

Pastor Bob Fox Personal Notes on Colossians 1

11/14/08

General Introduction

This is a letter written by Paul when he was imprisoned in Rome in or around AD 60. He wrote it out of concern that the faith of those in Colossae was being eroded by false doctrine. Specifically, Apostolic teaching was being co-mingled with the religious and philosophical thinking of the region and with Judaism. The result was that the doctrine of Christ was being compromised. Paul wanted to bring clarity to this situation and anchor the faith of the Colossians in a right understanding of the person of Christ and His work that the gospel proclaimed. This understanding would help order their lives.

The carrier of this letter was likely Epaphras, who may also have been the one who carried Paul's letter to Philippi. He was the one who was their key teacher and leader (1:7-8). He was likely filled the same role in the churches in Hierapolis and Laodicea as well. The whole letter aims at strengthening one's view of Christ, not only in terms of his identity, but his supremacy and centrality.

Gnosticism

This is the philosophy that influenced popular thinking on spiritual things in a good portion of the Mediterranean world during the first three centuries AD. The term itself is from the Greek word γνῶσις, which means knowledge. This was a very diverse religious/philosophical stream that was evident in the thought of Plato and continues to the present.

The general idea of Gnostic thought is that humans are divine souls trapped in a material world that was created by an imperfect god. This imperfect creator is referred to as the demiurge. This demiurge exists in sharp contrast to a more superior entity referred to by a number of terms including Godhead. Generally the material world is considered evil in Gnostic thought, either a hindrance to or irrelevant to a spiritual existence. Hence a person is viewed in a dualistic way. The immaterial part of our being is good, and our physical bodies are evil.

Gnosticism embraces the idea that there is a revealed, esoteric (secret), knowledge through which the truly spiritual are reminded of their true identity within the superior Godhead. Through this knowledge they can escape materiality and so experience salvation. So salvation is viewed as escaping the material world. It comes through knowing, being made party to secret knowledge.

Gnosticism and Christianity mixed to some degree, though apart from orthodox Christianity. Jesus was identified by some Gnostics sects as an embodiment of the supreme being who became incarnate to bring secret knowledge to the earth. Most Gnostics assigned him much lesser significance than this. Some in fact considered him a false messiah who perverted the teachings that would lead to truth. Gnosticism also mixed with Judaism and the philosophies of the Hellenistic world. This mixing was characteristic of the movement so that it became quite diverse in its view of God, or the gods, Jesus, Satan, angels, and the entire spiritual realm.

In the thinking of most Gnostics, Jesus was an example of a lesser being, an emanation that flowed from Godhead somewhere down a degenerating line of truth sources. This then made the knowledge of Christ a mere subset of a larger body of knowledge. He was only part of a supposed

spiritual hierarchy that included all manner of gods and spirit beings. He was viewed as *a* source of light, but not *the* source of light.

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise date that this movement emerged. Some theories trace it back to several centuries before the Christian Era. That it existed in Paul's day and was influencing Christian thought is apparent. Its strains are varied enough that it is impossible to know with precision all that its adherents were propounding in the days of the early Church. It would evolve much over the first couple of centuries after Christ, so that the Gnosticism of the second and third centuries was more complex than that evident in Paul's day. Gnosticism never completely passed from the scene. Even in the 20th centuries in both Europe and North America groups could be found that identified themselves as revivals of earlier Gnostic thought.

In light of this growing influence this letter of Paul to the Colossians is concerned with keeping the doctrine of Christ pure, and holding the Christians on course with what Apostolic teaching was. It does not take much effort to see in Paul's reasoning the basic tenants of Gnosticism being attacked.

Judaism

Another system of thought that was influencing the Church during Paul's day was what we refer to as Judaism. Judaism involved mingling the laws of the Old Covenant with the teachings of Christ. It demanded an understanding of Christ more as a continuation of the Old than a termination of the Old. The effect was that Judaism imposed the demands of the Mosaic Law on the Church. It demanded from Christians the observation of certain holidays and feasts, and participation in the rite of circumcision. Its teachers were numerous, since most of the early converts to Christianity were Jewish. These false teachers were aggressive. They tended to swoop in behind Paul and the other Apostles, masquerading as the learned and skilled who would get the churches on "the right track."

Paul wanted to clarify that Christ was the substance and reality of what the Law's ceremonies pictured and illustrated. He presented Christ as the end to which the Law pointed. He demanded that the faith be practiced in this way without compromise. He would not accommodate in any way teachings that integrated Old Covenant rites with the practice of faith in Christ. His clash with these teachers was particularly brutal. This is reflected at times in the words of this letter.

Angel Worship

The worship of angels was a part of local religion and it is likely that this grew out of Judaism or at least was influenced by it. In some of the secular histories and writings that mention the city this is spoken of. In particular it is mentioned that a temple to Michael the archangel was located there. The belief was that he had saved the city from a destructive deluge. This worship of Michael no doubt reflects the presence of a Jewish or Christian cult, though not much is known about it except the existence of this temple. This seems confirmed by Paul's mention of the worship of Angels (2:18).

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

Paul knew that there were issues that his letter would have to address with unbending authority. So in just a few words he states his own authority to address such matters. This was important because he had no personal relationship with these people, having never met them (2:1).

Paul presents himself as one commissioned by Jesus Christ. As such a one he had authority in spiritual matters whether doctrinal, or matters of practical life, or matters of church polity. This was not an authority he had sought for himself or gained by some selfish pursuit. It was by the will of God. It had been choreographed by Him and brought about at a decisive moment (Acts 9). It was confirmed by an ensuing revelation or series of revelations from God Himself (Gal 1:11-2:20; 2 Cor 12:1-9).

Paul states that this letter is also from Timothy, who was by this time known as an up and coming leader. Paul included other leaders in his leadership process in order to provide for the future and to provide for direction in the present when he was imprisoned. The citation here of Timothy was a wise move. It was a good affirmation of Timothy so that his presence someday, if needed in Colossae, would be of greater impact.

1:2—“to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are at Colossae*: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”

Paul regarded the Colossians as saints and faithful ones. Even though his tone will become urgent at times, he regards the readers as true children of God. Good people and sincere people can be led astray in their thinking and they frequently are. That is why God has placed leaders in any movement that He has ever envisioned or inspired. It is not that they are better than the rank and file, or not that they themselves cannot wander. It is simply the way God has chosen to work. He generally does not reveal His whole heart to everyone in His community. That is not to say he does reveal it to the leaders exclusively. Rather the entire picture emerges from its parts. It is not that the leaders are the source of all God’s leadings and stirrings. Rather they are given wisdom to understand the whole that is emerging from the parts. They are given understanding to keenly observe, to discern, and to tie together. Good spiritual leaders understand the flow of God through the community and they watch for it, ponder it, collate it, and tie it together into an understandable whole. And so Paul, though troubled by the thinking of the Colossians, still respects that they are saints.

His greeting is that which he always used. It was and is a Jewish tradition to bring blessing into a house and Paul’s letters reflect this desire on his part. Grace, a concept rooted in the *cheched* of Yahweh portrayed in the Old Testament, was what every human needed. Paul knew this and knew that the gospel imparted it. Peace, the *shalom* of the Old Testament that spoke of being at rest, remains the greatest felt need of humanity. There could be no more relevant thought to every culture and in every era than that of the concepts of grace and peace.

1:3—We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,”

A system of thought was building in the cultures of the Mediterranean world that would reach full bloom much later than Paul and become known as Gnosticism. As that word indicated, the Gnostics pursued knowledge. In particular they sought a higher, or true knowledge that lay beyond what mental processes could impart. Part of the teaching of the Gnostics was that from a

supreme power had come a series of “emanations”, lesser lights, or inferior sources of truth. This influence would lead many to assert that Jesus was one of a number of such lesser influences or beings coming from a higher source. This led to the conclusion that something lay beyond Christ and the knowledge He had imparted.

Paul speaks to this influence immediately with these initial words. He speaks immediately of relating to God through prayer. Thanksgiving is given to one who has brought about favor and so implies both personhood and relationship. Then he speaks of God being the Father of Jesus. This alludes to the virgin birth brought about through Mary by an act of God, and again confirms both God and Jesus are persons and are at the very least related in essence. His instructions later in the letter will show that they are one in essence.

Paul uses the full combination of name and title that belong to Jesus. He is ours in the sense that we embrace Him, but also in the sense that He gave Himself to us. There is much more to the word Lord than just a title. It was the term used in their contemporary Greek translation of the Old Testament for God’s personal name, Yahweh. It was an assignment of the divine essence to Jesus. Jesus is Yahweh given to us and for us. So He is our Lord. He is also the Christ. That term means “the anointed one,” and refers to His God-given designation as ruler of the universe.

There is in these opening words a calling back to soundness and clarity with regard to the faith. It begins a series of thoughts strung together for several verses, all of which will have a similar effect of taking the readers back to the faith they had embraced in Christ.

1:4—“since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints:”

Paul had not ever been to Colossae, and so was not directly involved in their coming to faith in Jesus. But his heart was with them and for them from the time he heard that this body of believers had come into existence. It is likely that Epaphras, who had apparently brought the Gospel to Colossae, was one of Paul’s converts and designated leaders. That would explain why Paul would write this letter and expect it to be accepted by the people who did not personally know him. There was an early knowledge of each other and an appropriate affection.

Paul has said that he prays for them always. We can only imagine Paul’s prayer habit as the Spirit brought into his mind thoughts of various people in far away places while he himself was imprisoned.

Paul cites two things he has heard of the Colossians. Both were good to remind them of. Their faith had been Christ-centered. Their faith was also shared by an entire community of people in other places. They had believed in concert with others and there was respect and love for that larger whole. They belonged to a person, Christ, and were a part of a larger family, the Church. So they practiced the faith, and they had the love that grows with it. As such people they had also been a part of Paul’s heart, though they had never met. God’s Spirit was at work between themselves and Paul though they had not become acquainted. That is an important dynamic we must cultivate.

1:5—“Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel.”

Hope is the great motivator. Where there is hope, there is a dynamic atmosphere. Where there is no hope there is stagnancy and where there is stagnancy there is soon both atrophy and entropy.

Paul names hope as that which had inspired the faith and love in the Colossians spoken of in verse four.

Paul speaks of this hope as being “laid up for you in heaven.” Christianity is at its best when it is reminding believers of what awaits them there. It de-generates if it seeks to be a means of helping people get what they want in this life. Though the Scripture has much to say about how this life is to be lived in the present, its advise is primarily given with the day of accountability before Yahweh in mind. Ultimately eternity is what we are to have in view. That is what is being captured most of the time by the term “heaven” in Scripture.

The Gospel is the key piece of information that inspires hope in us with regard to eternity. It enables us to know beyond conjecture of the parameters God has established governing our eternal well-being. The gospel is different than any other theory about heaven in that it is the word of truth—the official message from God. It is the official word on the issue of how to be right with Him. It is information that inspires hope because it is good news. That is the meaning of the word Gospel. It describes what He has done on our behalf to make us right with Him. It is not a message primarily about what we must do. It is about what love and grace motivated Him to do. It is the body of facts God wanted us to know and believe so that we could be restored to relationship with Him. That restoration has great impact on our remaining years on earth and our position in eternity.

1:6—“which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as *it has been doing in you since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth.*”

The Gospel reveals to all who hear it the extent of God’s grace. It is not another religious “feel good” story. It is a story that comes from the domain of truth and realism and is about that domain. Wherever and by whomever it has been understood in truth, the grace of God constantly bears fruit and increases. To understand the grace of God in truth is the key thought in Paul’s words in this verse. This means to understand it as true and that experience happens relatively quickly. It also means to learn the length, breadth, height and depth of that truth, and that understanding grows throughout a lifetime.

Paul is speaking here of both of these things, the moment of truth and the process that unfolds. All over the world people were coming to an understanding of God’s grace through the story of the Gospel. Paul could not have known how true this would become in the centuries that were to follow. There would continue to be great fruit in this sense of new people being added to God’s kingdom daily through the telling of the story. Paul also saw the increase happening in the Church. Individuals were maturing and whole Churches were maturing. What was happening in Colossae was the norm. it was happening everywhere and has continued to the present. That is the unique power of the Gospel (Rom 1:16).

When Paul speaks of the Colossians coming to an understanding of the truth, he uses a word which expresses the idea of “true knowledge,” *ἐπιγινώσκω*. The idea that there was a “true knowledge” that only the initiated came to an understanding of was common among the false teachers at Colossae. So from the outset Paul assigns the knowledge of the truth of the Gospel the deepest significance. There is nothing deeper that could be known. There is no next level or next step except to ponder the implications of the Gospel and all that it reveals of God’s grace.

The phrase “just as” occurs twice in verses 6 and 7. Paul uses that conjunction to link thoughts that remind the readers that there is one Gospel, and there is one Christian belief system. It is not a different message from place to place, taking on the local deities or mingling regional philosophy. It is standardized, the same worldwide, or it is not the Gospel. The fact that it bears fruit across ethnic lines and international borders highlights its truth and uniqueness.

1:7—“just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf.”

Here Epaphras is the one named as having taught the Colossians the Gospel. So he was either from Colossae or that area in Asia Minor, or else made his way there under Paul’s direction. Either way, he is identified as the one who brought them knowledge of the truth. This is a way of affirming Epaphras as a leader. The truth was being eroded and it was important that Paul signal the Colossians as to who could be listened to and trusted with regard to sound doctrine. This affirmation is clear that Epaphras “is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf. In other words, Epaphras spoke for the apostle and was to be regarded as one with authority.

In the book of Philemon (v. 23), Epaphras is referred to by Paul as a fellow-prisoner. There it is inferred that he is with Paul in prison, conveying his greeting to Philemon through Paul. Paul says simply that he is in prison for the cause of Christ. So at some point this “beloved fellow bond-servant” becomes a fellow prisoner. We have no record of how this came about.

1:8—“and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.”

The Colossians demonstrated the Spirit’s presence in that they loved others. That is a tell-tale sign of fellowship with God (1 Jn 2:10; 3:14-20). To a leader when this sign becomes visible in those they lead they know that they have led them rightly. There is always love present in what is choreographed by the Holy Spirit. This is mentioned here by Paul because it is from a Biblical standpoint the highest commendation and affirmation that could be extended (1 Cor 13:1-3).

Love in the Spirit is an important idea. It has all kinds of implications regarding love’s authenticity, its practicality, its constant presence, its perseverance, and so on. Love in the Spirit will be manifested in different ways in the Church depending on one’s giftedness. A person who is an encourager might express love in such a way that we say, “Wow, that’s love!!” A person who is a prophet might demonstrate love for the body of Christ in a way that leaves us puzzled. The same is true of a teacher, a servant, and a leader. Each will express their love a little differently. Hopefully all of these are demonstrations of love. That is the love the Spirit is orchestrating and it is our challenge in exercising our giftedness to have our ministry be shaped by love.

It is the challenge of the 21st century Church to understand that there is more than one way to demonstrate love. We tend to see the love of Christ much more easily in a person with the gift of mercy, whereas we might doubt the presence of the love and character of Christ in a teacher or leader. Paul’s point in placing his description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 in the midst of a discussion of spiritual activities in the Church is probably along these lines. The love that is directed by the Spirit is for the welfare and spiritual health of the body of Christ and so takes on different shapes in different moments. Clearly however, our ministry to each other should be an outflow of love for God and for each other. There is no other legitimate motivation for ministry.

1:9—“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”

Because he had heard of the growing faith of the Colossians, Paul had continuously prayed for their maturity in the faith. What he is about to set forth has been his consistent prayer for them. This is a valuable section of Scripture for this reason. It reveals Paul's thought on what maturity is and how it comes about. It describes life on a higher plane and so shows how such life comes to be. Paul writes verses 4-12 to summarize his prayer for these people, and likely for many others as well. It is not that this is an exact prayer he prayed by memory, although one could do worse. It is a summary of his thought in their behalf that was continually expressed by him in requests to God in their behalf.

People who are mature are filled with the knowledge of God's will. The doing of only that which the Father wants done is the essence of Christ-likeness (Jn 5:19). Paul prays and asks to this end. Again he uses the word for “true knowledge” when he speaks of the knowledge of God's will. This is done to direct the Colossian's thinking back to the all-sufficiency of Christ, the fact that there is no knowledge beyond what is to be gained in Him.

Paul associates this state of being filled with the true knowledge of His will with spiritual wisdom and understanding. This relationship between “all spiritual wisdom and understanding” is defined in the NASB by the preposition “in.” This is an English rendering of the Greek preposition εν. That preposition can be understood as expressing the location in which the knowledge of God's will is found, the means by which it is found, or the person or thing for whose benefit God's will is found. It is apparent that it does not in this case express the latter option. It is either expressing where such knowledge of God's will is found or the means by which it is found. The NASB, by choosing the word “in”, has chosen to understand this phrase as describing the logical sphere in which one finds the knowledge of God's will. The word “in” renders that meaning. The meaning conveyed by this is that as we lay hold of all spiritual wisdom and understanding we will find in these the will of God. The two are synonymous.

The other way of approaching this would be to understand “all spiritual wisdom and understanding” as the instrument by which we are filled with the knowledge of God's will. This meaning would be expressed by a preposition such as “by” or “through,” or by short phrases such as “by means of,” or “because of,” or “in a manner consistent with.” This is the direction the NIV takes. The message of the verse if taken in this way is that through the pursuit of spiritual wisdom and understanding we lay hold of the true knowledge of God's will. I believe this is a more favorable rendering.

The wisdom and understanding spoken of here is spiritual. When the Scripture speaks of such spiritual wisdom and understanding it is speaking of that which is resident in God and made known to us through the activity of the Holy Spirit. The activity we must engage in to gain this is both objective and subjective. It is the Spirit energized meditation on the objective data in Scripture. It is also the Spirit energized pondering of life from the viewpoint of what we learn from Scripture to glean from it Divine wisdom. Wisdom is the acumen we develop by experience and it comes rapidly as we partner with the Holy Spirit in learning life's lessons.

All of this is to say that “all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” the thing false teachers and philosophers in Colossae were holding above Christ, is by Paul's choice of words either resident in God's will or only a means of finding His will. Either way, God's will or thought is the commodity of value and that was what Paul wanted to remind the readers of.

The message of the letter is shaping up. Put your focus on God. Everything else has its value in getting you there. Later Paul will define the fact that Christ was God made flesh so that in Him we have God's essence clothed in human flesh. There is no need to look further or higher or deeper. In Christ any and all mysteries are hidden.

1:10—“so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

Throughout the Scripture we see both relative and absolute language used with regard to righteousness. In the absolute sense, there is no one righteous (Rom 3:10-20). Humanity is totally incapable of living in a manner worthy of the Lord in this sense. There is also relative language used in the Scripture such as Paul uses here. It is legitimate to call one another to living a worthy life and Paul defines what he means by that idea in this verse. Relative to those without knowledge of the truth, believers can live righteously.

Christians bear the name of Christ whom nearly all humanity regards as a great moral teacher at the very least. He is, of course, much more than that to us. He was God in human flesh, undiminished deity and perfect humanity united forever in one person. He was also our sin-bearer and Savior. To live a life worthy of Him does not demand that we lead a perfect life. A worthy life begins with a summons to shape our lives by His teachings. These tell us that He died to save us from the penalty of our sin and to provide grounds for our forgiveness. There is an appropriate response for forgiven people, and it is to live a life in which we forgive others, and in which we don't willfully engage again in those things for which we've been forgiven. He has placed His Spirit in us. We should appear to have His Spirit in us. We should appear to be saved people in the sense that we are being rescued and separated from the things that bind us. If we are the Lord's, then His power, love, and wisdom should mark our lives.

In Colossae, the so-called deeper knowledge of the mystery religions was leading people into license. The idea that their bodies were “just matter” and so didn't matter was taking root. This movement would sweep through the Mediterranean world in the centuries ahead. This has always been the tendency of humanity, to mix religion with excess so that religion creates opportunity and justification for excess. That road is not to be traveled by Christ-followers. There was no room for it in what He modeled or taught. To live the life that Christ lived is to experience the next installment of what our salvation is. It is to begin to bring about God's design in initiating it.

Three statements are made in this verse by Paul to clarify further what it is to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” The first statement describes such a “walk” as one that pleases Him in all respects. When we speak of “pleasing” it is easy to envision a Deity that is angry, or offended, or arbitrary and grouchy. But that is not necessarily true, and certainly not in this case. Even in human relationships there are those we seek to please who are wonderful to us and who we love dearly. That is the relationship Paul is describing here. A father or mother can be completely pleased by their children, yet be pleased even more by certain actions they take. A walk that is worthy of the Lord grows out of such a love relationship. It is a focused life in which He is central. It is not self-centered. It is bent on doing what He desires done in the moment.

The second phrase Paul uses to describe a worthy life is “bearing fruit in every good work.” All lives bear fruit. The question is, what kind of fruit will they bear (Gal 6:7-8). Among the Lord's people there is to be continued growth in good works. Christ's teaching indicates that good works are those inspired by faith and trust in God. They are works that we see God doing and we trust them as such and join Him in bringing them about. Sometimes it is a voice within us that we must

trust as His. Sometimes it is the words of Scripture. But if it is a work that is His it will involve faith of some sort. They will not flow out of our own instincts for our own pleasure.

The third phrase Paul uses to describe a worthy life is “increasing in the knowledge of God.” A life worthy of the Lord is one in which learning is taking place. There is always new understanding as we process life experiences in the light of what Scripture reveals. There is a deeper understanding of Him and all He has revealed. The person who has begun to understand God, rightly sees life as a stewardship. The stewardship of life requires an understanding of what is true. It was what Jesus knew of Himself, of the Father, of humanity, of specific individuals, of the Scripture that made His life extra-ordinary. It is said of the child Jesus that He increased in wisdom even as He grew in stature (Luke 2:52). The life that is lived in a “worthy of the Lord” manner is intent on knowing more of what God has revealed.

1:11—“strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously”

A fourth phrase Paul uses to describe a life worthy of the Lord is one that is strengthened with his power. He then describes the particular power he is thinking of. It is the power that results in all steadfastness and patience. Steadfastness is the rendering of a compound word composed of “remain” and “under.” It speaks of one who is able to endure, or carry a responsibility for a long period. The word rendered “patience” is also a compound formed from the word for “long” and the word for “passion.” Passion is characteristically powerful, but short. Those who are passionate are usually flashes in the pan. Passion usually flares up and dies down. God’s delight is when we become long in passion, where our zeal and energy is prolonged, and pronounced.

The difference between the power of the flesh and the power of God is found in sustainability. Both of these terms, steadfastness and patience, describe an effort and commitment that is sustained and drawn out. These are produced by “the power of HIS glory.” The legacy of Jesus’ life was a new era that He brought about in the lives of those who served him. There was a glory among those who served Yahweh under the old covenant. But its distinguishing mark was that it faded. This was best illustrated by the face of Moses, which glowed from the impact of God’s glorious presence, but the glow faded away to Moses’ dismay (Ex 34:29-35; 2 Cor 3:4-18). The new relationship with God the Father, brought about through Jesus’ work on the cross, is one of constancy. The might of His glory, the Holy Spirit, He has placed within us. The result is that we are blessed with an ability to endure and to be sustained in our pursuit of Him and our work for Him.

The life that is worthy of the Lord is so because it is produced by Him. He is able to produce it in us because he has made us worthy of being His temple. So when we speak of living life in a worthy manner it is not us deciding that we must prove that we deserved to be saved by Him. It is about us believing in what He has done and implementing it by faith. A worthy life is produced by Him through a body that we donate moment by moment.

This verse ends with the phrase “with joy.” Early translators believed it belonged with this verse, verse 11. The idea was that we were strengthened with all power resulting in steadfastness and patience with joy. In other words, the Christian life is not a kind of divine stoicism. It is a joyful life of endurance, a light-hearted but steady and consistent journey. Later translators observe the verse divisions, but have generally linked the phrase “with joy” to the verse that follows.

1:12—“giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”

The short phrase “with joy” that occurs at the end of the previous verse likely goes with this verse, so that it reads, “with joy giving thanks to the Father . . .” Paul is still setting forth those things that are characteristic of a life lived worthy of the Lord. Here he speaks of that life being characterized by thanksgiving. Christ’s life was marked by spontaneous thanksgiving (Matt 11:25; Jn 11:41). Before this verse was written, He gave His disciples this perspective, that above all they should be grateful for the heavenly inheritance that would be theirs (Luke 10:20). This verse is the testimony of God through His Spirit to us. It is also the testimony of a man who had witnessed heaven’s wonders (2 Cor 12:1-5). Heaven should be constantly on our minds and thoughts.

Thanksgiving is deserved by God and is right and proper. It is a kind of worship that must minister greatly to Him. It also ministers to us. All that we have discovered about “positive thinking” was enjoyed for centuries by Christians who, like Jesus, engaged themselves in spontaneous times of thanksgiving. In our darkest moments we can give thanks for what Paul speaks of here, our inheritance in heaven. So vast is its blessing that it will shrink any trial we experience here on earth.

Our thanksgiving is to be joyous. We are to reflect on God’s gift to us in a way that makes us celebrate. This is done through thoughtfully turning our minds to our eternal inheritance and reflecting precisely on it. The more we know of Him and His truth, the more we are able to do this. But we are to reflect on it deeply enough to rouse within us joyous thanksgiving. Our thought should not be in passing so that our thanks is obligatory, and emotionless.

This is an important detail in these words that Paul has given us. God has qualified us for this inheritance. Evil had disqualified us. God didn’t lower the standard of judgment by mercy. In that case we would have spoiled the inheritance, as the first creation was spoiled. He qualified us, meaning He embarked on a plan that would release us from sin’s penalty, which was separation from God. With our relationship to Him restored, we can be released from the power of sin and eventually its presence. It is a big thought that God didn’t just hand over his wealth to evil people. Earth’s history is full of stories of men who have passed on huge inheritances to their sons, but have not imparted the character that their sons needed to successfully manage them. These are tragic stories. God makes no such mistake. He has done and is doing a meticulous work of imparting qualifications to us.

It is noteworthy that the verb “to qualify” (κωλυω), and its related words, refer to what has been made fit, or what is worthy, or up to capacity or capability. This is expressed here in a context in which Paul is speaking about living a life worthy of the Lord. This verse points out that if we do live such a life it is because God has enabled it.

The inheritance of the saints is that which Christ has inherited. We know that His inheritance is all things (Heb 1:2). We know that we are “joint-heirs” with Him (Rom 8:17). We know that He will freely give us all things (Rom 8:32). So certain is this that we are told that all things belong to us (1 Cor 3:21-22). So each person is given a share in all that is.

Now there are some important questions connected with this. Does each person receive a share in the whole, as Americans today hold together “public land”? Is it more like our experience in holding shares in a public company, where we exercise control over it? Is it more like owning a piece of real estate, or a business, where we exercise full control over it?” Perhaps even more important is this question: will each person receive an equal share?

The dilemma of all these questions is that we tend to project what life on the new earth will be like based on the only thing we know, life on this present earth. That experience is marred by evil. At the same time God Himself through writers of Scripture, often described that life in terms we would understand, that relate to this present life on this earth. So there is a certain limit to our ability to sort out the coming reality from the parables and symbols that compare the picture we are given of eternity and the inheritance to today. On the other hand the information we are given is what God calls revelation. By its very nature revelation makes something more clear. So we cannot throw up our hands and give up trying to understand our eternal inheritance. We must simply know that our understanding will be limited, and we must not run beyond the boundaries and principles the word pictures allow.

From all that is said in the Scripture about the inheritance, there are certain things that seem clear. First, it seems that within the being of the Triune God there is a distinction in roles, and even authority without any compromise of equality. This is very difficult for us to imagine because the moment evil is injected into beings, distinctions become warped and abused. But since there is no evil in God there is perfect harmony within the Trinity, though things like authority and submission are being exercised. Earthly experiments like the “Separate but Equal doctrine” in American race relations have made us fear distinctions. Our experience in an evil world immediately and rightfully sounds an alarm in our minds. But in God’s realm there seems to be no problem with differing rank. It seems that these distinctions are true among angels as well. So distinction in role, authority, and in glory received cannot be inherently evil, or God himself would have to be judged evil.

Second, there seems to be distinct roles set aside in God’s kingdom for some. A specific case is cited by Jesus. The apostles were told they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel in Christ’s kingdom (Mark 10:28-31). Furthermore it is said that this is a reward for their faithfulness. In Paul’s writings we see the same concept when he speaks of Christians judging both the world and angels (1 Cor 6:2-3). So there is in Paul’s writings a sharing with Christ on the part of believers of His role as judge of the earth.

Third, there is the clear idea in Scripture that God will evaluate stewardship and reward it individually (Matt 25:15-46; Luke 19:11-27; 1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10). This means that distinctions will be made by Him relating to decisions made by us in this life. These distinctions seem to be quite apparent during the millennial reign of Christ on this earth (Matt 19:27ff; mark 10:28-31; Lk 13:28-30). It is not apparent to what degree these carry over into life on the new earth.

It seems that our experience of all things will be both uniform and distinct. All saints will inherit all things in the sense that all of them will enter into the experience of the great glory that accompanies God’s visible kingdom, just as God’s angels do now. At the same time their role in that form the Kingdom takes may be quite varied individually, assigned by God in accordance with their faithfulness to Him in this life. Amidst all the imagery used in Scripture to describe the future realities of the Kingdom there seems to be both an “all things” and a “some things” dimension to our inheritance. Another way of seeing this might be to see a collective and an individual experience of it. We will experience together all the fullness of God’s glory. We will experience individually with Him the fruit of our labors for Him on this earth.

The entire idea of God rewarding us seems superfluous when we properly understand His work of grace and our own depravity. Some object strongly to the idea of reward on this basis. It is entirely true that any accomplishment brought about by us is entirely of Him. That is the reality. And so the idea that He would compensate us in any way can seem far-fetched. But isn’t that the

nature of His grace anyway? That He blesses humanity we all embrace and believe. The reward He will bestow is just more grace. We should simply understand it as a continuation of His blessing of us. Any reward given will simply accentuate His grace and so magnify His glory.

We are told in this verse that we will share the inheritance of the saints “in light.” This expression, “in light,” involves the Greek preposition *en*. The question that this preposition raises here is whether it is conveying to us where this inheritance will be enjoyed, or the instrument that has brought about this privilege of sharing in the inheritance. Light is used as a symbol of the place of God’s dwelling (1 Tim 6:16). It is used more frequently in both Testaments as a symbol of truth (Is 5:20; 42:6; Luke 11:32-36). As such it becomes a symbol throughout Scripture of the presence of Yahweh, and therefore of truth (Is 9:22; Jn 1:4-9; 8:12; 1 Jn 1:5-7). Walking in light is the symbol used by Jesus and in the writings of John for living in fellowship with God and therefore in harmony with the truth.

In this verse the “in light” phrase certainly captures all of this. It is through the truth that we come to share in the inheritance of the saints. So our inheritance comes to us through the light. That inheritance is to live in light, in absolute harmony with all that is true. We will become as God in this sense, like Christ, who was the truth incarnate in human flesh. This is a sphere of existence that will be ours and will be so by the power of God to change our makeup including our physical bodies. The tiny preposition “en” seeks to capture this amazing sphere of existence where there is no pretense, no lie, no mixture of truth with untruth, no ignorance of what is.

1:13—“For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.”

This verse states more of the reasons we should joyously give thanks to God the Father. First he has delivered us from the domain of darkness. From a spiritual standpoint the earth is a mingling of two domains or spiritual powers. What is called here the domain of darkness dominates it in terms of number of subjects. Light in Scripture represents truth and so darkness represents an absence of truth. The power of that realm lies in ignorance, in lies, in superstition, and in half-truth. It is the realm we are born into and exist in apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit. We have been delivered from that domain. To escape it requires deliverance. One does not know to escape it on their own and apart from God cannot escape it. To be delivered is to be drawn out of something by someone else. Everywhere in Scripture this is taught that God has intervened to draw us out of the spiritual domain of darkness (Eph 2:1-10).

The second reason we should give thanks to God is that we have been transferred to that other spiritual domain. It is the domain of light. By numbers of human subjects it is smaller. By sheer power it can overwhelm the domain of darkness and eventually will dominate the earth through its King Jesus Christ, the truth incarnate (Daniel 2:44-45, 7:26-27; Rev 19:11-21). All who come to believe in Jesus Christ are transferred into this kingdom of light. By His power they are able to put to death the old deeds that they did while subjects in the realm of darkness (Eph 5:11-12).

This is the work of the gospel, to bring about this “transfer” in humanity. The gospel is the power of God in this regard, the specific truth that enables one to cross over into light and then find freedom from their old way of thinking and behaving. Its central figure, Jesus Christ, performed the only acts required for our rescue. The only act we must add is our faith, and that itself is even of God (Eph. 2:10).

1:14—“In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

In Jesus we have redemption. That is, through what He has done a price has been paid that meets the demands of God’s justice and so we can be transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of Jesus. There is no longer any judicial claim against us, blocking us from God. We have been redeemed. The price for our freedom has been paid. It is not a redemption process that simply pays a fine and leaves our offenses intact. It involves Jesus actually being substituted for us and bearing our guilt and punishment. This redemptive plan of God involves forgiveness, full and complete, because Jesus bore our punishment. The result is unique in the annals of criminal justice, where criminals compensate for their crime by time served or by money paid or both. Their guilt remains, though they have been released. Forgiveness is not really an element of the process. In Christ we are released because we are forgiven, and that is foreign to most of our understanding of crime and punishment.

1:15—“And He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

With the former thought on the redemptive work of Christ, Paul sets up this natural shift to his next subject, the person of Christ, though it should be mentioned that grammatically it is a continuation of the previous thought. This kind of flowing, smooth shift from one idea to the next is very typical in the writings of Paul.

He makes two important statements about Jesus here that will be followed in the ensuing verses by a number more. He states first that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, which is somewhat of an oxymoron. In this case the invisible God chose to make Himself visible, becoming a man. As such He was fully Divine and fully human and named Jesus. And so for a period of time there was the experience of seeing God occurring on earth.

This appearance of God on earth did not make visible to us the physical glory of God. It is doubtful that is possible in our present state. In that visit Jesus came in the “likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3). By that we are not saying he sinned or had sin. Only that His human appearance was like that of fallen humanity. It was a body subject to the physical weaknesses that ours are but without sin (Hebrews 4:15). There was only one occasion when the glory of this great King became visible and only a few were privileged to see it (Luke 9:27-36; 2 Peter 1:16-18). Jesus will come again and this will be different. He said He will come again in power and great glory (Matt 24:30; 25:31). And so at the first coming he demonstrated the glory of God’s character and attributes (Jn 1:14-2:11). But that first appearance on earth did not make visible to us the full glory of all that God is.

Paul’s point here is not what Jesus wasn’t, but what He was. Jesus was God Himself made visible. He was not a different, lesser being than the Creator and sustainer of all that is, as the Colossians were being led to believe. The central figure of our faith is none less than the central figure and ruler over whatever else is. The Colossians need look for no one or no thing that would lead them higher or deeper in their understanding of reality.

There are several statements made in Scripture that speak to this appearance of God on the earth, the incarnation. Several Greek words are used to express the different dimensions of the appearance of the God/man. There is considerable overlap in meaning and usage of these words, but there are also noticeable differences in them as well. In Philippians Paul says that Jesus existed in the *form* of God and took on the *form* of man (Phil 2:6). The word used there and rendered *form* is μορφή. It is a term that can speak not just to the shape of something, but its essence. By using this term Paul wished to teach that Jesus was Divine in essence. Without giving

that up he took on the essence of man. In that same passage we find that He had the appearance of man (Phil 2:8). The word used there is σκευα. That word relates to what the eyes observe and see, the outward form of Jesus observed by those who laid eyes on Him. Elsewhere, Paul uses the term ομοιωμα to speak of idols, objects made that bear the likeness of something or someone (Rom. 1:23). Now in this passage, Paul uses the term εικων to speak of the identity of the incarnated Christ. That term speaks of that which is a manifestation of something and so representative of it. Christ was a manifestation of God such as has never occurred.

So here Paul uses the term εικων, and it is likely that through it he wishes to make a strong statement about the humanity of Christ. He is the image of God, a statement that harks back to what is said of the first Adam (Gen 1:26-27). We know that Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. We know that when they sinned that image became marred in humanity. In Jesus that image of God was more fully present. I say more fully present, because His body was like that of fallen man, subject to fatigue, sickness, weakness and death. But He Himself was without sin and lived a life of unbroken submission to the will of God the Father (John 5:19). He was in this sense a manifestation of God in the way humanity was originally intended to be and as such representative of what God desired in humanity.

So we conclude that Jesus revealed not only who God was, but who God designed humanity to be as the bearers of His image. In looking at Jesus, we see not only God, but ourselves as we will be when God's plan of salvation has run its course and His image restored in us. The first threat against a healthy doctrine of Christ was that many began to deny His humanity. He was of course different than fallen humanity, but He was human, and that is likely an important reason for Paul's choice of words here.

That Jesus, the Creator-God, relates Himself to creation by becoming human is an important statement in this letter. The philosophical thought that was developing in that part of the Mediterranean world would eventually propound the idea that because matter was evil a moral being would be disengaged from it--unconcerned because it was to be destroyed anyway. That concept would lead to the idea that what we engage in with our material bodies is irrelevant. They are immoral as is the entire material realm and therefore can and should be abandoned to whatever. That God became a material human being and that He was understood to be One who dealt in and had objectives in the physical realm, and that He did so without sin in perfect harmony with the Godhead was a very important distinctive to maintain in the practice of Christianity. So Paul's first statement about Jesus presents Him as undiminished Deity and perfect humanity.

Secondly Paul states that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. This follows very naturally the idea that He was Divine and also the first human to perfectly bear the image of God by living a sinless life. This He was appointed to do by His anointing to be the source of our salvation. As such he became the firstborn of all creation. This was important to the culture because it conveyed the idea of Jesus' right and authority over creation.

The idea of the right of the firstborn son has disappeared in western civilization and thought. But it is the motif of Biblical thought about Christ and His relationship to His creation, and His family. Though the actual word "over" does not occur in the Greek text, the phrases that follow clearly show that to be the thought here, that Jesus is the firstborn OVER all creation. The Greek grammar allows for such language and even can be understood as demanding some expression of distinction and separation.

Again, the significance to the readers and their culture of both of these statements about Christ is that Jesus was not one of a myriad of "emanations" that came from God. He was God Himself,

and was distinctly over all else that has come from God. He was not to be understood as detached from the material world. He is distinct from it in essence but it is a creation of His, and an expression of Him, though marred by evil. He intentionally immerses Himself in it for His own purposes and glory.

1:16—“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him.”

These thoughts are connected to the previous verse through the conjunction $\sigma\tau\iota$ in the Greek, literally “because.” They are intended to add further information and explanation and weight to the idea that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. Specifically they show that the intention of the statement of Him being firstborn was to convey Jesus authority over creation.

In our way of thinking, that Jesus was the firstborn of all creation would mean that He was the first thing created by God. This verse shows that Paul is using the expression according to its meaning in his own culture. It was an expression of Christ’s authoritative position as ruler over all that is. His thought in this verse can be summarized in this way. Jesus is the sovereign ruler over all that is because He made it all, and made it all for Himself. Verse 17 will add further to this statement of Jesus sovereignty.

Verse 16 begins with the statement that all things have been created by Him. He is firstborn over them because they owe their origin to Him. This is true whether they are in the heavens or on the earth. This statement of origins will be made to relate to the entire universe before it is concluded and that is seen in terms of the way the word “heavens” was used in Paul’s day. All that we know, and know of even vaguely, and what lies beyond the boundaries of what we see, exists because Jesus has put it there. He is sovereign over it. *All* things means that there is nothing that lies outside the boundaries of His sovereign ownership.

This statement had powerful implications in terms of the philosophical systems of the ancient world, and all those that have been propounded since. It raises some difficult questions to be sure. These must be addressed with the understanding that His sovereignty is finally absolute and that it flows from a being who is absolutely good and loving. It is finally absolute in the sense that there are beings who exercise power of decision that bring about that which offends His character. In that sense things happen that are not His will. He exercises decisions that counter those and have the power to shape those evil decisions. He is able to bring about His will even through evil and in spite of it. This all has the effect of revealing the extreme nature of His power and sovereignty. So there is that which He has created, such as humanity and Satan, that has brought about what is NOT His will. But He is taking action toward all that is not His will to bring about what is His desired final outcome. All things are serving Him, and so He is the firstborn OVER all creation.

The phrase “visible and invisible” is added next by Paul. Jesus created the material world we see and so is sovereign over it. This was important to reinforce in the minds of the original readers. Matter is of Him and is made for Him. That includes our physical bodies.

There has been a reoccurring error in the Christian community over the years that somehow our material bodies are the source of our evil. This has given birth to two streams of thought. One is that our inner being is pure and our bodies useless. If, in fact, we could somehow escape them and their influence we would live a life of perfection. That is fundamentally against Scripture. A

second strain of thought is that since our bodies are evil they are outside the realm of concern to God and what we engage them in does not matter. That too is fundamentally against Scripture. When the idea that the source of our evil is our material bodies, a dualism emerges that always creates a non-biblical view of the sanctification process.

The invisible things were also created by Jesus and He is sovereign over them. This includes the forces of nature, natural laws known and unknown that shape the universe and life in it. But the primary point of Paul in speaking of invisible things seems to be clarified by him in the string of specific things he names. He speaks of thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. These are all personal beings that exercise authority. They include the kings and governors that we see as well as any and all spiritual beings that are largely unknown to us. This latter realm has been the subject of much speculation over the eons of time. There was a complex system of gods and beings in the Roman and Greek philosophies of the day. From the earliest written histories, we see polytheistic systems that include myriads of divinities, both good and evil. They explain everything from the weather to the fertility of the womb. Paul's position is not to eliminate completely here the existence of such a spiritual world. It is certain that spiritual beings, known in Christianity as angels and demons, exist. It is certain that these have impact on our experience. Paul's point is that these all fall under the sovereignty of God. Their work is not unscrutinized, uncontrolled or unmitigated. Jesus is acting against evil so that the outcome will be the one God desires, and has planned.

This is affirmed in a very far-reaching phrase that Paul lays out next--that all things are created FOR Him. The idea is that all things exist for His use and to benefit or bring advantage to Him. That is a very important idea with a number of implications. Now, before speaking to what this means it is good to speak to briefly to what it does not mean. It does not mean that all things in every moment bring about that which serves Him in the particular moment of time or era in which they occur. We know that some things do not serve Him in their existence, but in their destruction (Prov 16:4; Rom 12:22; 1 Cor 1:19, 3:17; 1 Jn. 3:8; Rev 11:18). It does not mean that all things benefit Him, as they are envisioned by their inventors. It does not mean that in every thing and every being there is an innate goodness that He values and accepts. It does not mean that every thing or being is such that good is produced by the offsetting forces of the whole.

If it does not mean these things, what can we say is implied in the statement and clarified in the rest of Scripture. First, since it is stated that all things exist for His benefit, it is only logical that He is using them for His benefit, since they do exist. So He is taking actions that utilize and will eventually reverse what is clearly initiated by others that are opposed to Him. In the end all will acknowledge that all things have served Him and led to the triumph of His purposes. Second, it is implied that all things find their true purpose in the particular function they serve in His plan. That means that each individual finds their identity in His plan and blueprint. It means that the things we "own" and the experiences we can choose for ourselves have their highest return when used or experienced in conformity to His prescription. The implications are endless from a philosophy of wealth to one of personal satisfaction. Design defines function and dysfunction, and that is useful in all of life. It makes revelation of God's mind something that is of supreme practical value.

Third, it implies that sin is not only a matter of innate moral character, but a matter of how something is used. In other words, there are beings that are innately sinful. We find that in ourselves as humans. There are also experiences that are amoral, but become sin if they are not entered into in conformity with the plan and design of the Sovereign One. Even things that we view as innately good, such as preaching or doing charitable work, are sin if done in a self-serving way instead of a God-serving way. All things are made FOR Him. To the extent they are done for Him they are good.

Fourth, and this is primary, this statement is made with a view toward the end to which God is taking all things. It means that things are being and will continue to be acted on by Him in a way that He will bring about His purposes through them (Rom 8:28). This is true even of evil things and evil itself. All things that He allows to exist will be made to serve His purposes and desires, and to aid in some way His plan. So the statement is not of the nature of things themselves, or of their combined potential for good. It is made in view of action He takes of His own nature and volition that will bring about His advantage and benefit through all that has been made.

1:17—“And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

With this Paul continues to support his statement that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. He continues by this statement to undermine the teachings of the early Gnostics who believed that the world we know was the creation of an inferior being and as such was evil. He continues to show that in Christ we have the unique infinite One from whom came everything else. He is nothing less than the supreme God of the universe.

Paul states that Christ is ‘before all things.’ This could be construed as a statement of time or a statement of sovereignty over all things. The word rendered “before” is the Greek preposition *πρo*. In most of its usage in the New Testament it is a statement of time or space. However in the only other places that it is used with the term “all things,” it means “above,” and is a statement of priority (James 5:2; 1 Peter 4:8). So this could legitimately be understood as a statement of Christ’s authority over all things. But Paul seems to have already established that, it being his first desire in the clarification of Christ being the firstborn of all creation. That all things have been created by Him and for Him seem to establish Him as above all creation in rank. Likely then, Paul wishes to confirm that the statement of firstborn of all creation includes the element of time. He is before all things in time. Though this seems inherent in the idea that He created all things, Paul wants to clearly state it. Christ Himself had alluded to this about Himself (Jn 8:58; 17:5). Before anything else existed there was Christ.

Paul adds that Christ is the one who holds things together. The idea of the word he uses is that of coherence and order, as opposed to chaos. All of the New Testament affirms this about Christ, that the order we observe is preserved under His authority (Matt 11:17; Lk 10:22; John 13:3; Rom 4:11; 11:36). He has only to give the word and the entire natural order of things will be enveloped in entropy.

So the picture that is emerging in these verses is that Christ existed before anything else did. He brought into existence all that does exist. He assigned to each thing a role and order whereby it continues by His command to be sustained. From the viewpoint of many, creation is self-sustaining. But this is really a misnomer. The testimony of Scripture is that it would all collapse apart from His sustaining power (Neh 9:6; Heb 1:3).

1:18—“He is also the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.”

From Jesus’ great position as the sovereign ruler of the universe, Paul moves to the logical deduction that He is also the sovereign ruler of the Church. Paul reminds the readers of the pre-eminence of Christ in the Church through the imagery that was characteristic of his teaching on the Church elsewhere, the figure of the human body (Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 12:12; Eph 4:16). He

presents Christ as the head of that body. He is the nerve center that unites the functions of the rest of the parts to sustain life and He brings about the activity of the body. Even with the limited understanding of physiology in Paul's day, everyone knew what became of a headless body! It is perfect imagery in terms of Christ's preferred style of leadership. He seeks to sway people and bring them to obedience through inner influence of grace rather than lord it over them. The figure of the head and the body describes the relationship perfectly. He is clearly the originator and imitator of the life of the healthy Church. Yet there is a clear identity, vitality, and even beauty to the function of each individual part. He leads and controls but does so in a way that also brings out the glory of what He has made.

Christ is also said to be "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." Paul has spoken of His present role in the Church. Now he speaks to the next stage of the kingdom of God, the lead edge of which we see in Christ's resurrection. He is the first human to receive a glorified human body. In this sense He is the firstborn from the dead. He is the first in time. He is also the firstborn in terms of His pre-eminence in the ages to come, where He will rule over the entire family of those raised from the dead. Christ is our head now in the Church, and He will be our older brother, the controller of our inheritance, through the years of His kingdom on earth and into the eternal state. We will rule with Him, but it is clearly with Him, not apart from Him, and it is clearly because of Him (John 17:24; Rom 8:17; Col 1:13; James 2:5).

Jesus' title in Scripture is Christ, which means the Anointed One. It refers to a number of roles He plays in God's plan, all of which make Him the central visible figure in that plan. He simply has first place in everything, and this is by design and so by qualification and activity. Were we to search for the greatest leader it would be Jesus the Christ. Were we to search for the one who had served humanity the fullest it would be Jesus the Christ. Were we to look for the one with the best character it would be Jesus the Christ. The same would result if we were to search for the most powerful, the most intelligent, the most loving, the most pious the most in-tune with people, the wealthiest and so on. He is by design and endowment pre-eminent. History is scripted to confirm the truth of this and to make it known to every living creature (Is 45:23; Phil 2:10). Paul's testimony here to the Colossians is of this. It is an important thing to remind them of since the thinking of the day was to understand Christ within a broader, polytheistic scheme, one of a myriad of greater-than-human beings. He is to be revered by His Church as wholly set apart and unique. He is to be understood by them as absolutely sovereign over all. He is to be worshipped by them as intrinsically worthy of every ounce of praise and admiration that could ever be afforded Him. Though no one has stooped lower than Christ, it is equally certain that no one occupies such an elevated position.

It is clear from the Scripture that the ideological end toward which events have been choreographed is that God be acknowledged by all creation to the full degree that He deserves (Psa 46:10; Is 45:4-5, 20-25; Hab 2:13-14; 1 Cor 15:28; Eph 3:10). Since the visible manifestation of God is Jesus, it stands to reason that He has become and will become even more the focal point of humanity's praise and worship. Within the being of the Triune God however, we find the submission of the Son to the Father. This was demonstrated by Christ during His years on earth (Jn 5:19-20; Luke 22:42; Jn 18:11). Clearly much of the worship God the Father seeks for Himself, He brings about through the worship of the Son (compare Is 45:23 with Phil 2:10). He has clearly revealed that Jesus was Yahweh in human flesh (Phil 2:9-11; John 1:1-14). But we also see what we would call internal submission within the triune God to the Father. This will not change and will become more visible (1 Cor 15:28). Christ will have first place in everything, as Paul tells the Colossians here. This will be the new order of things. He will remain the visible incarnation of God for all eternity, Yahweh in the form of man. We will also see clearly in Him His own submission to the Father. More of the mystery of the Triune God, three

distinct persons who are one in essence, will become visible to us and more clearly understood by us.

1:19—“For it was the *Father’s* good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.”

This idea is of such significance in Paul’s thought to the Colossians that he will restate it in the next chapter (2:9). That idea is that all of the attributes of God are present in Christ. Both in scope and degree these things that make God who he is are present in Christ, and they are present permanently. This is a significant idea to set forth in the arena of polytheism. The characteristic of those systems is to imagine all the things that might be true of a single god as being carried out by a number of lesser divine beings.

In the strain of thought that was flourishing in Asia Minor the terminology would be different than for example, Greek Mythology. But the idea of a number of lesser beings who each carried out a function of the supreme entity in a monotheistic model was present. An example is that many were teaching that matter was created by an inferior moral being that had divine-like powers. Paul’s statement here and in 2:9 stands against that idea, that a number of divine-like creatures were in control of our reality. His statement defines clearly the divinity of Jesus Christ. He was nothing less than God in His fullness and in visible form.

There are three important words in this statement that are used in specific ways in the Bible. Considered according to their normal usage they lend clarity and power to this statement on Christ. The first of these terms is “good pleasure.” Here the term Father is added by the translators and that is legitimate. When this phrase is used of God’s good pleasure it is always speaking of God the Father (Matt 3:17; Luke 12:32; 1 Cor 1:21). The point is that it is not that the attributes of God had a will of their own and came to alight on the man Jesus, nor is it that Jesus was just a man and clothed Himself through self-discipline with attributes such as God has. It was a decision of God, an intentional, purposeful course of action by Him to become human.

This decision of God related to His “fullness,” and that is the second important word. It is a word that means to be filled to capacity, whether it is used in a plain literal sense (Mark 8:20), or in a figurative sense (Gal 4:10). When something is full in the sense in which this word is used, there is no more capacity. Of the infinite fullness that is God’s essence, nothing was held back by Him from Jesus. He was the full and complete essence of God.

The third important word in this statement is the term “dwell.” In the Septuagint, two words were used to express dwelling. One referred to a temporary state. The other to a permanent one. In Genesis 37:1 both of these words are used. There it says that Jacob dwelt permanently (κατοικεν) in the land where his father sojourned (παροικεν). Paul uses the word here that speaks of permanent dwelling. The fullness of God did not simply pay a visit to Jesus, or come upon Him for a season so that His essence was otherwise normal. It permanently resided in Him. It was so united with His Humanity that it was truly His essence.

This then is the reason why Jesus has first place in everything. He is worthy by virtue of His identity and essence. It is this thought that Paul is seeking to strengthen by this verse.

1:20—“and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

In this verse Paul is expressing thought meant to strengthen the idea of verse 18, that Jesus was to have first place in everything. Verse 19 spoke to the idea that the worship of Him was appropriate due to His essential identity. He is God incarnate in human flesh. So Jesus is to have first place in everything because He is God. Here Paul transitions from that thought of Jesus' essence to summarizing His work done in our behalf. He is worthy of our absolute worship because of what He has accomplished for us.

Through Jesus God “reconciled all things to Himself.” To reconcile means to bring back hostile parties to a former state of harmony and friendship. It captures in a word the state of original creation, fallen creation, and God's new creation. While the English word “reconcile” or “reconciled” occurs many times in the New Testament, this particular word occurs only three times (Eph 2:16; Col 1:20-21). It is the word *αποκαταλλασσω*. In the other cases where reconcile appears in the English versions it is the rendering of a very similar word. It is in fact, the same word minus one of the prepositions prefixed to it, *καταλλασσω*. The additional preposition which Paul prefixes to this word here conveys separation and liberation. The resulting word does not appear in the Septuagint or in secular Greek literature. The addition of the preposition *απο* to this word that already meant to reconcile, emphasizes separation between what had come about due to sin and what now is as a result of God's plan.

The presence of the term “all things” must be reckoned with when interpreting Paul's words here. Some could drag out of this universalism, that somehow all people will be saved, no matter the diversity of their belief. This does not agree with the rest of Scripture that belief in Christ is essential (Jn 3:16). Even this verse speaks of reconciliation coming through Christ.

As always the context in which this phrase “all things” occurs is significant. Already in verses 15 through 20 Paul has used the term “all things” four times and the term “everything” once. This is a discussion not just about people but things. That was intentional on Paul's part. He was concerned about the belief that was developing in the minds of the people of the ancient world that matter was evil, and that it was to be discarded by God and so by us. That view made everything in the material world, from the planet to the human body base and meaningless.

While it is true that the present earth has been spoiled by evil (Rom 8:20-21), and that it will be destroyed in its present form in the future (1 Peter 3:9-13), three other things are true of the present creation as well. The first is that God intends to restore the present creation in some sense (Rom 8:20-21; Acts 3:19-21; Is. 11:1-11). This appears to be both a spiritual and physical regeneration brought about on the earth and in it by the second coming of Jesus Christ who will physically rule over it (Matt 19:28; 25:31; 1 Cor 15:24; Rev 2:26-27). The reconciling of all things then can be understood as God's plan for the restoration of the present creation, as well as His plan for a new one.

A second factor in the understanding of this idea that through Christ all things will be reconciled to God is that the reconciliation of humanity to God will be fulfilled through a remnant of humanity. It will not be achieved in the case of every single individual who has ever lived. The entire story of Israel that occupies the whole of Scripture illustrates the idea that God is seeking out and choosing a remnant of humanity whom He will save (Rom 11:1-5). So it is that within the infinite field of “all things” we find that representative elements are reconciled. This can be understood in the way that Creation was “saved” during the time of the flood through the representative humans and animals aboard Noah's ark. God will reconcile to Himself angels,

though not all of them. He will reconcile humanity, though not all of them. He will reconcile created things, though not necessarily every object created that has been warped by the presence of evil.

The third thing that must be understood in terms of this present creation being reconciled through Christ is that in the case of material things, their form can change very dramatically, while the matter that composes them remains essentially the same. This is true of all things from an ice cube to a long thrown on a fire to the actual planet we live on. Matter can be changed so that it becomes invisible in terms of its form, but it still exists. It is not hard to imagine an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator-God reconstituting matter so as to conform it to His desires. In the case of our material bodies this appears to be exactly what God will do (1 Cor 15:35-49). So in the reconciliation of all things this will undoubtedly be much of what God eventually does through Christ (Rev 20:11-21:8). In terms of material things, they will be reconciled to God in the sense that God will certainly bring them into the form He desires for them, serving the function He desires them to have. We will see this to a degree when Christ rules on the present earth. We will see the work fully accomplished on the new earth.

Paul says that this work of reconciliation is done through Christ's blood and that this blood of His has made peace. It is certain that without blood there is no remission of sin in the moral economy God has chosen to establish in His plan (Heb 9:22). This is consistent with the fact that our life functions are sustained by our blood and God has ordained that blood should be that through which atonement is made for our souls (Lev 17:11, 14). As to why God chose this we do not know. It is certainly no morbid, warped desire to inject more suffering into our life experience. It seems most likely that He wanted to establish a most somber, visual picture of sin, guilt, and atonement, and so chose blood as the instrument. Its sight arouses our fullest attention and our deepest empathy and sorrow. The thought of it is associated with pain and so arouses in us pre-emptive action. Animal sacrifice became the earliest picture God used to arouse in humanity the seriousness of guarding and guiding their power of decision (Gen 3:21; 4:4). From this legitimate root blood sacrifice in time became quite perverted as religious thought took on its demonic bent. In God's way of practicing it, outlined in detail in the Mosaic law, animal sacrifice provided the perfect symbol of what God intended to do through Jesus the Christ. His blood is that through which reconciliation has occurred. It is so, not because of any intrinsic value of blood, but because of the value that God has assigned it in general and in particular the value that He has assigned to the blood of His own sinless Son.

Paul ends the verse with a statement that reinforces the idea of "all things." It includes things in earth and in heaven. It is not that there are things in heaven that need to be reconciled to God. Rather, they need to be reconciled with man. Christ's blood allowed reconciliation between all parties in heaven and all willing parties on earth. It was the only thing that could accomplish this. The words of Paul are emphatic on this point. Heaven could only reconcile with earth because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. This role He occupies is added rationale for Him having first place in everything.

1:21—"And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,"

Paul has been speaking of the right of Christ to be considered pre-eminent. This pre-eminence is commensurate with both His identity as God incarnate and with what He has done in our behalf. Here Paul personalizes Christ's goodness to humanity, speaking of the former mindset of the Colossians. Three things characterized them and all of humanity apart from Christ. First, they had been alienated in mind with respect to God and the things of God. The word refers to that which is not kindred, that which is foreign. It captures the thought that because there is no relationship

or fellowship with God, His thoughts and desires completely escape our understanding and grasp. So there is estrangement, and where there is estrangement there is suspicion, misunderstanding, and ignorance.

Second, this growing ignorance led to outright hostility. The word is often used to describe Satan who not only is estranged from God, but is intentionally opposing God. So the Colossians and all of humanity journey away from God becoming increasingly hostile to His thoughts, His family, and all the normal processes He uses to communicate His heart to his people.

Third, this estrangement and hostility was more than a mindset. It involved evil deeds. In truth, the evil deeds are the cause, according to Paul, of our hostile mindset toward God. That is an important order. We start out alienated from God. As we engage in evil, we justify ourselves and incriminate God, even as Adam and Eve did. So the deeds themselves are evil, but the biggest problem becomes what they produce in our minds, a pattern of thought that is anti-God, in which we fabricate a god to our liking and a theology to match. So our hostility to God is compounded as we defend our actions instead of confessing them.

What started out as a lack of relationship mutates into a hostile relationship and God becomes utterly foreign to us. Because that happens there is a relational degeneration in human relationships that happens. One of the things we observe among humanity is a distrust of those who are different. A distrust of those of a different race, language, or social custom, becomes quite natural. This distrust is very volatile. Through suspicion and ignorance it easily is manipulated and degenerates into hatred and war. This is symptomatic of our spiritual incapacity which fosters in us all that is contrary to what is true and therefore right. This is our condition before Christ intervenes. It is to dissipate as we learn to think as He does with His help.

1:22—“yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.”

The worship of Christ as pre-eminent is proper because of who He is, and because of what He has done in our behalf. Namely, He embraced us as hostile rebels and is imparting to us freely the capacity to live in intimate relationship with Him and so at the other end of the moral spectrum. The previous verse looked to the Colossian's past. This verse looks to the future God would like to lead them into. The following verse will describe their present challenge.

By taking on a material earthly body Jesus could live as we must live and do so without sin. He would then be qualified as man and as sinless man to bear our sin and give His own body as a sacrifice for our sin. The idea that Christ took on a material body like that of the rest of humanity was and is a critical doctrine for all to affirm. It was being eroded in the early Christian community.

Jesus' vicarious death removed the guilt of all who would believe in Him. The result is that they are reconciled to God, meaning that they are restored to friendship, partnership and more importantly into union with Him. His Spirit lives in all of us who have believed. His purpose in our lives can now be worked by Him. His purpose is to change how we think and so to change how we behave. This process of saving us from how we instinctively live is called sanctification, and it means to set apart for special use. Yahweh does different things through us than use to be done. This happens all along our journey until we arrive in His presence eternally where our bodies will be transformed and we will live in perfect conformity to His will.

Paul defines this process of sanctification as the process that started in us through the death of Christ. This journey is a present reality because of the fact that we are now re-united with God through His Spirit. It is a journey that aims toward bringing about three things in us for the benefit of that day when He presents us as His family to His Father.

Three words are used by Paul that capture the intended fruit of our day to day journey with God, God's intent when all the lessons of life are learned is first that we be holy. This is a familiar word that means set apart. The noun form, used in the plural means holy ones, or saints. We are separated ones. Holiness has to do with the designed purpose of something, with a specific designated use it is assigned and its resulting dignity and honor. The separation conveyed by the word is as much a separation to something as from something. In terms of what it means in day to day living, holiness is very much a matter of what one does. What they don't do is shaped by what they do. The journey God has His children on is meant to lead them to do that which other people do not do. Namely, He gives impetus to them to do in each moment what God desires and to do it in the way He wants it done. As this is done, there are many things that are not done and some things that will never be done. Being holy is being pure in one's inner being, single-minded, facilitating what He desires. That is our highest use, the particular noble use He has designed us for.

The second word Paul uses to define God's intent in our journey is blameless. The word is best understood by backing into its meaning. When someone is to blame, it means they bear responsibility for the presence of something, usually something evil. They either initiated it or they could have prevented it. Therefore when someone is blameless it means they are not responsible for the presence of evil. They have not failed to do what they could to prevent it, and they have not initiated it. Now this is obviously not true in the absolute sense of any human being other than Christ. However this term is always speaking in the more relative sense when used of people. God is seeking to build character that keeps us from initiating evil and moves us to prevent, deter, mitigate, even destroy its work in and through others. This is the work we are set aside to do. Where others might dabble or even traffic in it, God is seeking to move His children to a place where together they are a force against it.

The third term Paul uses is beyond reproach. This is a similar idea to that of blamelessness. It looks to that time in believers lives where they begin to have credibility in the minds of others. Their character is respected, though perhaps not embraced. It also looks far forward, as blameless does, to the day when "before Him" we are vindicated in the eyes of all who have ever had existence. The choices we have made to believe and trust, to sacrifice and serve will be acknowledged as shrewd and wise, right and good. The one who accuses and slanders us will be silenced.

These are the fruits that the journey God has us on will bear in us. Ultimately they are "before Him" experiences in the sense that they are only tasted in this life. As Paul has written, the life we experience through the Holy Spirit in this life is only the earnest of our inheritance (Eph 1:13-14). The degree to which we enter into the experience of these we could refer to as the degree to which we are saved. That is not to suggest that our justification or sanctification are by works. Both are by faith. However the degree to which God's salvation from what we instinctively are and become is experienced by us depends to some degree on both the speed and consistency of our submission to the promptings of His Spirit. This to a large degree depends on the level of trust and confidence we place in the truth—our faith. Paul's thoughts in the next verse will speak to this challenge in the present that our faith must rise to.

1:23—“if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I Paul, was made a minister.”

There is a wonderful future ahead for those who are a part of God’s family. The previous verse has spoken of the destination God has for us. This verse speaks to our present challenge.

There is an urgency to Paul’s message to the Colossians. The faulty ideas about Christ that were creeping into their doctrine would have a devastating impact on their ability to experience God’s salvation process if they embraced them. That salvation process is fueled by truth. We find truth in the statements of God about what is that He has miraculously placed in writing through human authors in the Scripture. We find truth modeled and fleshed out through the record of when God became the man we recognize as Jesus, the Christ. To let go of Christ’s unique identity by putting other beings on equal footing with Him and mingling other ideas with His teaching is to undo revelation. It dilutes the very thing God has placed in our lives to rescue us from what we were. We become destined at that point for spiritual wandering, not spiritual maturity. This is always the threat of false doctrine, in particular those ideas that minimize Christ and that assign equal authority to teachings not sourced in Him.

From a pragmatic point of view, the only means the family of God has ever had of protecting itself from this danger is to compare what they might think or hear with what is written. What stands written Jesus said, cannot be violated (Jn 10:35). And so the challenge is to be firmly established, steadfast, and unmoving with respect to what has been delivered to us by God. There must be the constant mental/spiritual activity of comparing what is being heard with what has been already delivered (Deut 17:18-20; Is 8:20; Jude 3-4). There must be congruity. This does not mean stagnancy. It simply means consistency and harmony. All of the New Testament writers took pains to provide such linkage with the Old Testament. They did this because they knew that truth is ultimately what sets people free (Jn 8:31-32). To alter truth, whether our movement is in a conservative or liberal direction, is to compromise the energy of the ongoing salvation process.

Paul says that we are not to be moved away from the hope of the gospel. Usually when material is added alongside God’s revelation of truth it has the effect of eroding the tremendous hope the gospel provides. The hope of the gospel is this; God has acted in humanity’s behalf so that the image of God will be restored to fallen humanity. The only requirement on their part is that they believe this good news.

The gospel is simple, and it is a message of great hope. The devil hates it because it undoes his work. He inspires additions and corrections to it because they appeal to the pride of men, dilute the truth, and impede the experience of God’s salvation. The appeal of these “other gospels” is fleshly rather than of the Spirit and whenever fleshliness is fostered hope is ultimately sacrificed. When hope is lost, it is because gospel-centered thought has been sacrificed.

Paul speaks of this gospel having been proclaimed “in all creation under heaven.” He is not supposing that every person on the earth has heard this good news. There remain unreached people groups to this day. He means that God has made the proclamation, and intended it for all. The news is not hidden under wraps. The good news that God would rescue humanity was revealed beginning at the fall (Gen 3:15), it was affirmed through God’s revelation to Israel (Is 42:5-7; 49:6), and finally confirmed and announced by God Himself when He became a man (Jn 3:14-17; 6:40; 12:44-47).

Paul then makes a statement about himself, linking himself firmly to this greatest of causes, the gospel. He says he was made a minister of it. This was by a very definite act of God in which He dramatically and physically intervened in Paul's life. He stopped him from his work of persecuting Christians and charged him with representing Christ to the Gentiles, to kings and to Israelites (Acts 9:1-22). He was a chosen instrument of the Lord. Paul had a tremendous sense of the urgency of the gospel and the work of establishing it in the minds and hearts of people. It was not simply a means of answering the dilemma of the afterlife. It was and is a means of entering into an entirely different way of living the present life.

Christians must remain true to the gospel and all the truth that under-girds it and flows from it. They can be robbed of their experience with God by compromising it. They stand in danger of falling short of what God wants to do for them and in them if they begin to dilute the truth of it. This verse constitutes a grave warning to believers of all time, one that is often repeated in the writings of the New Testament (Heb 2:1-4; 3:12-19; 6:1-8).

1:24—“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the Church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

If one is to help move along the salvation process in the life of others, and if one is to help bring maturity to local Churches, it is certain that this will involve suffering on their part. The suffering could be physical in terms of persecution, sickness, weariness and various stress-related maladies. It could be emotional, due to its relational nature and all the accompanying misunderstandings, concerns, wounds and unresolved traumas. But it is certain that the work requires suffering and sacrifice by its very nature. It is mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical work rolled into one. The mental aspect of the work involves balancing and maintaining many vexing theological tensions that are only so maintained by faith. Because it is spiritual work, it is unseen and subjective and results are often intangible. There is an invisible enemy and invisible obstacles. Because the work is emotional it is characterized by wide swings within moments of each other and so is unpredictable. It is physical because it requires being places at certain times and it takes a toll on the body. It results in sleepless nights, is never done, and must be engaged regardless of how the body feels.

Paul rejoiced in such suffering. He likely did so as an endurance-athlete “enjoys” an event. There's just something that feels good about the push, though it may not feel good to the senses in the moment. He rejoiced in his spirit because His Spirit witnessed within him that this was all right and good and the absolute will of God. That is the greatest of feelings. It is produced by the combination of faith and obedience.

When we think of Christ's sufferings our minds go first to His death and rightfully so. Without His death the rest of His life would have had less impact on us. But His entire life involved sacrifice--spiritual, emotional, mental and physical sufferings. There was the mental work of wrestling with the written word and learning His own identity and calling from the Old Testament writings. There was the emotional load of the resistance of people He loved, broken relationships, being maligned and misrepresented. There was the spiritual work of resisting temptation, knowing the leading of the Father, choosing people, discerning hearts, and whole nights of prayer. There was the physical work of long days and sleepless nights. This was His life. All the stress of it was visible in Him before the actual events that were involved in His torture and death. These sufferings of His life were essential to His work of revealing the Father to us.

The work of justifying us before God was essential to us having relationship with God. For that work to be done He had to die. That is the work He declared finished, and the veil of the temple being torn was the visible sign that work was complete.

The work of sanctifying us and bringing all of His family to maturity though provided for, is not finished. That is the work He partners with us in. His sufferings were essential and foundational to that work. Without the baptism of the Spirit we could not be sanctified. The Old Covenant proved that. Without the fuller revelation of God, the information disclosed through the teachings of Christ and the actions of Christ, we would not have the truth that sets us free (Jn 8:31-32). He finished the work of revelation through His apostles of which Paul was one. He is presently finishing His work of bringing about the gathering and maturing of His family through His family (Eph 4:1-16). This is the sense in which our sufferings in behalf of His family add to His and bring to completion His work. His sufferings lacked in the sense that they did not propagate the truth to all of the world, they did not establish local Churches, they did not complete all He wishes to do on the earth and in the earth's people. Our sufferings are added to those of Christ as He completes His work through us by His Spirit.

There is a large sense in which the sufferings of Christ are sufficient. There is nothing we need add to them to bring absolution to our guilt for our sin. There is nothing we need to add to them to be embraced by Him as His children once we have believed. There is nothing we need to add to them once we have believed in Him to receive His Holy Spirit. But His work of bringing others to such faith involves us, and it involves our own sacrifice and suffering for which we will be abundantly rewarded.

1:25—“Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God.*”

There are two terms added in this rendering by the NASB. The first is added to clarify that the health of the Church, the body of Christ, was that which Paul was to focus his efforts on. The second term added by the NASB seeks to bring additional clarity as to what it was that Paul was to fully carry out. And so the translators added “the preaching of” to the term the word of God. This has the effect of saying that the proclamation of the word of God was the specific task Paul was to fully carry out. There is an alternate way of understanding this latter phrase that may be better, which will be addressed below.

These thoughts of Paul follow after he has referred the readers to his own sufferings that he has joyously endured that have been added to those of Jesus in behalf of Jesus' family. They give us great perspective on the issue of life calling and purpose and on our own quest for significance.

Paul suffered with joy because this course of action that led to suffering for him personally was of benefit to the body of Christ. The phrase “for your benefit” occurs in the middle of this verse, and is central to its thought. Our life purpose and our call relates always to benefit for the Church. Whenever we ponder our own purpose and calling, the benefit of the body of Christ should be the primary factor we find ourselves pondering. It is a fundamental error to base our perspective on our own purpose and calling in life on what will benefit us, feel good to us, or fill up our lives.

We should learn much from this statement by Paul because he found what he had been made for and called to do by God by direct interaction with Jesus Christ. It was not a subjective process as ours is, that could be warped by Paul's own desires or the subtle influences of guilt or some unperceived emotional need in him. That is the path he WAS on. Then Jesus Himself interrupted

his course. There was no subtle leading, no still small voice. There was dramatic intervention, a blinding light and a booming voice. If anyone has ever known with certainty what God wanted them to do with their lives, it was Paul. The design and purpose of God for Paul's life was not something that would make him feel good, or loved, or embraced. It would not be clearly known because it was effortless, or because it had a good "flow." It would lack much by way of warm feeling and predictability. It would be filled with conflict and stress. It would entail broken relationships and disappointments that would certainly detract from the spiritual highs. Paul's purpose was to bring benefit to the family of Christ, and before any of us can find our purpose we must embrace this grand over-arching one. Each member of the family of God finds their purpose in this larger one of benefiting Christ's Church.

This idea of Paul's purpose is central to his thought in this verse. From this idea, expressed in the middle of the verse we can work backwards through the first part of the verse. We find that this purpose was being realized in Paul as a result of a "stewardship" from God. A "stewardship" in biblical terms is a trust. It is being entrusted with an important responsibility to manage something that belongs to someone else. It involves privilege, responsibility, accountability, and reward. In that sense it is what we would call a "position of responsibility." We infer in that phrase that something is more than a job. It is both demanding and rewarding. So Paul's purpose became the benefit and welfare of the Church, and this was the result of a position of responsibility bestowed on Him by God.

Paul's title, the one associated with this position of responsibility, was "minister." The term refers to one who serves by providing what is necessary for certain processes to move along. It likely came from a word that described one who ran errands. In our day it is used of those who make their living as a religious leader. In Paul's writings it did not refer necessarily to a paid position or even a religious one (See its use in Romans 13:4). It simply described one who provided a necessary service in the accomplishment of a larger objective. In this case Paul provided such service to advance the Church, the body of Christ.

The stewardship, or trust, bestowed on Paul by God was ministry to His Church, but this did not mean his ministry was shaped by the Church. It was bestowed by God and shaped by the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. It is the same for every leader called by God to His work. This is always a delicate balancing act for spiritual leaders. They must serve the Church, lead the Church, even be submissive as any other believer to the Church. They must shepherd the Church, by being certain that all parties are being led by God. A minister in the sense Paul and the Lord uses the term does not simply provide what the people of the Church want. Aaron did that with disastrous results (Ex. 32). Leaders must serve the interests of God and facilitate the godly interests and leadings in their people.

The last phrase in this verse shows that this was true of Paul. His ministry was not about what people wanted or clamored for. His stewardship, the specific mission God had entrusted to him involved revelation of a new era, of logical but sweeping change in and among the community of God. Paul would proclaim that which had been here-to-for unknown. The "preaching" referred to here is not the normal work ministers and teachers have done for centuries, that of teaching and applying the Word of God. In fact, the word preaching does not occur in the Greek text. It is added in order to convey the idea of proclamation that is inferred in the following verse. There was information God wished to add to his written word, that would make the revelation of the Old Testament clearer. The next verse will clearly bring this out. The mission God entrusted to Paul was to convey this expanded message through spoken and written word, so that it would become known to all.

Paul says here that his mission, according to the stewardship given to him for the Church's benefit, was to bring to fullness or completion the Word of God. This involved the disclosure of information that brought clarity to four areas. First, it made the sufferings of Jesus clearly visible in the Old Testament and so made the way of salvation for man clearly visible. Second, it made known how the community of God was to conduct itself now, given the death of Jesus Christ. Third, it made known how God's word to Israel, both His directives and His promises would be fulfilled. Fourth, it made clear the error that tends to develop in us that leads us to believe we can obey our way into favor with God. The New Testament exposes completely the inadequacy of the works of the Law to justify us with God. Paul's writings are key in shedding light on these mysteries of the Faith.

Much of God's purpose for Paul involved the orderly presentation of information that would provide these four important lines of truth to the Church during the coming centuries. Most of us will not do a work anything like that of Paul. But the principle of purpose is the same. Our purpose will in some way contribute to the health of the body of Christ. We move closer to our purpose as we focus on that priority.

1:26—That is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints,”

The stewardship or treasure entrusted to Paul was truth. That is the most prized possession of God we have access to in this life. It was in Paul's case, truth that had been obscure, but now was made plain and was to be proclaimed. It was not that this truth was not present in the Old Testament. It was like any other hidden thing. Its presence was concealed and could be passed over, and its detail missed. Paul will identify this mystery in a concise statement in the next verse, but for now he simply calls it a mystery.

A mystery exists where a result is seen and the detail of how it came to be is unknown. The Old Testament projected much that would come to be. There were four important things prophesied. First, that there would be forgiveness of sin extended by God to all men (Ez. 36:24-27). Second, that God's Spirit would be poured out on humanity (Joel 2:28; Jer 31:31-37). Third that Israel would be restored (Zech. 8:8). Fourth, that Gentiles would turn to Yahweh (Is. 49:6). These things were apparent throughout the Old Testament, but how exactly they would come to be was a mystery. There were hints, such as the allusions to a suffering Messiah (Is. 53). But definitive statements about how this would all be achieved were absent. It remained for God to reveal exactly how this work would be done, and His chosen instrument in this revelatory act was Paul. Paul brought to light the truth latent in the types, symbols, and statements of the Old Testament that had not been set forth and explained in plain statements.

There is much by way of theology, doctrine, eschatology, and the daily practice of the faith that we understand due to the writings of Paul. Dedicated men for ages searched the Old Testament for clearer experience of the things of God (1 Pet. 1:10-12). It was not a lack of diligence that led to gaps in their experience. It was simply hidden from eternity past, through many generations of humanity until the time of Christ and the revelatory acts He choreographed through men of His choosing like Paul. In this verse, without stating clearly what the mystery was, Paul simply speaks of its former existence and the fact that it is now revealed and brought to light.

1:27—“to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

From the beginning of God’s relationship to Abraham and his children, God intended to use them to bring His truth to the rest of earth’s people groups (Gen. 12:1-3). Though this was not always understood or embraced by Israel, it was always a part of God’s plan for them. The time simply had to come for that to occur. And so when God became a man, He became a Jew by ethnicity and immersed Himself in life with them. He made Himself known clearly and plainly to them. Many did not receive Him but some did. To these holy ones, or saints, He revealed more of Himself. Through them He began to make Himself known to the rest of humanity. Paul was among these Jews, part of a remnant, a small minority in Israel who believed in Jesus and began to live his life through the power of the Spirit. They proclaimed the truth about Him to all people and tutored them in the way of life He lived, a life of continuous fellowship with Yahweh. This is the transformation and evolution in God’s family that Paul is describing here.

The verse begins with the phrase ‘to whom,’ which can be understood as ‘through whom.’ It refers back to His saints in the previous verse. These were His chosen ones from among Israel who believed in Him. These would make known among the Gentiles the ‘riches of the glory of this mystery.’ Paul identifies the mystery, but first there is this descriptive phrase of its glory. To describe the immensity of the weightiness of the truth of the gospel would defy words. It is richly glorious. What it brings to us in terms of hope alone is beyond description. Its potential in terms of imparting character, wisdom and understanding is limitless. And these only speak of glories related to this life. The gospel supplies truth to our minds that then stimulates an endless array of mental journeys we must take in order to begin to imagine the eternally rich glory of the gospel.

The verse ends with a statement of the great mystery which Paul’s ministry would enable the Church to publish to every tribe and nation. It is the message of the New Testament encapsulated in seven words—“Christ in you, the hope of glory.” It should be understood as this, “Christ, the hope of glory, residing within you.” It captures the magnificence of Christ, the wonder of grace, the end to which all events reported by the gospel work. It does so without removing the mystery of the faith.

Christ is the hope of glory. Paul is most likely expressing that He is the hope of all the heavenly hosts. He is the one whose character and nature guarantees all that defines heaven. He is the one who guarantees the subjection of Satan. He is the one whose work will restore creation. Very little is written for us in Scripture about how evil came to be or about all the characters involved in its evolution into its own kingdom. But it is evil and is a sordid threat to the well-being of humanity. Earth and humanity are small examples of the power of evil to bring ruin, a power understood fully among heaven’s beings. Jesus Christ is the hope of these heavenly hosts, the one who has made the eventual outcome of this colossal contest secure and certain. It can go no other way. The very Spirit of this one who was Himself Yahweh incarnate, is now joined to all who believe, living within them. They are by that act of His sealed as His (Eph 1:13), so that they are secure as well. The restoration of the full glory of God to creation, including humanity, is certain to be fulfilled. His presence now in them is His pledge to complete this that He has promised to do.

This is the great mystery that can help all people interpret personal events and world events. It is a statement that alludes to what was and what will be and states clearly what is. In the chaos of life as it has been warped by evil, this is our stability. Christ the hope of glory in us (Is 33:6), assures us of the outcome.

1:28—“And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.”

As Paul daily gave his body to doing his share to carry on the work of Christ (verse 24), these were the tasks he engaged himself in. His desire was to present every man complete or mature in Christ. Christ's suffering provided for Man's justification and the basis for his sanctification. Our sacrifice and work provides for people's progress toward maturity.

There is the proclamation of Him that must happen, of His identity as God and as sin-bearer, as coming king and judge. These are the recurring themes in the apostle's proclamation of Jesus Christ. People cannot believe in and grow in that which they have no familiarity with. There is then this work of proclamation or publicizing the news about Christ. The proclamation of Christ takes on a dual tone. It is good news of a cure that lifts burdens and brings joy and celebration. It is also a warning of eventual accountability to this One whose love is reaching out.

Proclamation involves two things—admonishing and teaching. In the grammar of this verse these two terms are participles that give definition to the idea of proclamation. So Paul wishes that the readers understand admonishment and teaching as two primary elements of proclamation.

Admonishment is the work of motivating people to make the decisions that will lead them to maturity. It is pushing them along to the highest ground they need to occupy. It is gentle yet confrontive. It focuses on what is true, not what one wishes was true or hopes is true or projects as true in themselves. Admonishment is encouragement, but not of the sort meant to simply make someone feel good about where they are or how far they have come. It is meant to compel them to take the next step, one that might be overdue. This work of admonishment, done in a loving, caring way is quite often the missing element in Christian fellowship. We are unable to occupy this middle ground, tending either to be vindictive and controlling, or soft and permissive. Either extreme can be uncaring. Admonishment begins with and is carried out with discernment. It perceives the realities of a person's life, their physical, emotion and spiritual stability and capacity to receive truth, and chooses the time, place, words, and tone that will bring about their progress in the faith. It means to place something in the mind of someone. That requires sensitivity and skill.

Then there is the work of teaching. Motivating people to action without instructing them in what they are to do will only frustrate and discourage them. There are always “how to's” in life skills, and there are the rational and logical reasons that underlie certain choices. Teaching focuses on bringing others to a point where they have learned the detail of what is true about spiritual matters. Its goal is action but action that is guided and shaped by precise understanding.

Admonishing and teaching were carried out by Paul “with all wisdom.” That is an important part of his thought here. The end he was aiming for was the maturity of the people of God. So his activity could not be mindless, clinical, or imprecise. There is no mass production process whereby raw material goes in one end of an assembly line and mature Christians accumulate at the end. It is certain that there are specific things that should happen by a certain time in one's experience with Christ. But that doesn't mean they will (Heb 5:12-16). So for any who lead this individualized work, wisdom is required. Now wisdom in the Scripture is always found where the Spirit of God is listened to. And so Paul's words imply his dependence on the leadings of the Holy Spirit and His continual shaping of the moment at hand. The next verse will fully clarify that the work done must be done in accordance with this Person who is the great choreographer of

all that God wishes to bring about in His creation. He allows us to do only what the Father is doing as Christ did (John 5:19).

The work Paul did was individualized and inclusive. It involved “every man” or every person. Paul felt a calling to enhance the spiritual welfare of everyone. His work was personal. He knew names and situations. He invested in individuals. I also knew the burden of the whole of the body of Christ. He sought to neglect neither.

1:29—“And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.”

Proclaiming and laboring were the two activities that occupied Paul’s time. Proclaiming involves our words. Laboring refers to the effort we exert in making our lives credible and relevant to those we wish to impact. It describes all we do to live the message and to model it to others. The goal of our efforts is to bring people to maturity in Christ.

This purpose of bringing people to maturity is the grand one that should capture us all. After speaking in the previous verse about being a part of the company of those who embrace this purpose, Paul now speaks of his personal commitment to it. This is a signal to the readers of some significance. Sometimes it is possible to be a part of something which is so big that our individual effort lags. The entire movement has a momentum that we do not contribute to. We can get away with doing little or nothing. We are “hangers-on.” We enjoy the company and being part of the success, but we make no real sacrifice to help move the load forward. This can be true of those at the entry level, but can also be true of us the higher up in the organization we move. The flesh can lead us to this thinking the more tenure we see ourselves as having and the more authority we have. Somehow we think we arrive at a point where we have “paid our dues.” It behooves the leaders of any organization to ask, “Am I working hard doing the things that this movement needs to do or am I resting on my laurels?”

The other trap that spiritual leaders can fall into very easily is to not work according to His power. They work hard, but it is all human, fleshly effort. The difference between hard work done in the flesh and hard work done in the Spirit lies in the motives that drive it and in those motives it appeals to. It is not that one is less effort than the other. But what drives the effort of the one is the glory of God, and the heart of God. It is done because there is a strong sense He wants it done. The effort expended is great. But the spirits of those who do it are at peace. There is a certain spirit of rest in the air though intense labor might be going on. Work that is done in the flesh is for the glory of some person or persons. It is done to meet some need they have. A craving drives them and so vexation and frustration are their companions. They have never done enough. It is never big enough or good enough. Such work appeals to the flesh in others and they are attracted to the effort. In time there is an assemblage of those who have deceived themselves completely, laboring hard, investing years in that which is not God’s heart at all. They experience little of His touch and so must invest even more of their own emotion. Eventually it all collapses under its own weight.

How much Church work and ministry falls into this latter category is hard to surmise. But each person who leads it must ponder what it really is that God wants done. Either way they will work hard and exhaust themselves. That is certain. The question is will they experience God working mightily with them or in them. Are their efforts complimenting His, or is He absent from the labor?