

CROSSING THE BORDER

An Expositional Study of Colossians

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CHAPTER THREE

HIS MAIN EMPHASIS 1:12-29

THE passage is so full that we cannot deal with all the points and matters raised; but we shall not go far wrong if we say that the great theme throughout is CHRIST. That, after all, is the subject of the whole Bible. Certain native Christians used to call it the "JESUS Book" - a beautifully instinctive assessment of its contents.

- (1) in the Old Testament, we have *Preparation*, for His coming.
- (2) in the Gospels, we have *Presentation*, He has come, here He is.
- (3) in the Acts, we have *Proclamation*, the message of the Gospel of His grace and salvation.
- (4) in the Epistles, we have *Personification*, "**for me to live is Christ**".
- (5) in the Revelation, we have *Predomination*, the Lamb on the throne.

Yes, the whole book is, fundamentally, about Him.

Open the volume where you will, and you will find Him.

An Ethiopian is puzzling over an abstruse passage in Isaiah 53 about a lamb being led to the slaughter. He can't understand what it means; but Philip, "**beginning at that same Scripture, preached unto him Jesus**", Acts 8:35.

Our Lord overtakes two grief-stricken disciples who are mystified at the death of their beloved Master and Friend, and resolves their problem, "**beginning at Moses, and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself**", Luke 24:27.

In the light of all this, we are not surprised to learn that, in this passage now before us, the theme, and stress, is about Him.

THE UNIQUENESS OF HIS BEING

Look down at those verses 15-18, and note some of the descriptive names given to CHRIST.

"**The Image**," 15.

"**No man hath seen God at any time**" I John 4:12 reminds us. Do you recall how, when Moses asked to see GOD's glory, the Almighty replied, "**Thou canst not see My face: for there shall**

no man see Me and live", Exodus 33:20?

By the way, when, in Genesis 32:30, Jacob said, "**I have seen GOD face to face, and my life is preserved**", I suggest that it was GOD the Son that he referred to, who, in coming to wrestle with the patriarch, assumed one of His pre-incarnation appearances, of which there are so many in the Old Testament; for He was the very Image of GOD.

Do we wish to know what GOD is like? We may so do, for "**he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father**", John 14:9, said our Lord JESUS. And how moving it is to realise that we, too, may, in our measure, come to some degree of resemblance to Him - "**we all, with open face, beholding as in a glass, the glory of God, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord**", II Corinthians 3:18.

One day we shall be perfectly like Him, "**we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is**", I John 3:2; but meanwhile we seek, through obedience to the Word, and to the Spirit, a growing likeness down here. But, oh miracle of the Advent, that such as we shall be such as He! King Charles wrote a book-or, as some say, his chaplain wrote it - which was called "*Eikon Basilike*", the Image of a King, setting forth the prime qualities of kingly character and behaviour. Unfortunately he did not fulfil, in his own person, the high ideals of his book. For ourselves, as Christians, Romans 5:17 says "**They shall reign in life**": we have the name, is our personality the same? Is there anything kingly about our character?

"The First-born," 15.

The name accords Him the priority. We look round upon "**every creature**", every created thing, and we know He was there first. The description seems to cling to Him. At His incarnation, it is recorded that "**she brought forth her first-born Son**", Luke 2:7. There were other children of Mary, as we learn from Matthew 13:55-6, but He was first.

Of His resurrection, our passage speaks of Him as "**the first-born from the dead**", 18. Others were, before Him, miraculously brought back from the dead, but they all died again eventually -- they were not true resurrections but resuscitations. His was the first real rising for ever, "**Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more**", Romans 6:9.

Yes, His is the priority: should He not also be Priority No. 1 in every Christian's life? But our phrase also carries the idea of superiority. in speaking of Him, John the Baptist says, not only that "**He was before me**", in priority, but that He "**is preferred before me**", in superiority, John 1:30.

Superior in moral splendour, superior in saving power, superior in practical guidance, superior in transforming influence, superior in gracious friendship, John 15:14. Shall we not also "**prefer**" Him to all other people and things, "**the chiefest among ten thousand**", Song of Solomon 5:10?

But we have not yet done with His uniqueness.

"The Creator", 16.

"**By Him were all things created.**" Yes; but look back to Genesis 1:1, "**In the beginning God created**": the word for the Deity is "*Elohim*", a plural word, which is said by the commentators to be understood as the plural of majesty - as a king speaks of himself in his proclamations as "we"; but is it not more than that?

Can we not see in it the plural of trinity: GOD, at the very start of His revelation to man, introducing Himself as the Trinity in the Unity - a matter never discussed nor explained, anywhere in the Bible, but always assumed and taken for granted. Our finite minds could not, as yet, understand this infinite truth, therefore GOD has not disclosed it; but, as Robert Browning says -

"GOD, stooping,
Shews sufficient of His light
For us to rise by - and I rise!"

Well now, it is clear that all Three Persons are concerned with the great enterprise of Creation.

(1) **God created** - GOD the Father was in it.

(2) "**The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters**", Genesis 1:2 - GOD the Spirit was in it.

(3) "**All things were made by Him**", John 1:3 - GOD the Son was in it; GOD "**the Word**" (cf. "**God said**", Genesis 1:3).

Our Lord, it would seem, was, in that early dispensation, the Executive of the Godhead. Is that why He so frequently comes to the aid of men in His preincarnation appearances, as to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Balaam and others? We would say that in this present Age, the HOLY SPIRIT is the Executive of the Godhead.

To return to our passage, there is particular point in Paul's reference to our Lord as the Creator. A certain false teaching, called Gnosticism, is being propagated in Colossian church circles. It would appear that it was to counteract this that Epaphras had gone to Rome to consult Paul, as we suggested in our first chapter.

The basis of this heresy was that they held the inherent evil of matter, and that, therefore, the entirely holy GOD could not directly have created nor touched it. The only way for Him to act in the affair was to work through a descending and deteriorating series of agencies, angels, if you like, which these teachers called "aeons". It is easy to see what havoc all this would wreak upon the Bible revelation if the bundle of errors were accepted.

So Paul, master-tactician that he was, loses no time in stating explicitly, and categorically, that "**all things were created by Him**", definitely and directly. And it would seem that His creative activity will be evidenced also in the Age of the New Jerusalem, for "**Behold, I make all things new**," Revelation 21:5. And it is certainly at work in this Age in the hearts and lives of men, for "**if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature**", II Corinthians 5:17. A Creator, indeed!

"**The Head**," 18.

"**He is the Head of the body.**" Under what impulses, instructions, and influences does your body function? The answer is, of course, clear to us all: the direction of all our movement, whether of the body as a whole, or of any particular part, comes from the brain, the head.

Under the figure of the body corporate, the church - "the blessed company of all faithful people", as the Prayer Book defines it - is taught to look upon CHRIST as the Instigator and Controller of all its actions, whether as the company, or as individuals. Each believer has a privileged place in the body, and a specific function therein - "**ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular**", I Corinthians 12:27.

Some are there for manual work - "**the hand**"; some for pedal work - "**the foot**"; some for optical work - "**the eye**"; some for aural work - "**the ear**"; some even for nasal work - else "**where were the smelling?**" verse .17; there are people whose olfactory nerve is highly sensitive, who have a rare sense of smell for detecting false doctrine - very useful members of the body!

Not least so in this Colossian church, now threatened with infection. Our main point here is that every member is to be motivated and moved by the Head. May none of us become paralysed limbs, but be quick to respond to the dictates of the Head - "**that in all things He might have the pre-eminence**".

Now, in following Paul's emphasis, we consider -

THE UPSHOT OF HIS WORK

"**Redemption**," 12-14.

(a) The price of it, "**through His blood**". Some people seem to think that we have to pay for our redemption, while all the time it has already been paid for. No amount of good deeds, no reckoning of good character, could avail to purchase our redemption - "**not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us**," Titus 3:5. We do not earn it as "**wages**," we receive it as "**the gift of God**," Romans 6:23.

(b) The pardon of it - "**even the forgiveness of sins**": blessed release from an evil conscience, and an eternal doom. This is, of course, the first upshot of His work of redemption. The primary nature of this blessing is, as we know, strikingly illustrated in the familiar story of the man sick of the palsy (poor fellow, we are not surprised that he was sick of it).

Before ever the Master dealt with his body, He went down to the fundamental need of his soul. "**Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee**," Matthew 9:2. Was it that his illness was caused by sin; or was it that, lying so long on his bed, he had had time to think, and had become convicted of his sinfulness? It would seem that he was worrying about that; and that he would have been "**of good cheer**," even if he had gone back without bodily healing. Yes, His forgiveness is our prime necessity. Another thing.

(c) The positive side of it - "**the inheritance**," 12; "**the kingdom**," 13. Believers are privileged indeed, seeing that they are negatively, brought out, and, positively, brought in. "**He brought us out, that He might bring us in**," Deuteronomy 6:23. We have a share in a glorious inheritance along with all the believers in Him who is "**the Light**," John 8:12, together with all such who have passed on into the Eternal Light beyond - an inheritance comprising all the joys, all the blessings, all the riches that are in CHRIST for Here, and for Hereafter.

"**If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ**," Romans 8:17. But are we indeed "**meet**," to be partakers of such bounty? No; not in the sense of being worthy of it. but the word properly means "*qualified*" - not on our own account, but by His infinite mercy, and sovereign grace, we are qualified to be beneficiaries of His so blessed Will and Testament.

And further, we have a place in a wondrous kingdom. "**Translated**" from the rebellious and dark sway of the usurper into the all-blessed realm of Him "**whose right it is**" to reign, Ezekiel 21:27, a kingdom of "**righteousness, and peace, and joy**," Romans 14:17. Blessed are the subjects of such a Sovereign. "**Happy are thy men, happy are these thy servants**," I Kings 10:8, said Sheba's queen to King Solomon.

Thrice happy they who serve "**a greater than Solomon**". Matthew 12:42. But stay a moment: we say a lot, and sing a lot about His kingship, but, as a matter of fact, is it a reality in our own lives? Many years ago there was a great conference in Liverpool of the Student Volunteer Missionary Union. At the last moment an expected delegation of students from Japan found it impossible to come, so they sent a message, which thrilled the great gathering; it consisted of three words, "Make JESUS King".

That summer a brilliant young Cambridge undergraduate, Russell Darbyshire, who afterwards became Archbishop of Capetown, was leading the seaside services of the Children's Special Service Mission at Swan age, and wrote for them a special chorus -

"Make JESUS King, through Him we shall live.
Our souls and our bodies to Him we will give.
His praises we'll sing, and others we'll bring
Till the whole of creation shall make JESUS King."

One added thing is mentioned here. as part of the outcome of His work.

"**Reconciliation**," 20-3.

(a) "**All things**." 20.

To grasp the real significance of this verse, I think we must go back to the dramatic happening of Genesis 3, where we find that, in consequence of man's Fall, the whole universe was put out of joint.

The vegetable realm was, for the first time, invaded by weeds. "**thorns and thistles**". 18 - awaiting the day of reconciliation, when "**instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree**". Isaiah 4:13. The animal world shall

exchange its domestic tameness, as observed when "**GOD . . . brought every beast of the field unto Adam, to see what he would call them**", for the fierceness which so many now possess, until the day of reconciliation, when "**they shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain**". Isaiah 65:25. "**For the earnest expectation of the creatures waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of GOD**" Romans 8:19-22.

And all this reconciliation is, be it noted. "**through the Blood of His cross**". The malady is the consequence of sin; and the Blood, the salvation from sin, will be the remedy whereby the maladjusted joints of the natural world shall be set right again.

(b) "**And you.**" 21.

Enemies that we were, He "**died for us**". Romans 5:10, and through that death. "**reconciled us to GOD**". which holy estate is ours if "**we have now received the reconciliation**," verse 1.1, in which latter case, He has entrusted us with the privilege and responsibility of bearing to others the "**word**," the message of reconciliation, as "**ambassadors**", speaking in His Name. II Corinthians 5:18-21.

Let us, then. "**continue**" (back to Colossians 1:23) to hold and proclaim that faith. so that He shall never have to reprove us for fostering, and furthering another "**gospel**".

Well now, can we ever be too thankful for all that His redemption, and His reconciliation, through His precious Blood, means for us? Shall not our gratitude be shewn in -:

THE UNDERTAKING OF HIS SERVICE

The Lord CHRIST is still the prevailing theme of our passage; and here the apostle unfolds for us the duty and delight of serving Him. Not that that service was ever easy for him.

Over and over again he calls himself, and is proud to call himself, "**a servant [bond-slave] of Jesus Christ**," e.g.. Romans 1:1. and that figure implies an "all-in" energy. and an "all-out" endeavour for the Master "**whose service is**", for all that, "perfect freedom," as the Prayer Book has it. Listen, then, to this outstanding labourer. I Corinthians 15:10. while he commends to us -

A readiness to suffer. 24.

There is something very difficult in this verse. What does Paul mean by "**fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ**"? It just cannot mean that the apostle thinks of himself as supplementing anything lacking in the Saviour's atoning suffering.

That would be wholly contrary to his teaching about the completeness and sufficiency of the Calvary offering, as it would also be contrary to the Master's own triumphant cry, "**It is finished**," John 19:30. No! Greatly daring, in the face of the scholars, I am going to venture to say what I think.

May we not paraphrase the verse, "Fulfill what yet remains of the appointed tale of afflictions that I must suffer for CHRIST'S sake. and for the advancement of His church". One cannot help

recalling that prognostication of the Master's concerning him at the time of his conversion, "**I will shew him how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake,**" Acts 9:16.

Was he, then, made aware of what was to befall him in the service of the One whose Name he had so violently persecuted, and which now he was so earnestly to proclaim? And was he now aware, as he wrote from his imprisonment, that the limit had not yet been reached?

Of all this it is difficult to be sure; but one thing is quite certain, that this intrepid missionary was ready, even joyfully ready, to "**endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ,**" 2 Timothy 2:3. And yet some of us - weaklings that we are - curl up at the very thought of what others may think, or say, or do!

Is there one of us who is not amazed at the catalogue of sufferings that Paul records in II Corinthians 11:23-28; and are there not some of us who have almost a feeling of shame that our allegiance to CHRIST has cost us so little? Are we, then, ready, if needs be, to suffer for His Name?

A readiness to spread the news, 28.

When, in verse 23, he speaks of the Gospel being preached to "**every creature,**" he is not thinking along the lines of Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds. He means, every kind of creature - that is, every kind of person.

We find persons as creatures, for example, in II Corinthians 5:17. He has the widest conception of the Gospel's reach - "**every man . . . every man . . . every man**".

To that end, he surely must have been one of the most prolific travellers of his time - and no cars no trains, no planes. "**So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome,**" Romans 1:15.

He was always anxious to get to that Imperial City, the very hub of the then world. He was a great strategist, and spent so much of his tireless energy in big, metropolitan towns, from which the influence could reach out to many directions near and far. But oh! for Rome.

Well, GOD promised him that, "**Be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome,**" Acts 23:2. Yet, how differently was the witness eventually given from what the apostle imagined. In Rome, yes; but in prison - but how faithfully and fruitfully the witness was borne, through his correspondence (as this very letter to Colossians), and through his many contacts.

Are we as eager to spread the Good Tidings? That great missionary, the late Mildred Cable used to tell us that the greatest crime of the desert was to know where water was and not to tell it.

One's mind travels back to far Samaria where four erstwhile desperately hungry men were revelling in an unexpected feast, and suddenly paused, and thought of starving people in the city, "**We do not well; this is a day of good tidings [a Gospel Day], and we hold our peace,**" II Kings 7:9.

Do we? Or are we keen to get to dying souls news of the Bread of Life, the Water of Life?

A readiness to strive hard. 29.

"**Labour**" is the word he uses. Among the ranks of the Christians there are workers and shirkers. There is no doubt of the category to which Paul belonged. He was so imbued with the HOLY SPIRIT that "**he could no other**". Notice his explanation, "**striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily**".

After all, it is always the inner that governs the outer - and it little avails us to try to whip our energy to work harder for GOD. That may succeed for a moment, but it will soon exhaust itself, and we shall revert to "tepid" again. Paul's enthusiasm abides, and abounds. Why? Listen to him, "**I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me,**" I Corinthians 15:10. Listen again: "**the love of CHRIST constraineth us,**" II Corinthians 5:14. And here in our passage, "**His working. . . in me**".

All this is the motive-power-inward, and God-ward: and therefore is available for us all.

Let us, then, be up and doing. "**Son, go work today in My vineyard,**" Matthew 21:28. "**Be strong . . . and work, for I am with you,**" Haggai 2:4.

Thus, for all the service expected of us we can rely upon-

THE UTTERMOST OF HIS GRACE

Here is what Paul calls a "**mystery**," a word which, in the New Testament, does not bear the connotation that we usually attach to it. Rather does it indicate a something shrouded but awaiting disclosure: the unveiling has now come. "**The mystery which has been hid from ages . . . but now is made manifest to the saints,**" 26.

When our apostle speaks as he does of "**the riches of this mystery,**" 27, I think he refers first to the wealth of the mercy and grace of the GOD who conceived and revealed such a wonderful proposition; and then to the wealth of spiritual experience wrapped up in the matter - the uttermost grace of the Giver; the uttermost grace for the Recipient. "**God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good thing,**" II Corinthians 9:8. So what more do you want?

Yes; but what is this mystery that means so much to us?

In three monosyllables - *multum in parvo* - it is, "**CHRIST in you,**" 27.

- See that poker grown hot in the flames - the poker is in the fire; yes, but the fire in the poker.
- Look at that bath - the sponge in the water; yes, but the water in the sponge.
- Think of yourself - the body in the air; yes, but the air in the body.

Turn to John 15:4 - "**abide in Me, and I in you**". And now in this very Epistle the writer, using

one of His favourite phrases, speaks of believers as being "**in Christ**," 1:2; while here in our passage it is "**Christ in you**"

- in Him, for your salvation;
- in you, for your full salvation,

with all the "**riches**" applied in such amazing grace. We do not wonder that in this portion, as through every part of the Letter, Paul's chief emphasis is CHRIST - and that the sum and stress of it all is that of Galatians 2:20, "**Christ liveth in me**".

"Oh, the glorious revelation!
See the cleansing current flow,
Washing stains of condemnation
Whiter than the driven snow:
Full salvation!
Oh, the rapturous bliss to know."

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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