rite of circumcision for the Christian?
5. (a) In what sense were we dead through our trespasses (2:13)?
 (b) Why could not God just forget our trespasses and give us life?
 - i. what stood against us (2:14)?
 - ii. who stood against God (2:15)?
- (c) How did Christ remove these two hostile forces?
- (d) Why was it that only Christ could do this for us?
- (e) How permanent is his triumph?

8. The Strivings of the Religionists, Mystics and Ascetics

1. (a) Why is the observance of meats, drinks, feast-days, new moons and Sabbaths (2:16) so unhelpful?
 (b) Does *Sabbath* in this context mean the weekly Sabbath?
 (c) How should we then observe the Lord's Day?
 (d) 'Let no one pass judgment on you' (2:16). But do we have to consider other people's consciences (Romans 14:5–6)?
2. What is the prize in 2:18? And in what way can anyone disqualify us?

3. What kind of religious experience is 2:18 talking of? What is wrong with it?
4. (a) What does it mean to 'hold fast to the Head'?
- (b) What are the 'joints and ligaments'?
- (c) What is the secret of unity in the body (2:19 and cf. 2:2)?
5. In what sense are we dead and no longer 'alive in the world' (2:20)?
6. Is 2:21 a list of prohibitions that as Christians we should
 - (a) observe? or
 - (b) take no notice of? And if so, why?
 - (c) What does 'perish as they are used' mean (2:22)?
7. (a) Why do 'self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body' appeal to many people (2:23)?
- (b) Why are they utterly useless?

9. Enjoying the Triumphant Life

1. (a) 'Seated at the right hand of God' is a reference to Psalm 110:1. What is this verse used to teach in Matthew 22:41–45; Acts 2:34; Hebrews 10:12; 8:1; 1:3–4, 13; 12:2; 10:13?
- (b) What is the point of it in Colossians 3:1? (Consider Colossians 2:15; Ephesians 1:20–22; 1 Peter 3:17–18, 22.)
2. What does it mean to 'seek the things that are above' (3:1)?
3. What would you say to someone who argued that 3:2–3 is a recipe for escapism, for being 'too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use'?
4. What is the point of saying that 'your life is hidden with Christ in God' (3:3)? Is it to teach us that:
 - (a) our life is secure? or
 - (b) that we have no life at all except the life that is with Christ in God?
5. What is going to happen when Christ who is your life appears—according to Col 3:4; 1 John 3:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:10?
6. What does 2 Thessalonians 1:5 and 11 mean by talking of our being 'counted worthy' of God's kingdom?

10. Life in which Christ is All, and in All

1. (a) In what sense have we put off the old self? Is it merely that we promised we would do so? Or have we actually done so? If the latter, how and when?
- (b) In what sense have we already put on the new self? And what is the new self? Simply a new set of rules by which to live?

2. If we have died (3:3), how is it that we have any earthly members still alive which have to be put to death (3:5)?
3. Who are 'the children of disobedience' in 3:6 (KJV)? Could the wrath of God ever fall on a believer? If not, what's the point of mentioning the wrath of God?
4. Why is covetousness idolatry? Why is it grouped with the sins of verse 5 rather than with those of verses 8–9?
5. What does it mean that the new self is 'being renewed in knowledge' (3:10)?
6. Read 3:11. What has the abolition of these distinctions, and the fact that Christ is 'all, and in all', got to do with our responsibility to 'put away', 'put off' (vv. 8–9) and 'put on' (vv. 12 ff.)?
7. 'Our standards are set by our status' (3:12). Comment.
8. In 3:13–14 is our Lord's forgiveness empowering as well as an example? What does 3:14 mean?
9. What does the 'peace of Christ' mean and how does it rule us (3:15)?
10. What instruction does 3:16 give us regarding hymn singing?
11. (a) What does it mean to 'do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus' (3:17)?
(b) Be thankful' (3:15); 'giving thanks to God' (3:17). Is this merely a repetition?

11A. Life under the Lordship of Christ

1. How many references to 'the Lord' are there from 3:18 to 4:2? (The word for 'master' at the end of 4:2 is 'lord'.)
2. (a) What does 'as is fitting in the Lord' mean (3:18)?
(b) Why is children's obedience to parents 'pleasing to the Lord' (3:20)?
3. What is to prevent husbands, parents and masters from acting as unreasonable tyrants, if the lordship of Christ demands that they be submitted to, obeyed and served? (See vv. 19, 21 and 4:1.)
4. Are wives free not to submit to their husbands, children free not to obey their parents and servants free not to obey their masters, whenever the husbands, parents and masters take decisions that the wives, children or servants do not like? If not, when would they be free?
5. Would acknowledging the lordship of Christ in their daily work make the Christian servants' lives harder or easier?

11B. Life in the Work of the Lord

1. Why should we pray for the spread of 'the mystery of Christ' (4:2–4)? Does 1:27 supply one answer?
2. How do you interpret the instructions on witnessing in 4:5–6?

3. Consider the emphasis on making known, '[they] will tell you', in 4:7, 8–9. Is it important for us to know about the work of missionaries, evangelists and servants of God as well as knowing about the doctrines of Scripture?
4. In the light of 4:10–15, how many missionaries do you know by name? Do you try to encourage any of them personally? Do you pray for any person or church like Epaphras did?
5. Colossians is full of riches. What happened to the Laodiceans (4:16) after they read it? (See Rev 3:17–18.)