

COLOSSIANS: Power to Endure with Joy

by Ray C. Stedman

Most of the letters that Paul wrote to the churches were written to those that he had started himself. But he did not begin the church at Rome, nor did he begin the church at Colossae. It is not certain who started the church at Colossae, but it is very likely a man mentioned in certain of Paul's other letters -- Epaphroditus, or, since that was too long a name for even the Greeks to say, Epaphras. He is mentioned in this letter as being from Colossae, and is very likely the one who founded the church. Where he had heard the Gospel we do not know, but he had evidently taken it to his own home town and had begun to proclaim Christ. Out of that proclamation had come the church at Colossae.

Epaphroditus had gone to Rome to see the Apostle Paul, who was then a prisoner, carrying with him reports of the church at Colossae. Another man had also gone to Rome to see Paul during his first imprisonment, and he too brought reports of the church at Colossae. So it was to these new Christians who had never met the apostle face to face that Paul wrote the letter from Rome.

It was written at about the same time as the letter to the Philippians, and you will notice that it is very similar in its structure and content to the letter to the Ephesians. They were probably written at about the same time, during Paul's first imprisonment, and are therefore called the Prison Epistles of the Apostle Paul. The primary difference between the Ephesians and Colossians is that the Colossians had a problem, and it is on this problem that the apostle is primarily focusing. They were on the verge of losing their understanding of the power by which Christian life is lived. Therefore, this letter is the great proclamation and explanation of the power of the Christian's life through Christ as the resource of the individual.

The theme of this letter can be expressed by these words which are part of the apostle's introductory prayer for the Colossian Christians:

May you be strengthened with all power [that is why he wrote the letter], **according to his glorious might** [that is the subject of the letter to the Colossians]. {Col 1:11a RSV}

Since Paul had never been to Colossae, he begins the letter with certain references to himself as an apostle and with greetings to these people, with thanksgiving for the faith that he has heard is prevalent among them, and for their love and joy and for other evidence that these people have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and have been radically transformed.

That is always the mark that the apostles looked for. Whenever they heard of other Christians they expected to hear that something had happened to them, that they had become a different kind of people, that they weren't going on, as many Christians attempt to do today, utterly unchanged in their attitudes or their outlooks. But to the first-century Christians, becoming a Christian meant a radical transformation, resulting from a revolutionary change of government. This was evident in these Colossian Christians. Now the apostle writes to them and thanks God for what he has heard about them. He comments upon their faith and then prays for them. This prayer is one of the most refreshing and delightful prayers in the New Testament (1:9-12):

From the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the

knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the lord, fully pleasing to him, hearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. {Col 1:9-12 RSV}

Beginning on that note then, he sets forth for them the source of all power in the Christian life -- Jesus Christ himself.

One of the strongest and most glorious proclamations concerning his essential deity is found in this passage (1:15):

He is the image of the invisible God, {Col 1:15a RSV}

An image is an exact expression. He is declaring here that in the man Jesus we have the exact expression of all that God is. And furthermore, he is,

the first-born of all creation; (Col 1:15b RSV)

Perhaps you have had the experience of finding a couple on your doorstep with little green books under their arms, announcing themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses and asking if they may come in and tell you the truth about life and the Bible. If you let them in, sooner or later they turn to this passage to show you that Jesus Christ was not God, but he was essentially a creature -- the highest of the creatures of creation -- and they use this term the first-born of all creation to bolster their argument. They say that this means that Jesus was the first one ever created. (There is, of course, a sense in which this word first-born does have that meaning. In referring to our children, we say that the oldest one is the first-born because he or she appeared first on the scene.) That is one of the slick devices by which the cults propagate their errors. It is very subtle because it seems to be logical and scriptural.

But what they are doing is giving the term a modern meaning, which is quite different from the usage in the New Testament. Here, the word "first-born" means the heir, or the chief -- the principal one, the owner. This phrase, "the first-born of all creation," means that the Lord Jesus stands in relationship to creation just as an heir stands in relationship to his father's property. He is not part of it, but rather, he is the owner of it, the heir.

This term is used in various ways in the Old Testament. There are two specific instances where the one who is born second is the first-born of the family. In the case of Isaac and Ishmael, Ishmael was born first, but Jacob was the first-born. So you see, Jesus was not the first one of a line of creation, but the heir of all creation -- the owner of it. And this fits with what the apostle goes on to say (1:16):

In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. {Col 1:16 RSV}

If you look carefully at the Jehovah's Witnesses' little green translation of the Scriptures, you will notice that in order to substantiate their lie about Jesus Christ, they've inserted the word "other" in these phrases. "All other things were created by him. In him all other things were created." But there is absolutely no warrant whatsoever in the Greek text for the insertion of the word "other." This is a clear instance of the kind of deceitfulness to which these people will stoop in order to propagate their lies.

Now here is Paul's great declaration. Here is the Lord Jesus. He is declaring him to be the creator. The One who flung all the worlds into being, who was present with God (and who was God) when the great words

went out, "Let there be light; let the earth bring forth," and all the other great declarations of creation that are recorded in Genesis. It was the Lord who did this, and, furthermore, as Paul goes on to say (1:17):

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. {Col 1:17}

Now it is one of the puzzles of science why things hold together. We know that everything we can touch is made up of tiny atoms that consist of electrons buzzing around a nucleus. And anything that rotates or revolves has a force that projects outward -- centrifugal force. Therefore, things ought to be blowing up. Because of this centrifugal force, every atom ought to be flying apart. Well, what holds it together? Science cannot answer. Scientists say it is an unnamed force. That always interests me, because it reminds me of Paul's experience in Athens when he found the people worshipping an unknown god. It is the unknown God that science is struggling with today: his name is Jesus of Nazareth. By him are all things held together, and all power in the natural world comes from him.

But further, the apostle says (1:18):

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead. {Col 1:18 RSV}

Twice he uses this term, the first-born. He is the first-born of the old creation; he is the first-born of the new creation -- the resurrection -- the first-born from the dead. Now that does not mean that he was the first one ever to be raised from the dead, because scripture records others who preceded him. But he is the One who is the heir, the Lord of all the new creation. He is the head of the new creation, as the apostle tells us, and we are part of a new body, the new race of men that God is forming through the centuries, and of that body, Jesus Christ is the head. From him, then, flows all power -- resurrection power.

It is my increasing conviction that the problem with most Christians is that they do not understand what the Bible teaches about resurrection power. If they had any idea what this power is like and how it operates, and the areas and situations in which it is intended to operate, they would never again live as they live now. They would be entirely different. I do not mean that they would be dazzling people, making great displays of power and moving mountains. It does not take resurrection power to do that.

Resurrection power is quiet. It is the kind of power that was evident in the Lord Jesus. It was not the fact that he came from the tomb that dazzled the eyes of the soldiers there, nor that produced the earthquake. He came from the tomb absolutely without a sound. The stone was rolled away, not to let him out, but to let people in, so they could see that the tomb was empty. There was no sound, no demonstration. There was the quiet, inexorable power of a risen life which no mechanical or natural power can possibly resist. This is what God has released to us. A (quiet power that changes hearts and lives and attitudes, making everything over from within. That is resurrection power. It flows to us from the head of the new creation, the risen Christ, the source of all power.

Now Paul goes on to show who are the intended recipients of this power (1:21-22):

You -- who were estranged and hostile in minds, doing evil deeds... {Col 1:21 RSV}

That includes us all, doesn't it? We all belong in this category. And we are the ones through whom this power is now to operate.

... he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, {Col 1:22 RSV}

Then Paul gives us the demonstration in his own life of this power. He says that God called him and set him up in the ministry to proclaim a mystery, and he tells us again what it is (1:25-27);

... to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations ... {Col 1:25b-26a RSV}

You will not find it explained in the Old Testament. It was experienced there, but it was never explained.

... but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, {Col 1:26b-27a}

What is it?

Christ in you, the hope of glory. {Col 1:27b RSV}

Christ living in you. This is the supreme declaration of the Christian church. You have never preached the Gospel until you have told men that not only will their sins be forgiven when they come to Christ, but that he, himself, will live within them -- to do through them everything they are expected to do. He died for us, so that he might live in us. This is the full glory of the Christian Gospel.

Now notice how Paul experienced this. He says (1:28-29):

Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy... {Col 1:28-29a RSV}

Where does the energy come from? This amazing apostle, with his indefatigable journeying night and day, through shipwreck and hardship of every kind, working with his hands, laboring, traveling up and down the length and breadth of the entire Roman empire, is ceaseless in his endeavors. Where does he get the energy? Would you like to know? He says (1:28-29):

... striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires with me. {Col 1:29b RSV}

Christ in you! The hope of glory. Now that is why I say if Christians would begin to understand what it is that God has made available to them, they would never be the same again. We would never have to plead with people in the church to take on needed enterprises, ministries, or teaching Sunday School. We would not be met with the excuse, "Oh, I just don't have the strength to do it. I don't have the energy." You see, here is a source of energy, Paul says, that is constant and consistent and which flows through him, created by the Spirit of God indwelling him. As he saw the task, he moved to meet it with energy which God gave. That is resurrection power.

Now, in chapter two, we have the warning against certain false powers which would woo us away from the true power Christ has given us. These warnings are as valid and relevant today as they were when Paul wrote them. Certain things among men are always regarded as sources of power. If you can obtain these, you can be a powerful individual; your personality will be strong and radiant. You will be a dynamic leader of men. You have seen advertisements in which this kind of language appears; "For just ten dollars you'll get a course that will transform you within fifteen days into a dynamic leader. You'll never be the same again."

There are many more subtle approaches offering us power, but they all come largely through the three avenues outlined here by Paul. First of all, though, he reminds us of the glory of Jesus Christ (2:3):

In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. {Col 2:3 RSV}

We have all that it takes to live life in him, and in verse six he says,

As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, {Col 2:6 RSV}

You have got what it takes, now live it out, let it show.

... rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. {Col 2:6b RSV}

Have you ever read that verse before? Abounding in grumbling is the way it sounds to us, sometimes, doesn't it? But Paul says, abounding in thanksgiving. Now what robs us of that? Well first, the idea that power comes from human knowledge. Verse 8:

See to it [says the apostle] that no one makes a prey of you [literally, kidnaps you] by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. {Col 2:8 RSV}

I do not know how many instances of this kind of kidnapping I have seen, or how many failures of faith on the part of young people going to college to study. Young people who have been raised in Christian homes, but who have been exposed to the wily, subtle teachings of human wisdom, have lost their faith and turned away from the things of Christ, often going off into wild and riotous living. Why? Because no one warned them, or else they did not heed the warning to avoid being made a prey of human knowledge. Now this sounds, at first, as though the Gospel is anti-intellectual. But the Bible is not against knowledge. It is against knowledge that does not come under the judgment of the Word of God.

The apostle analyzes what is wrong with human knowledge. There are many things that are right. There is much truth in what man has discovered through the centuries. This we must readily admit. But Paul points out first that the source is suspect, because it comes from tradition. Tradition is the gradually accumulated body of knowledge built up bit by bit through the centuries and passed along from one generation to another. Consequently, human knowledge is made up of great quantities of truth mingled with error, with no way of distinguishing between the two. Those who accept it uncritically are bound to accept as much error as they do truth. It will lead them, therefore, into mistaken concepts and erroneous and injurious ideas.

In the second place, he says, human knowledge is according to the elemental spirits of the universe. What does that mean? Paul is referring here to the dark powers that, as he brings out in other letters, govern the minds of men, darken their intellects and limit their understanding. Human knowledge, then, is essentially rudimentary. That is, it is elementary. It stays on the periphery of truth, never getting to the real heart of things. That is why you can have a university community, saturated with the highest exponents of human knowledge, and yet filled with vileness, corruption, unrest, distress, with a high suicide rate and evidences of decay and deterioration on every side. Human knowledge does not go to the heart of things as the Word of God does. The two compliment each other, but there must be a critical evaluation of the words, as they are subjected to the wisdom of God.

The final objection Paul makes is that it is not according to Christ. Therefore, human wisdom lacks the ability to insert the great positives into life. It is essentially negative. It does not produce the qualities of love, truth, joy, peace and power that come only from Jesus Christ.

He shows us, then, that the answer to the lure of human wisdom is the judgment of the cross. The cross has

delivered us and cuts us off from trust and admiration for human wisdom as such. We are brought to the place where we can judge these things and see their moral values properly in the light of the Word of God.

Paul goes on to indicate another false source of power, which also leads many people astray (verses 16-17):

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only an shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. {Col 2:16-17 RSV}

In that same vein he continues in verse 20:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch [referring to things which all perish as they are used], according to human precepts and doctrines? {Col 2:20-22 RSV}

What false source is this? It is the power that supposedly comes from a dedicated zeal for God. It manifests itself in the keeping of days and special feasts and regulations and ascetical practices -- flogging the body, wearing a hair shirt, laboring long hours out of zeal for the cause. All these things look like sources of power. Sometimes we cannot help but admire the zealotry of individuals who get themselves all wrapped up in a cause. But, says the apostle, they are tricking themselves. They do not discover real power (verse 23):

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, {Col 2:23a RSV}

There is a kind of false humility that is produced by this kind of behavior. It extracts a grudging admiration from us, but look what the apostle says:

... they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. {Col 2:23b RSV}

You see, you can wear a hair shirt and be filled with lust. You can beat your body black and blue and still be guilty all the time of thinking lascivious thoughts. These things provide no check to the indulgence of the flesh. Therefore, there is no power here to lead the kind of life that we must live.

Now he mentions a third source of false power (verse 18):

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind. {Col 2:18 RSV}

What does he mean here? We are hearing a lot about this these days. If you get in touch with the invisible spirits, you will have power. If you contact the dead, and get messages from them, you will have an unseen source of power which will enable you to live as other people cannot live. These Colossians were troubled with these influences as we are troubled with them today. We are seeing a great increase on every hand of this turning to the occult -- to astrology, to the black and devious arts, to magic, to seances. All of this is a satanic substitute for the power of Jesus Christ -- the indwelling power of Christ.

Now, in chapter three, the apostle turns to the true manifestation of power and how to lay hold of the power of Christ (verses 1-2):

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth. {Col 2:1-2 RSV}

That does not mean that we should go around constantly thinking about heaven. There is nothing super-pious about this. He is simply saying, "Don't let your desires and your attitudes be governed or directed by desires for earthly fame or power. Instead, let your desires be shaped by the word of God." We are to have a desire to exhibit love, truth, faith, and patience -- the qualities that mark the life of the risen Lord. That is what he's talking about. We are not to go around thinking about heaven all the time. We are to go around manifesting heaven in the situations in which we find ourselves.

Paul gives us the recipe for doing this:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; {Col 3:5a RSV}

God has already sentenced it to death on the cross. When it manifests itself in you, treat it like that -- as under the sentence of death from God. He goes on to list these earthly things:

... immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, {Col 3:5b RSV}

And then he moves over into our area:

... now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foolish talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, (3:8-9a RSV)

Put these away. That is step number one. Step two is in verse 12:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together. {Col 3:12-14a RSV}

What does he mean by this? That we try to imitate Christ in this respect? Oh no. You see, he has already told us that Christ dwells in us. Having him there, he says, now deliberately let these things be manifest in you. Deliberately set yourself to manifest these characteristics of his life. Count on his life in you to make them real and not phoney -- genuine, authentic manifestations of his life. The apostle lists certain areas in which these are to be made manifest:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, ... {Col 3:18a RSV}
Husbands, love your wives, ... {Col 3:19a RSV}
Children, obey your parents ... {Col 3:20 a RSV}
Fathers, do not provoke your children... {Col 3:21a RSV}
Slaves, obey ... your earthly masters, ... {Col 3:22a RSV}
Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, ... {Col 4:1a RSV}

And he concludes with these practical admonitions:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; and pray for us also, ... {Col 4:2-3a RSV}

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, ... {Col 4:5a RSV}

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, ... {Col 4:6a RSV}

In the last section of the letter there are simply some personal greetings from men who are with Paul. These men, too, are demonstrations of the power of an indwelling Christ at work. He concludes the letter, as was his custom, by taking the pen in his own hand and writing:

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my fetters. Grace be with you. {Col 4:18 RSV}

Now I want to return once more to that verse in the first chapter which is the key to this letter:

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, ... {Col 1:11a RSV}

That is tremendous, isn't it? You want that, don't you? Christ's power, Christ's life, manifested in you. What do you want it for? So you can dazzle everybody? So you can go around performing miracles, doing startling things that will get your name in the paper? Is that why? Read what Paul wants you to have it for:

... for all endurance and patience with joy, {Col 1:11b RSV}

Underline those words. That is where resurrection power is made manifest. The world cannot produce that kind of living. It does not know how to take trials with a smile, to endure hardships with faith and patience and joy. As far as the world is concerned, this takes an unknown kind of power the power that is resident only in Jesus Christ. This power will transform our hardships and our difficulties into joyful experiences, not just phony manifestations of joy. They are genuine. We learn things from these trials. If our heart is right with Christ, if we are putting off the old and putting on the new we discover that these experiences, instead of producing grumbling, griping, and complaining provide a basis for joy, as we are "strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might."

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this first-century book that speaks to our twentieth century lives, and shows us that not one thing has changed. Not one thing in our world is different from the world these early Christians faced. Not one thing is different about our relationship to Jesus Christ. We, too, can live as they lived, in joy, gladness and thanksgiving in the midst of this life. We pray that we may discover this truth by acting upon these admonitions which Paul has given us. We pray in Jesus' name Amen.

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