

COLOSSIANS – AN EXHORTATION FOR UNITY IN LOVE

Our daily Bible readings have brought us to consider the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, and so by way of exhortation today, we propose to look at some of the themes that occur in the early chapters.

DELIVERANCE

One of the main themes to consider, is that of Divine deliverance. So we read of the Father:

“... which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear son ...” (Col. 1:11-12).

There appears to be an allusion here, to Israel’s departure from Egypt under the cover of darkness. Leaving that spiritually dark nation behind, Israel were to journey to the inheritance of light, as promised by Yahweh to the fathers of old. 1 Corinthians 10 tells us that their experiences “were our examples” (1 Cor. 10:6, 11), and in the first chapter of Colossians, we have a case in point.

When Israel left Egypt, it was under the shadow of death. The final plague had taken place, and the firstborn sons of all Egypt were smitten unto death by the destroying angel. Therefore, it was through the death of the Firstborn that Israel were set free. But we have a contrast here with our Lord Jesus Christ. He was Yahweh’s Firstborn, and we are set free from sin by his death – and Resurrection:

“he is the head of the body, the ecclesia: who is the beginning, *the firstborn from the dead*; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence” (Col. 1:18, see also vs 15).

We are saved from spiritual Egypt (cp. Rev. 11:8), by not only the death, but also the resurrection of Yahweh’s Firstborn. In this way, we are “saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10), as the Apostle taught:

“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and become the firstfruits* of them that slept ...” (1 Cor. 15:30-31).

THE MANNA IN THE WILDERNESS

But although the people were delivered from Egypt, their troubles were not yet over, for in order to reach their promised inheritance they had to pass through “the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt” (Jer 2:6). It was not the purpose of their Redeemer to place them in their land immediately - they had to travel towards it in faith, and so learn to trust, and believe in Him. Even so, the life of a believer, as he journeys along the “narrow way” to the Kingdom is not always easy. He is not automatically “saved”, despite the claims of some, but has a journey to endure - maybe longer for some than others, according to the Wisdom of the Almighty. He travels through a spiritual wilderness, having to face many trials, for “many are the afflictions of the righteous” (Ps 24:19), to teach them faith and obedience.

In the case of the Mosaic “ecclesia in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38), it became necessary for provision to be made to meet their physical needs - nourishment in the desert, to provide for the temporal needs of the situation. But also, a continual blessing to give hope and assurance that their Redeemer would remain with them along the treacherous journey which lay ahead until they reached their promised haven. The provision of Manna fulfilled both requirements. The words of the Lord came to Moses: “Behold, I will rain bread *from heaven for you*, and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day ...” (Ex 16:4). And when the people had gathered their “certain rate”, they found it to be wholly sufficient for their needs - a token declaring the power of Israel’s God “... in the morning *ye shall be filled* with bread: and *ye shall know* that I am Yahweh your God” (Ex 16:12). So it was, that

Israel were taught of their God through the miraculous provisions he made for their welfare - originating "from heaven" for them.

And in the case of the ecclesia in the modern day "wilderness", a similar need of spiritual sustenance and nourishment remains, a need amply satisfied with the "bread of God" which "cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world" (Jno 6:33). This spiritual bread is the Lord Jesus himself, in whom all our hopes and expectations rest, and whose words sustain and strengthen the weary traveller: "I am that bread of life ... the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life (v 48,63). And in speaking of that Word of Life, particularly the hope it contains for those who partake of it, the Apostle taught the Colossians of: "the hope which is *laid up for you in heaven*, whereof ye heard before in the Word of the truth of the Gospel" (Col 1:5). So just as the "ecclesia in the wilderness" had physical nourishment which was said to be rained "from heaven for you", so the believers hope is said to be in heaven, (that is, in the Lord Jesus who is in heaven), yet it came to them after his ascension through the Word preached by his Apostles. And just as the manna "filled" the people, enabling them to "know" the power of their God, so it is, that upon partaking of the "word of the truth", we find it to be sufficient for all our needs. We become "*filled* with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding ... increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:9,10). There is then, a powerful exhortation for us in the example of Israel - just as they gathered in the Manna daily, that they might be "filled" and satisfied by it, so the believer ought to gather in daily the wisdom of the Word, that being so filled we might be strengthened further in our knowledge and appreciation of the Great Provider. Those who neglect this vital duty can only become spiritually weak and malnourished, and the probability of their reaching the Land of Promise will be no greater than a starving Israelite who couldn't make time to collect and eat the Manna.

MANNA WHICH WAS "LAID UP"

But the Spirit through Paul informed the Colossians that their hope was "laid up for you *in heaven*". This is most instructive, as there were two types of Manna which were said to be "laid up". We remember that although the Manna was to be collected daily, on the 6th day, double was to be collected. The people were thus commanded, "Tomorrow is the Rest of the Holy Sabbath unto Yahweh ... that which remaineth over, lay up for you to be kept until the morning. And they laid it up till the morning, as Moses bade; and it did not stink, neither was there any worm therein" (Ex 16:23-24). This Manna did not corrupt on the Sabbath. Thus, it speaks of incorruptibility on the 7th day, and points forward to the 7th millennial "day" of rest, when the saints shall "put on incorruption", that they might inherit the Kingdom of God. This is the glorious hope which we have "laid up" for us - the hope of eternal life in God's kingdom.

But we read also of another sort of manna which was "laid up". "Moses said unto Aaron, take a pot, and put an omer full of Manna therein, and lay it up before Yahweh, to be kept for your generations" (Ex 16:23). This Manna never corrupted, and was laid up before Yahweh, in the Ark, in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle. Thus, it speaks of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, after being raised incorruptible, has entered into the Most Holy, even Heaven itself, "now to appear in the presence of God for us (Heb 9:35). This is the hope we have which is "laid up ... *in Heaven*" - The Lord Jesus Christ who appears in the Divine Presence. As we read in Colossians 3:3-4: "For ye are dead, and your life is *hid with Christ in God*. When Christ shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory". Our "life", that is, the prospect of Eternal life, is hid with the Lord in Heaven. But when He returns, we shall be partakers of this hidden life, as it is written, "to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden Manna ..." (Rev 2:17).

"YE ARE COMPLETE IN HIM"

One of the central themes running through this Epistle, is the principle of unity, and how the multitude of believers should be united in Christ as a single conglomerate entity; "the body, the ecclesia" (1:18), with the Lord Jesus himself as the Head.

In this vein, the Apostle gave the warning: "beware, lest any man spoil you through philosophy, and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And *ye are complete in him ...*" (Col 2:8-10). Here, the

“rudiments” (or “principles” as the word is elsewhere rendered (Heb 5:12)) of the world” speak of the elementary principles of the Law upon which the then present order of things, or *kosmos*, was based. We read of these again in the Epistle to the Galatian ecclesia, speaking of Israelites under the Mosaic Schoolmaster: “even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons ... Now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” (Gal 4:3-9). The turning back to the precepts of the Law, was a return to bondage; a bondage from which the Lord Jesus had provided redemption. And this was the danger which Paul warned the Colossians against - the Judaisers were seeking to turn the believers away from Redemption in Christ, so bringing them into bondage to precepts which could only bring condemnation.

But in speaking of the “philosophy” of the Judaisers to the Colossians, the Apostle also speaks of their “vain deceit” and “the tradition of men” which, as we saw in our introductory study, indicates how that they were not simply seeking to bring the believers back under the things commanded by Moses; but also their own teachings which they had mingled with it. The Lord speaks of this, rebuking the Pharisees and Scribes for “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the command of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition ...” (Mark 7:8,9). The Pharisees effectively negated the precepts of the Law by their traditions which had become superimposed onto it. In rejecting the spiritual principles revealed to Moses, their righteousness stood in the keeping of their own traditions, hence the apostle’s condemnation of it as “empty deceit”. As he wrote to the Galatians; that which the Judaisers sought to bring Christ’s brethren into bondage to, were “weak and beggarly elements”. Not that any elements of the Law were “weak and beggarly”, for they perfectly achieved what the Divine Lawgiver intended. But that the elementary principles upon which the order of things established by the Pharisees and the like, had become “weak and beggarly”, weakened and impoverished, devoid of any spiritual value by the subtraction of the Lord’s Truth, and the addition of the philosophies of man.

And how much like today’s religious scene this is! Truly history has repeated itself in the decline of Christendom to the degenerate state of corruptness and spiritual whoredom (Rev 17:5) which it is in today. Like the Pharisees of old, the leaders of modern churches have “rejected the commandment of God” that they may keep their own traditions. And this to the extent that what is presented to the people is likewise void of spiritual nourishment; being simply the humanistic sophistries of human wisdom which lead the hearers back into the bondage of sin: “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse than the beginning” (2Pet 2:19:20). So it is, that the principles of Paul’s warning apply to our generation just as they do to the Colossians, a warning which too few hearken to.

“IF YE THEN BE RISEN WITH CHRIST”

Notice the contrast here with verse 20 of Chapter 2: “Wherefore, if ye be *dead with Christ* from the rudiments of the world (i.e. elementary principles of the *kosmos* that then was) why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances ...”. By becoming aligned with the death of Christ in Baptism, the Colossians had become free from the ordinances of the Mosaic Law - and the traditions which men had added to it. Yet through the Judaistic philosophising of the apostates, they were being seduced back to that which they had forsaken. They were turning back to unearth that which they had previously buried in the grave, and the Apostle exposed the vanity of such. So following the denunciation of the “philosophy and vain deceit” (2:8), of those who would lead the believers back to the ministration of death, Chapter 3 returns to the principles involved with baptism - and the responsibilities of being risen with Christ. The believer must not dwell so much upon what has been left behind - but more importantly, what lies ahead, and the obligations which go with newness of life in Christ.

“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (3:1).

Lifting up their heads to gaze upon the things of eternity, those who are resurrected from their baptismal death, must fix their attention upon the Divine Presence - and the One who appears there “for us” (Heb 9:24).

Rather than to manifest the grovelling spirit of the natural man which, as that of the beasts of the field declines to earthly things, the spirit of the renewed man “goeth upward” (Eccl 3:21), focussing upon the place of favour and blessing - the Father's right hand, where our Lord is positioned. And in this, we have the example of our Lord before us, who always kept the things pertaining to His Father's Kingdom and Righteousness to the forefront of his mind, always seeking the will of His Father dwelling in the Heaven above:

“I have set Yahweh always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved ... My flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; *at thy right hand* there are pleasures for evermore”. (Ps 16:8-11).

In these words, the Spirit of Christ speaks prophetically of the meditations of our Lord Jesus, faced with the agony of Crucifixion. Elsewhere it is testified that he, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). And this Psalm enlightens us as to what that “joy” was which was set before the Lord. “I have set Yahweh always before me”, and positioned at His Right hand, the future seat of power upon which he would set, the Lord saw joy and pleasures: “in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore”. So it was, that by continual meditation and reflection upon such a joyous vision of Glory - even His Father's Glory, our Lord was strengthened to overcome, enduring the shame of crucifixion that he might ultimately obtain that place of joy himself.

And even so it is with us. For the death of Christ was not the death of one individual - but that of all who are aligned with it in Baptism: “if one died for all, then were all dead” (2Cor 5:14). In our baptisms, we died with Christ. But for us, as with our Lord, crucifying the flesh is not a single event at the time of our immersion; it is a daily struggle as we seek to “die daily” (1Cor 15:31). Thus the exhortation was given to the Colossians, that in seeking heavenly things - the “pleasures” at the Father's right hand - they must crucify earthly things:

“Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and covetousness which is idolatry” (Col 3:5).

As we died in Christ therefore, we must put to death earthly things, and do as he did, focus instead on the Joyous Vision of the Divine Presence, and all that it speaks of. For if we are dead with him, then are we also risen with him (Rom 6:5), and our life is bound up in him: “for ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God”. There is no earthly thing which appears in the presence of the Father - only things of the Spirit. And as our lives are “with Christ in God”, who is the fountain-head of all life, then we ought to have no earthly thing dwelling in us. Only things of the Spirit - and how hard that is to maintain! Yet we have hope in the example of our Messiah and Lord. As Paul wrote:

“O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:24-25).

We must endeavour to let the Mind of Christ dwell in us (Phil. 2:5), that being complete in him, we shall find life and forgiveness, and be found part of a Body that is in unity in love.

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