

**A New Creation
Focus
Through Colossians**

A new creation focus through Colossians

God Bless Faithful Brethren

No congregation can exist for very long or accomplish anything of much value without a core of faithful brethren and sisters in Christ. Furthermore, the kingdom of Christ cannot advance in the world without the establishment and strengthening of local congregations. Hence it is that Jesus and His scriptures always encourage the movement of the new Christian from worldly values and commitments to the faithfulness of brethren who are totally committed to Christ and to the work of the local church. Without that successful transition, the great and lofty plan of the Savior of the world will fail. We welcome, then, the opportunity to examine these precepts through the letter of Paul to the church in Colossae.

- **Greeting** - Paul is writing this letter, and includes Timothy in his opening greeting, Timothy, as the apostle noted in his epistle to the Philippian brethren, was of "kindred spirit" with him, and Paul added him in his salutation when the younger man was accompanying his mentor in Christ. "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God," says he to the congregation, "and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father" (Colossians 1:1, 2). The Holy Spirit, speaking through Paul on this occasion, always reinforces the positive image of the Christians, emphasizing that they are saints and not sinners.
- **Paul's apostleship** - When Paul (initially listed as Saul by the beloved physician Luke in the book of Acts), with Barnabas, was sent out on the first missionary journey from Antioch of Syria, he (along with Barnabas) was an apostle of the church at Antioch. Later (as Luke noted in changing the listing of his name from Saul to Paul), Paul was designated as an apostle of Jesus Christ, sent out by Christ's direct authority. Often, then, in opening comments in his epistles, he will use this appellation to communicate to the brethren he is addressing his authority in dealing with internal matters and doctrinal issues arising in these congregations. No exception here, as he writes, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God."
- **Faithful brethren** - It is often said that for every front line soldier in war, there are seven support personnel. There is a somewhat parallel situation in the spread of the gospel; it takes many support personnel behind the front line men like Paul. The point is; there is a tremendous amount of work to be done at every level within the functioning of the congregations, and it takes people who can be counted on to get it done. One of the really frustrating and challenging issues for employers, for example, is having members of their crew not showing up for work. All of a sudden, the team is short-staffed, and the reliable members are burdened with extra work and extra hassle because of the dereliction of the "no-shows." The same is true in the functioning of the local congregation; if the members are unreliable, there is simply a lot of important work that goes undone. The leadership has a more difficult time in planning things for the edification of the body when many do not attend the functions and classes, and it is much more challenging to build the momentum of the congregation in aggressively taking the spiritual battle into the teeth of the forces of darkness.
- **Grace and peace** - The prayers and greetings of the authors of the New Testament writings often center around "grace and peace." The saints need the grace of God in assisting them in overcoming sin and weakness in their lives, but they also require the power stemming from the riches of God's grace to supply their physical and spiritual needs in fighting the good fight of faith. They need the inner peace that comes from reconciliation with the Father in order to focus on each individual step in their walk of faith.

It is exciting to think of the faithful brethren in Colossae. They were actively building the local congregation and prepared to work hard in spreading the gospel and supporting the truth-telling preachers and teachers of their day. Those same needs exist today. God bless the faithful brethren!

A new creation focus through Colossians

Thanksgiving and Petition

The apostle Paul was a man of prayer. Jesus Himself, of course, was the prime example of one who prayed on a continual basis, and Paul followed his Lord's example. Early on, even, in the church's history, the apostles were known to be praying men. When the widows in the early church in Jerusalem needed assistance in being provided with daily bread, the apostles involved the congregation in appointing seven men to meet these needs. "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables," they said. "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2,4). The word of God, in the first century, moved forward as it was bolstered by the prayers of the apostles and those faithful saints.

- **Thanks for the brethren** - As one who had labored diligently in the Lord's vineyard, Paul knew the value of one precious soul. He therefore was willing to pray diligently over the brethren in the congregations, including Colossae. "We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," he informs them, "praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints" (Colossians 1:3,4). The apostle had an information network set up throughout the areas in which he labored so that he could keep informed of the progress or problems of the saints. He had, therefore, "heard of" the faith and love of the disciples of Christ in Colossae. That did not mean that he had never been to Colossae, because Paul's letter to Philemon indicates otherwise; it simply meant that he was staying updated on the new Christians coming into the congregation and the increase of gospel in that region. The apostle was able therefore to lift up his prayers in thanksgiving for them.
- **Faith** - These prayers were addressed to the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is interesting that the apostle would use that terminology, but it gives more information concerning the somewhat complex interrelationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The first on Paul's list was that he had heard of the "faith in Christ Jesus" among the brethren. Sometimes where the original language would indicate the "faith of Christ," modern translations usually render it "faith in Christ." The "faith of Christ" refers to the general system of thought connected with the new covenant, whereas "faith in Christ" is referencing the individual's own personal faith, as it is in this quotation from Colossians. The apostle is gratified to hear that the brethren each had his own trust in the Savior as revealed by the word of God and their willing obedience to King Jesus.
- **Love** - God set the stage for defining love when He sent Jesus into the world, as the Lord Himself stated, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God's type of love is centered about getting people to heaven as the first priority, with other elements of joy and happiness second. This type of love in the lives of the Colossian brethren would enable them to overlook the difficulties arising from personal interaction and the occasional failures and foibles that accompany the growth of the children of God.
- **Hope** - After speaking of faith and love, the apostle Paul adds a comment on hope: "because," says he, "of the hope laid up for you in heaven" (Colossians 1:5). Biblical hope focuses on the resurrection of the dead at Jesus' second coming. When the saint recognizes the grand and eternal import of that event as it applies to him personally, all other hopes are totally secondary.

The existence of the congregation in Colossae was a result of Paul's labors - partly his own, and partly as a result of those whom he had by God's grace influenced. He was rightly thankful to God for their progress, and willingly petitioned the Almighty for continued growth of their faith, love, and hope as they followed Christ.

The Word of Truth

One of the fundamental and pernicious evils of this present age is the stated axiom, "There is no truth." Because most people would recognize the inaccuracy of the blatant statement - one instantly detected corollary would be that there are no lies, which people would know that to be false for the simple reason that they don't like people lying to them - the precept has to be propounded more delicately as "All things are relative." In other words, each individual may have what he perceives to be truth, but another person may perceive a different truth. Hence it is that Christianity is somehow supposed to "coexist" with Islam, Hinduism, and whatever other alien philosophy is the latest craze. The Bible, however, operates off the sound premises that there is truth and there are lies, that there is righteousness and there is lawlessness, that there is light and there is darkness. Satan, the penultimate liar, naturally has to attack these premises in order to impose his rebellious philosophy upon the world.

- **The gospel** - The apostle Paul was grateful to learn of the faith that the saints in Colossae possessed, of the love that they had for the brethren and thus their ability to work together, and "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you" (Colossians 1:5-6). The gospel of Christ, as the thinking individual would expect, is perfectly designed. It can take a totally lost Gentile, trapped in an unbelieving pagan or atheistic belief system, and bring him to faith in Christ. It can define what love is, communicate the love that God has for the individual, and turn around and produce that same love in him. As it describes the earthly sojourn of the Son of God, it paints a picture of One who experienced death but also who was resurrected and ascended to glory; and through an individual's participation in the gospel in immersion and faithful living, it gives him the assurance of his own positive resurrection on the last day. What a message - the evangel, the good news!
- **Truth** - The Holy Spirit, speaking through Paul, calls the gospel "the word of truth." All other systems, whether it is the mythology of evolution parading as science, the supposed enlightenment of Buddhism, the worship of Mary as co-regent and co-redeemer, or a myriad of other substitutes, are packs of lies. God, however, through the Bible as a whole and the gospel in particular, appeals to man to approach the subject of the Christ reasonably. "Come now, and let us reason together," is His call as stated by the prophet Isaiah, "though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool" (Isaiah 1:18). Through a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning, it is possible to establish that the Bible is indeed the word of truth, that the 66 books of the Bible that are in the canon are the correct ones, and that Jesus is who the Bible says He is. "For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world," Peter commented, "but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (I Peter 1:20,21). The result is that the person who obeyed the gospel of Christ knows "that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (I Peter 1:18,19).

Those of us to whom the word of truth has come, those of us upon whom the ends of the ages have come, are certainly the most blessed of all that have ever lived! May we rejoice in that, and may we excited spread that good news wherever we go, for the glory of Christ!!

Bearing Fruit

The Bible reveals a carefully nurtured and orchestrated plan to reach all of mankind. The first consistent traction in God's interaction with the human race began with Abraham, through whom the nation of Israel would be descended, and through whom would come Jesus the Christ. One of the most interesting points concerning Abraham is the promise that was given to him, and, by believing in this promise, the patriarch was justified before God: "A father of many nations [Gentiles] have I made you" (Romans 4:17). The "father of the faithful" had faith that God would execute this promise through Isaac and hence was willing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, believing that God would raise him from the dead in order to make good his offer to Abraham. Eventually, after all the appropriate groundwork had been laid, the Father sent Jesus to the earth as the Savior - not only of the descendants of Israel, but of all the peoples of the world. By the time that the apostle Paul writes to the Colossian brethren, the gospel was already reaching to the uttermost parts of the earth.

- **The gospel has come** - The gospel (the evangel, the "good news") is not limited to the mere "death, burial, and resurrection" of Jesus Christ. The gospel of the Christ, from the time it was first preached as recorded in Acts chapter two, includes the accounts of His appearances over a period of 40 days on earth leading up to the day He was lifted off earth, and includes His ascension into heaven and all the great events connected with His accession to the throne. The gospel is even more than just the facts about Jesus to be believed; the gospel must be obeyed as well, including immersion into Christ. The apostle Paul is grateful for the distribution of the message, as he describes it, "the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you" (Colossians 1:6).
- **All the world** - God plans, God executes, and He executes on time! His plan - which He ordained before the foundation of the world, and which began to gain traction through Abraham - entered its final stage ("the last days") in connection with Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. The gospel was first preached in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and then began to go the "remotest part of the earth." The word of truth, then, had come to Colossae probably about the time of Paul's second missionary journey. After commenting on the coming of the gospel to Colossae, the apostle adds, "just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing." Here the Holy Spirit defines "bearing fruit"; it has to do with the gospel being taught and souls being saved. How exciting it was at that point in the history of God's making! In the midst of great persecution and opposition from the Jews, the gospel was constantly spreading.
- **Working in you** - The word of truth not only is the agent in saving souls, but it also continues to work in changing the saint into the character of Christ. Paul, in writing to the Thessalonian brethren, stated that the gospel "is the word of God, which performs its work in you who believe" (I Thessalonians 2:13). Likewise the word of truth was working in the Colossian Christians, as Paul notes in commenting on the increase in all the world, "even as it has in you since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth."

The gospel of Christ is truly amazing. Furthermore, the more a person can ponder over its plan, its growth, and its effects, the more clearly amazing it is. The word of truth, in spite of massive opposition from the forces of darkness, continues to reach into a pagan or confused denominational world, and draw truth seekers into its marvelous light. Moreover, after pulling them out of the muck, the gospel begins to transform its believers into the likeness of the character of Christ, and produce of the love of God in them. How great and how awesome is our God!

Learning The Gospel

The gospel must be learned, and therefore the gospel must be taught. Or, the gospel must be taught, and therefore the gospel must be learned. Unfortunately, the obvious has to be stated occasionally because the confusion factors emanating from the one who is the source of all lies and from denominationalism really obfuscate the truth. The relationship between immersion in Jesus' name and forgiveness of sins is obvious as stated in Acts 2:38, but confusion reigns in the hearts of those trapped in the errors of their denominations. Similarly, the underlying foundation of nearly all Protestant belief systems is that "unregenerate man" cannot understand the Bible, and the Holy Spirit has to "quicken" him - cause him to be "born again" - before he can make any sense out of the Bible. It is clear that this position means that man cannot be taught the gospel in order to obey it. This, of course, contravenes all scripture, beginning with the commission of Jesus as recorded in Matthew's gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Matthew 28:19). The basic core is that followers of Christ and fishers of men must go out and set up Bible studies with lost people, and then teach them also to be followers of Christ. The gospel must be taught, and therefore the gospel must be learned.

- **Understanding** - The apostle Paul is commenting about the brethren in Colossae and their interaction with the gospel, "since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth" (Colossians 1:6). The system of thought called "the faith of Christ" is often also termed "the grace of God" as contrasted to the system of thought called "the law of Moses." The apostle John thus affirmed, "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The apostle Paul is laying down an important concept that he will refer back to later in this letter, that the brethren understood the grace of God in full truth.
- **Learning** - The apostle and the Holy Spirit are willing to give the credit for the basic teaching that laid the foundation for the church at Colossae to a preacher named Epaphras. Epaphras was known to Paul and clearly associated with the apostle, and Paul knew the type of teaching Epaphras had done in Colossae. Speaking of how the gospel came to the brethren, Paul comments, "just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved and fellow bond-servant who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf" (Colossians 1:7). Epaphras taught the gospel, made disciples out of those who were willing in Colossae, and then taught them the system of thought called here "the grace of God." The faithful brethren in Colossae learned. Simple.
- **Love** - Ultimately, all teaching and preaching is going to focus on the love of God, and how that love is produced in the hearts of those who are to be imitators of God. The sacrifice which Christ made on behalf of the lost world was a huge demonstration of God's love for each person. "We know love by this," asseverates the apostle John. "that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Understanding the love of Christ generates the love of the brethren and the love of the lost in the hearts of saints. Epaphras, Paul's "beloved" fellow bond-servant, not only taught the brethren, but "he also informed us of your love in the Spirit" (Colossians 1:8).

The brethren in Colossae had been taught well, and had been willing to learn what was taught. It must have been very exciting for Epaphras to bring Paul the report of the faith of the Colossians, their understanding of the grace of God, and their love in the Spirit! May others be able to report these same things about our existing congregations in the twenty-first century.

Knowledge of God's Will

The remnant that had been left on the land by the Babylonians near the ravaged city of Jerusalem came to Jeremiah the prophet with a question: "What shall we do; shall we go down to Egypt?" Jeremiah inquired of the Lord and ten days later received the answer: "Stay in the land of promise, and do not go down to Egypt." But the Lord went on to say through Jeremiah, "So, I have told you today, but you have not obeyed the Lord your God, even in whatever He has sent me to tell you" (Jeremiah 42:21). They had said, "We will listen to the voice of the Lord our God," but they were only willing to listen if He told them what they already wanted to hear. The result was the sword, the famine, and the pestilence destroyed them when they went to Egypt.

Time and time again, the people of the Old Testament would not listen. So, under the terms of the new covenant, God has produced a special people - born of water and Spirit - who will listen.

- **Value of a soul** - The apostle Paul knew that just because a person was immersed into Christ, that did not guarantee that he would make it to heaven. Immersion is primarily a beginning, not an end; hence, if someone were to fall away from the faith, it would be better for them not to have known the truth. The apostle, therefore, understanding the eternal value of a soul, wrote: "For this reason, since the day we have heard [of the Colossians love in the Spirit], have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). That prayer arose from a desire on his part that the brethren would remain faithful and fruitful to the end.
- **Knowledge of His will** - The remnant left in the land in Jeremiah's day found out what God's will was, but refused to do it. The brethren in Colossae, hopefully, would "be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." The implication of "spiritual wisdom and understanding" is that they would be able to spiritually assess their surroundings and situations, and make sound spiritually-focused decisions based upon the principles that the Lord had laid out for them in the terms of the new covenant or new will. After a person obeys the gospel, God does not tell him specifically what to do. He expects that those who are truly "born again" will have the maturity to gather information from the scripture and facts from their surroundings to then, as sons rather than slaves, make decisions. That is why they would need "spiritual wisdom and understanding." He continues, "so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects" (Colossians 1:10).
- **Walking worthy** - As Paul prays for the Colossian brethren to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, he petitions that they be "bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." Doing good works for the sake of doing good works is a waste; this earth is going to pass away. But the good works Christ is concerned about are those which result in more people being rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of Christ.

The apostle, as he writes, cycles back around to "increasing in the knowledge of God." In the days when the New Testament was being written, that knowledge had to come through the apostles and those who were so gifted by the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the apostles' hands. Today that knowledge comes through earnest study of what is written in God's word, and by having a person's thinking challenged or expanded by others who have studied and expounded upon God's word. And that is the only knowledge that endures forever. "Heaven and earth will pass away," averred Jesus, "but My words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

God Qualifies Us

In athletics or warfare, sooner or later the contest is "strength against strength." In athletics, the contest really doesn't matter, other than for those emotionally involved, or in the character lessons learned. In warfare it is more serious, for there are those whose souls are launched into eternity on the battlefield, and the fate of nations hangs in the balance. Ultimately, the real "contest" is between Christ and Satan, and the warfare is spiritual. This is where "strength against strength" is especially going to count. "God," says the Holy Spirit, "has placed the members [Christians] - each one of them - in the body, just as He desired" (I Corinthians 12:18). In other words, as the All Wise conducts His warfare against the prince of darkness and his minions, He strategically places the Christians exactly where He wants them. It is important, then, that each of those so placed be strong and dependable.

- **Strength** - "Be strong and courageous," said God to Joshua, as he prepared to take the Promised Land (Joshua 1:6). How much more are those who are fighting the spiritual battles for the spiritual Promised Land in need of strength and courage! The continuation, then, of Paul's prayer for the Colossian brethren is that they be "strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might" (Colossians 1:11). Each saint can be more than just sort of strong spiritually, but "strengthened with all power"! The Christian is not just a defeated individual, huddled at the base of the cross of Jesus and crying out to Him for the salvation of him "the worthless." The Christian clearly instead can tap into "all power," with the superlative "according to the might of His glory"!! That glory, by the way, is defined as the power that it took to get Jesus out of Hades, and off the surface of the earth to the throne in heaven. MEGA POWER!!
- **Steadfastness and patience** - When a soldier is strategically placed, it is super important that he carry out his duty very faithfully. It is important that the watchman not sleep on his watch; it is important that the support personnel fulfill their roles: it is important that those on the front line carry out the battle plan. It is likewise critical that each spiritual soldier be faithful, or steadfast. The apostle thus prays, on their behalf, "for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience." For the saint to be able to stand his ground steadfastly while the horses and chariots of the forces of evil are charging upon him, to be able not to flinch in the face of such adversity, is exactly what God needs. If he is steadfast, because of the tremendous strength with which his action is backed, the forces of darkness must stop; they are blocked at that point from accomplishing their evil purposes. In a similar fashion, the saint must be tremendously patient. He must be patient with the other people or saints involved in the situation, he must be patient with himself, and he must wait on the patience of God. In warfare, timing is critical, and the saint who gets impatient jumps ahead of the battle plan of God.
- **Qualified** - The Father is active rather than passive in working with the saints; after all, it is really His battle. He is the One who strengthens, He is the One who give steadfastness and patience. Hence the saints are "joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (Colossians 1:12). Through His marvelous plan He selects His warriors, and also qualifies them to carry out the duties He has prepared for them.

No one should skip over the words "joyously giving thanks to the Father." When the disciple of Christ has the proper spiritual perspective, each day is a day of joy and thanksgiving. Such a people are guaranteed to be victorious, and to draw out of this world those that are attracted likewise to such joy and thanksgiving.

Sharing in the Inheritance

The continuing challenge for the followers of Christ is to keep their focus fixed on eternal things. The love of money, and the scramble for food, clothing, and shelter stand as an exhibit of how much pull the things of earth have. These things of the world have such gravitational force because they belong to the realm of what is visible, and therefore that which is obviously critical for sustenance and survival. The things of eternity, because they belong to that invisible realm, can seem not to be real because of the lack of tangibility. Hence it is that the faith of Christ draws children of God out of the traps that Satan has to offer through the sense gates, and helps them to see with spiritual eyes what is true and enduring. Esau, because he could not see this eternal value, sold the most important inheritance of all time for a pot of stew; Jacob instead became the ancestor of those who would become the base for God's plan to reach the world because he recognized the value of the promise to Abraham and Isaac. It is important to desire an inheritance; it just has to be the right one!

- **The share** - There is nothing earthy about the inheritance in which the saints will share. The scripture thusly speaks in terms such as "the riches of His glory" to communicate the extreme value of the unseen realm, using something out of the physical existence to create a spiritual picture. Christians are therefore spoken of as "fellow heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). The apostle Paul, then, in communicating with the brethren in Colossae, comments on how the children of God are "joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (Colossians 1:11,12). Since the individual would have been disqualified for sharing in the inheritance based on his own merit, he is grateful in the maximum degree for the efforts of Christ which qualified him to participate in such glorious eternal treasure. Brethren who keep their focus on things above are therefore constantly "joyously giving thanks to the Father"!
- **The light** - The inheritance of the saints is "in light." While this might be easy to brush off as an incidental added thought, the "inheritance of the saints in light" is one of the great aspects of the "upward call of God in Christ Jesus." God begins our education in this matter of "light" at our conversion in immersion. Christians are a special people, said the apostle Peter, who "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9). This is not just light; it is "marvelous light"! Not only are saints in this light, spiritually speaking. "For God, who said 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' "asseverated the apostle Paul, "is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6). The light of God's glory is actually shining in the inner man of the follower of Christ. "You were formerly darkness," Paul informed us, "but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8).

This "light" is unseen in the physical realm. But it is there, brilliant and transforming, revealed through God's Spirit-inspired scripture, seen by the eye of faith. And eventually the children of light will be revealed at Jesus' second coming. When this mortal will have put on the immortal, then our bodies will be transformed into conformity with the body of Jesus' glory. "Everything that becomes visible," averred Paul, "is light" (Ephesians 5:13). Then the true saints of God will be able to glory in His revealed presence. "And the city has no need of the sun or the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23).

Transferred

It is an exhilarating moment when the prisoner steps through the gates of confinement into the openness of freedom! It was a time of great rejoicing when the Berlin Wall came down, or in those instances where slaves were emancipated! But those are mere freedoms in a physical world, used by God to set the stage for true freedom. Here is what Jesus, the great Emmanuel and Savior of the world had to say about this: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin" (John 8:34). God's goal is to help the residents of earth understand that spiritual enslavement is really far worse than physical or political enslavement; if they can understand that, they will desire the freedom that results from participating in the life of Jesus. "If therefore the Son shall make you free," said the Christ, "you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). The gospel therefore paints a picture of each adult-minded individual in a sin jailhouse of his own making, follows with a description of Jesus' sacrifice and concomitant intercession as high priest, and details the belief and obedience required for the individual to thus enjoy the abundant life as a spiritually free follower of Christ.

- **Deliverance** - When the individual commits his first sin - by his own choice - he is entrapped by the deceiver, the serpent of old. Because the bars of his jail cannot be seen by the eye or gauged by any of the senses, the person is generally unaware that he is even in any sort of slavery. Hence part of the gospel message is bringing the facts about the sinner's dreadful condition to his attention. Then comes the good news: "For He [Christ] delivered us from the domain of darkness," Paul informs us, "and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). This deliverance could never be accomplished by any human effort; it took the sacrifice of God's only begotten Son, and the beyond-description-spiritual-power of the Almighty to get the Son out of Hades and to place Him at the right hand of the Majesty on High. Having thus opened the way, Jesus then communicated the procedures of deliverance for any interested disciples through the apostles. Any person, then, whether of Jewish or Gentile background, can believe in the Jesus as the Christ, repent of his thoughts and ways, confess Jesus as Lord, and be immersed in Jesus' name for the forgiveness of his sins and receive the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit. In this way he is delivered from Satan's dark domain and transferred into Christ's kingdom.
- **Transference** - As awesome as it is to be delivered from the domain of darkness, it is much more important to focus on the wonders of being in the kingdom of Christ. In the realm of darkness, the residents are blind and blundering around, stumbling over the spiritual objects in their way, falling and getting hurt, and often dying in that abject condition. But in Christ's kingdom, the kingdom of light as contrasted to the domain of darkness, the saints can see with increasing clarity the awesomeness of our God! They are now enlightened, they have tasted of the heavenly gift, they have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and they have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come (taken from Hebrews 6:4,5). "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," exclaimed the apostle Paul, "who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3 - directly spoken to those of Jewish background, but by extension also to the Gentiles in Christ).

The contrast between the domain of darkness and the kingdom of Christ could scarcely be greater. The saint, then, as he increasingly comprehends what Jesus has done for him in delivering him from that domain and transferring him into Christ's kingdom, marvels at the love of God. He willingly commits to serving Christ with every fiber of his being, and is willing to offer God the highest praise and ultimate gratitude!

The Kingdom of Christ

There are so many people confused by the teaching of modern false prophets, looking for the kingdom or reign of Christ to come in the future. But the kingdom is not a future event; the kingdom is now!

The kingdom is one of the great themes of the scripture. It first shows up in a prophecy given through Nathan the prophet to David the king. Through Daniel it was revealed that the kingdom would come in the days of the "iron" kings (the Romans), that it would eventually crush and put an end to all earthly kingdoms, that it would last forever, and would consist of people of every tribe and tongue. Thus the angel Gabriel informed Mary, concerning the Child that was about to be conceived in her womb, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:32,33).

- **Body of Christ** - There are only two realms wherein the spiritual beings of all who of adult level mind dwell: the domain of darkness, or the kingdom of Christ. Those who are in Christ's kingdom are spoken of as in Christ, "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14). That redemption, that forgiveness, occurs when a person is immersed in Jesus' name (Acts 2:38). Thus, when a person is immersed into Christ (Romans 6:3), he is also immersed into the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:13). This body, according to the Holy Spirit, is also the church (Ephesians 1:22,23). It follows, therefore, that the kingdom of Christ is another expression for Christ's church.
- **Kingdom of God** - Jesus, in a teaching session with His disciples, stated, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matthew 16:28). This is consistent with the idea that the church came into existence on the Day of Pentecost, AD 30, when the Holy Spirit fell upon the apostles and then 3000 were immersed and added to their number. Mark, in his parallel passage, records it in this way: "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power" (Mark 9:1). Clearly, then, the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of God, and the church are exact equivalents.
- **The kingdom of heaven** - Jesus, in explaining a bit about His parables, made this statement as recorded in the gospel according to Mark, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables" (Mark 4:11). Again, in another parallel passage, Matthew recorded it this way: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted" (Matthew 13:11). Hence all these terms - kingdom of Christ, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven - all refer to the church.

The kingdom, therefore, is not a future event where Jesus is going to come down and reign on the earth. The kingdom is now, it is the church, and it began as recorded in Acts chapter two. It is the centerpiece of many prophecies, it is the topic of the parables of Jesus, and it ends up as the "eternal kingdom" where the successful saints "shine forth as the sun" (II Peter 1:11; Matthew 13:43). What a blessing it is to be able to be delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of Christ. "Truly, truly, I say to you," averred Jesus, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). If you have not been immersed into Christ, get that taken care of! NOW!!

Who Christ Is and What He Has Done

It takes some serious spiritual reflection on the truths of the Bible to begin to really assess the value of Christ and what He has done for mankind - especially for those who will follow Him. To understand the awe-inspiring positives of Christ's rescue operation, mankind must understand the yawning darkness and destructive effects of being deceived by Satan. "The way of the wicked is like darkness," said wise Solomon, "they do not know over what they stumble" (Proverbs 4:19). "He who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes," was Jesus' clear comment (John 12:35). Jesus, therefore came to rescue mankind from the darkness, as He stated, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). "While you have the light," was the Lord's exordium, "believe in the light, in order that you may become sons of light" (John 12:36).

- **God's Beloved Son** - The apostle Paul has been bringing forth the great things done by God through Christ for those who will walk in the footsteps of Jesus. "The father, "affirms the apostle, "qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." The Almighty "delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13,14). God is pictured, for our benefit and so that He might communicate clearly His love for us, as giving up His beloved Son - One whom He loved with love incomprehensible - so that mankind might come out of the darkness and live.
- **Redemption through Christ** - For that rescue operation to occur, Jesus had to: 1) suffer and die on the cross, 2) shed His blood from His body as a guilt offering as the soldiers pierced His side with a spear (for without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness), and then 3) in a spiritual way offer that blood in heaven itself as the resurrected High Priest of the order of Melchizedek. The redemption price for the "lost sheep" was high: the blood of Christ - shed on earth, sprinkled in glory. What a blessing, then, that full forgiveness can be obtained through Christ.
- **Who is Christ?** - Who is this Son of God? Who is this Emmanuel, God with us? "And He is," explains Paul, "the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). He is the great Jehovah (Yahweh) God in human form, and as He ascends to glory and takes on His body of glory, He is the complete and exact communication of who God is. He is also "the first-born of all creation," meaning that He, as the "oldest son" in an earthly manner of speaking, is the One who possesses it all. Jesus was not "created first," as is the doctrine of groups such as the "Jehovah's Witnesses," but simply has the title of first-born because He is the only One yet permanently resurrected from the dead.
- **Christ the Creator** - Paul informs the brethren "For by Him all things were created both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things have been created by Him and for Him" (Colossians 1:16). All the governments of the earth, all the good angelic beings, all the realm of Satan and his demons - the thrones visible and invisible - have been created by Christ, and for Christ. How encouraging it is to know the truths of this verse!

The basic point of these descriptions of the Christ is to exposit just how amazingly awesome and powerful He is. He therefore, in the realm of faith - the realm which cannot be seen but only known by what is written in God's word - has the mighty and extreme power and authority to rescue saints from the dominion of darkness and get them transferred, as they are born again, to His kingdom!

More about the Awesome Christ

"The god of this world," asseverated Paul, talking about Satan, "has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (II Corinthians 4:4). The goal of this enemy is to reduce the name of Jesus Christ, if at all possible, to the level of an epithet, and to prevent people from having their spiritual eyes open and being able to see Jesus as He really is. Christ's spiritual face, shining more brightly than the sun, is presented to those who will be obedient to the scripture as the very face of the Almighty God. This face - "the glory of God in the face of Christ" - revealed to the inner man of those who have been properly immersed into Christ in accordance with the scripture, is the complete revelation of the great Jehovah, and is the "image of God."

- **The Sustainer** - The earth (about 8000 miles in diameter), the sun (about 880,000 miles in diameter), and all other aspects of the physical universe (unknown and unfathomable in distance) were created by Jesus during the first six days of creation week. The angelic beings - good and bad - and the spirit realm were created sometime before the physical creation as evidence by the fact that "morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy" - references to spirit beings - as they watched the formation of earth (Job 38:6,7). Everything, "visible and invisible," was created by the Lord Christ. "And He is before all things," Paul adds, "and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). Not only is Jesus the Creator, He is also the Sustainer. He "upholds all things by the word of His power," the writer of Hebrews superadds (Hebrews 1:3). Every atom and every molecule in the universe is held together by the word of Christ, and when He "speaks once more," He will release that word and the universe will disappear in a flaming roar.
- **Head of the body** - The church, or the kingdom of Christ, was the contemplated plan of God before the foundation of the world. Jesus, then, "is also the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18). As the physical body is controlled and coordinated by orders emanating from the head, housing the brain, in the same way the body of Christ is controlled and coordinated by the Head. Since He is the Head, His precepts, principles, priorities, and prescripts are to be voluntarily observed and implemented by the members of His body.
- **First-born from the dead** - Jesus is the only One permanently resurrected from the dead. Those whose resurrections are recorded in scripture, such as Lazarus, were only temporary; each of them died, and must await the general resurrection of the dead at Jesus' second coming. Jesus was raised from the dead on third day following His crucifixion, and appeared in such a way that His body was recognizable by key witnesses. But on the fortieth day from His resurrection, He ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high, transmogrified into what the apostle Paul called "the body of His glory" (Philippians 3:21). Thus, "He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead."

Of George Washington, sometimes termed "the Cincinnatus of the West" because of his refusal to become king or maintain extended power, it was said, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." His rock-like steadiness as Commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the revolutionary war, his firm exuding of confidence during the trying days of the Constitutional Convention, and his superb service of the first President of the newly formed United States of America earned him the nearly republic-wide accolade. How much more, then, should Jesus - Creator, Sustainer, Head of the body, and First-born from the dead - "might come to have first place in everything" for those making the claim to be His followers!

The Father's Good Pleasure

God, "the Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6), is powerful and awesome! Only rarely was God referred to as the Father in the Old Testament writings: "But now, O Lord, You are our Father, we are the clay and You our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand," is one of them (Isaiah 64:8). The prayers and teachings of Jesus, however, really brought the Fatherhood of the Almighty to the fore. "I praise You, O Father," stated He in one His recorded prayers, "Lord of heaven and earth, that You hid these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to babes" (Matthew 11:25). The "babes," then, are those who "humble themselves" to become like children in the sense of truly trusting the word of God, and not trying to lean on their own understanding.

- **All the fullness** - When Jesus quelled the storm and calmed the sea, the disciples were amazed. "What kind of man is this," was their query, "that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (Matthew 8:27). It is a great question: who is this Jesus? "For it was the Father's good pleasure," expounds Paul, "for all the fullness to dwell in Him" (Colossians 1:19). This truly is an awesome verse: all of God dwelt in the body of Jesus. The Child that was born was the Prince of Peace indeed; but He was also the Almighty God, the everlasting Father, and the Wonderful Counselor [the Holy Spirit]! One hundred per cent of God was in Jesus. That is why He would say, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). And again, of the Holy Spirit, to the apostles, prior to His crucifixion, "You know Him because He abides with you" (John 14:17). The Holy Spirit was standing right there, the "other Helper" in the physical body of Christ. As incomprehensible as it may seem, the great God - who is so big the universe is inside Him - poured 100 of Himself into the physical body of Jesus. The "wise and intelligent" will stumble over this; the "babes" will accept it. After all, it was "the Father's good pleasure" that this should be so.
- **The reconciliation** - The angels who "sinned" - II Peter 2:4 - sinned in heaven. Hence the plan of God, "foreknown before the foundation of the world," had to incorporate a cleansing of heaven as well as accomplishing redemption on earth. It "was the Father's good pleasure," then, "through Him [Jesus] 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" (Colossians 1:20). This reconciliation was not accomplished by the mere shedding of Christ's blood on the cross; it was "through the blood of His cross." The blood had to pour from His side on Calvary's Mount, but as spiritual blood had to be sprinkled in the true Holy of Holies, heaven itself. The sacrifice of the Lamb of God would have had no effect were not the blood of the sacrifice offered in the courts of heaven by the great High Priest of the order of Melchizedek. This, then, is how the reconciliation and peace were accomplished, through blood of the cross, not by the blood of the cross.

Jesus' offering was not just for the things on earth. His death, resurrection, and ascension were universal; that is, they accomplished the reconciliation of "things on earth" and "things in heaven." This lets us know that there is not another planet out there with life; the plan of God was accomplished in its entirety through what took place on earth, to achieve heavenly purposes. "All things," in prospect, are reconciled to God through Christ. Everything about God was in Him, and He paid the full price to realize His earnestly desired reconciliation!

Reconciled

"The mind set on the flesh," asserted the apostle Paul, "is hostile toward God" (Romans 8:7). Hence it is, individual by individual, that the whole world - because people are much more interested in things of the flesh - ends up as an enemy of God, and engaged in open or passive rebellion. The size and scope of this enmity is not to be minimized. Jesus would have been perfectly justified, at any point, to carry out His desire, as He indicated during the days of His earthly sojourn: "I have come to cast fire on the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled" (Luke 12:49). But the loving God held His anger in abeyance, and instead offered Jesus Christ as a substitute for the sin of man. "It was the Father's good pleasure," the apostle had noted, "to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:19,20).

- **Alienated** - The holy God can have no fellowship with sin. Jesus, in His exalted state as the revelation of the glory of God and High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, is described in these terms: "For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest - holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens" (Hebrews 7:26). Thus it is that any member of the human race, growing up and committing his first sin, becomes separated from God, or alienated from His fellowship. "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind," affirms Paul, "engaged in evil deeds..." (Colossians 1:21). That is one of the clear and concise scriptural descriptions of those outside of Christ.
- **In His fleshly body** - The word of God affirms in different sayings that Jesus paid the full price for the sins of mankind "in His body": He did not have to spend another three days following His crucifixion suffering in hell. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross [tree]", said Peter (1 Peter 2:24). "By this will," superadded the writer of Hebrews, "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). The apostle Paul concurs, noting that although we were all alienated from God, "yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death" (Colossians 1:22). Christ's physical body was clearly the sufficient sacrifice for the sins of mankind, and through His death, the reconciliation of mankind to God is possible. That the Almighty would even consider reconciling with those who were "alienated and hostile in mind," much less put up the price of Jesus' sacrifice to make it happen, is totally mind-boggling.
- **The presentation** - The love of God for the soul of man is amazing and abounding. Not only does He take the step of reconciling people to Himself through the cross and through the power of Jesus' resurrection, but He does so "in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach." The Father's ability and desire to take the rats' nests messes of twisted and tangled people's lives, to forgive those souls who are willing to repent and be immersed into Christ, and then to present them holy who were not holy, blameless who were not blameless, and beyond reproach who were very reproachful, is beyond human comprehension!

This reconciliation between God and man - a reconciliation that God is willing to pay for - is the ultimate in marvelous. For a person to have once been a sinner and separated from Christ, but now to be a saint and ushered into the very presence of the great and awesome God of the Bible, is of sufficient import that the Christian should willingly fall on his face before the Father. Thus there is a warning condition: "if you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel" (Colossians 1:23). Pity the saint who would fail to recognize the greatness of his salvation, and be swept by the rip tide of the world back into a state of alienation.

The Hope of the Gospel

The gospel of Christ has indeed come into the world. The light is indeed shining in the darkness, prepared and sufficient to rescue the soul of anyone among the sons of men who shows a real interest in truth. But for that rescue operation to be affected, the individual must come to the same belief system as what is consistently termed "the faith" in the holy scriptures. The faith not only consists of the basic truths connected with Jesus, but also of all the elements incorporated into the terms of the new covenant. God, the Author and Perfecter of faith, therefore requires that saints "continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast" in for them to be justified in the Day of the Lord Jesus.

- **Hope of the gospel** - Tied intimately to "the faith" is the gospel. The gospel -- the evangel, or "good news" -- is naturally centered upon the story of Jesus Christ. His incarnation is a key part of that, as well as His suffering, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His appearances to the witnesses, and His ascension to glory. This gospel is then to be obeyed by those who believe its message of hope and salvation, who are willing to repent and be immersed into the name of Jesus Christ that their sins might be forgiven and that they might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through their participation in the gospel of Christ, the saints will receive the proper resurrection of the dead at Jesus' second coming, the ultimate end or "hope of the gospel." The redeemed of the Lord must not "be moved away from the hope of the gospel" in order to attain to the resurrection of the righteous.
- **Heard** - God does not save people by reaching down from heaven with a magical finger and touching them, causing them to be born again without choice. Rather, the lost become saved by hearing the whole message of the good news of Christ. "So faith comes from hearing," says God's word, "and hearing by the word concerning Christ." This statement is engendered by another question, "How shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:17,14). Thus the gospel has to be carried to those who have not heard by those who can teach and preach its terms of pardon. So the brethren in Colossae had had someone come and preach to them, and they heard and obeyed. But they were cautioned not to be "moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard."
- **Proclaimed** - Because the gospel has to be heard, Jesus issued the commission to the church prior to His ascension: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Speaking of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the end of the Mosaic system, Jesus stated, "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come" (Matthew 24:14). By the time that Paul writes this epistle to the Colossian brethren, about eight years before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, he is able to say this about the gospel, that it "was proclaimed in all creation under heaven" (Colossians 1:23). Those first century Christians took the gospel to all parts of the globe in their generation!

The apostle Paul was grateful to be a participant in spreading the good news of salvation through Christ, the blessing of the indwelling Spirit, and the hope of the resurrection from the dead. "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord," said he to Timothy, "who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service" (1 Timothy 1:12). He was excited about the gospel (for which he dedicated every bit of energy in his life) as he spoke to the church in Colossae about the fact that it was proclaimed in all creation, "and of which I, Paul, was made a minister." Paul truly lived the abundant life promised by Jesus!

Rejoicing in Suffering

The distribution of the word of God is accompanied by suffering. Even those in the Old Testament who proclaimed the message of God paid the price of preaching to a rebellious people, as Stephen noted in his defense before the blood-thirsty Sanhedrin, "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" (Acts 7:51). John the Immerser had his head chopped off for calling Herod and Herodias to account because of their violation of God's commands concerning marriage. The ultimate exhibition of suffering on behalf of the gospel was Jesus Himself. Facing continual conspiracies against His life, having to wend His way through tricky conversations and hostile encounters, and having to handle betrayal by Judas, the Lord allowed Himself eventually to be scourged and executed. For our benefit, and to demonstrate how to make suffering joyously a part of the abundant life which He promised, the scripture states: "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). The author of that epistle also refocuses our attention on Jesus, "the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

- **Paul's rejoicing** - The apostle Paul had commented on occasion about how he handled the suffering which is guaranteed to those who will walk godly in Christ Jesus. In his second recorded epistle to the Corinthian brethren, he called what he and his fellow first century saints were experiencing "momentary, light affliction" (II Corinthians 4:17). "I consider that the sufferings of this present time," he explained, helping the brethren in Rome adjust their attitudes, "are not worthy to be compared with the glory to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Hence, as he addresses the congregation in Colossae, his perspective is going to be the same. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake," says he (Colossians 1:24). The apostle was not only willing to suffer to get the gospel and follow up edification to them, but he also was willing to be happy in suffering in order to do so.
- **Filling in the gaps** - When Jesus cried out during His last living moments on the cross, "It is finished!" He did not mean that all of His work was accomplished. He did complete what was necessary on earth as far as He could while living as a human being, but there was much more work to be done, including all the great things He accomplished in connection with His ascension. Furthermore, part of the continuing work of Christ on earth is to be carried out by His loyal and faithful disciples. "And in my flesh," remarks the apostle, "I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24). This is an amazing and, to some degree, an unexpected comment. The "passion of the Christ" was not enough, that there were still some gaps that had to be filled in? Apparently so, for the apostle clearly stated that he was willing to do his share!

The church of the living Lord moves forward through a sea of suffering. "If they persecuted Me," affirmed Jesus Himself, "they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:20). As Paul and the other apostles did their part in suffering for the sake of the body of Christ, so also must all others who believe through the word of those apostles. In a period of time when "evil men and imposters proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (II Timothy 3:13), modern Christians also need to step forward and be willing to do their share in filling up that which is still lacking in Christ's afflictions. Will we learn to run toward such suffering, or will we "shrink back to destruction" (Hebrews 10:39)???

Paul's Stewardship

Paul said that he suffered on behalf of the body of Christ, which is the church. It is worth the Christian's time to contemplate the apostle's motive in being willing to suffer so much for the sake of the gospel. From the time he first began to preach the gospel following his immersion at the hands of Ananias, he was persecuted and often nearly executed for offering proof that Jesus is indeed the Christ. Paul reminded Timothy of the challenges that faced him on his first missionary journey, of the "persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me!" (II Timothy 3:11). The second, third, and final journeys of the apostle were filled with the same. So what kept him charging again and again into such emotional and physical pain? His goal: to preach the gospel and save the lost.

- **Made a minister** - "I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church)," he had just stated. As a Christian husband and wife are united in intent and purpose, so Christ and His body are united in intent and purpose. Hence, for Paul to do things on behalf of Christ translates into acting on behalf of the church. Of this church "I was made a minister." affirms this faithful servant of Christ, "according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit" (Colossians 1:25). "In this case, moreover," he had informed the church at Corinth, "it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy" (I Corinthians 4:2). The apostle was responsible for communicating the powerful truths of God's revelation, and for steering the saints themselves in the correct direction. This was no small task, for then - as now - the forces of confusion tried to get the Christians "carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:14).
- **Fully carry out** - The entire plan of God is centered about Jesus and the church; the execution of His purpose is carried out through the church and for the church as it glorifies Jesus. As Paul had stated, "I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church)." His stewardship for the church, then, is expressed as "that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God." While the words *the preaching* do not directly appear in the text, the thrust of the passage is for Paul to completely execute God's purpose for His word, which could only be accomplished through preaching and teaching the revelation which was given to him. That revelation, implicitly, focuses on Jesus - His life on earth, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His appearances to the selected witnesses, and His ascension to the throne of glory. But as the apostle points out that he is to fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, he brings forth another point: the mystery! This mystery, he says, is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Christ in you is another name for the indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:9-11).

There are many who have the mistaken impression that to preach the gospel, all that simply needs to be presented is the death, burial, and resurrection of the Christ. This perception results from a shallow reading of the scriptures, such as Paul's statement to the Corinthian church: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received," was his promulgation, "that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:3,4). But from the time that the gospel was first preached as recorded in Acts chapter two, the gospel also includes the ascension of Christ, and the indwelling Spirit in conjunction with forgiveness of sins. Paul, in carrying out His stewardship to God, fully preached the mystery - the Spirit of God dwelling in the saints!

The Hidden Mystery

People are interested in secrets. One of the pulls of the forces of darkness is the supposed revealing of information forbidden to man, which is called divination. But God is pretty emphatic: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God." Moses informed the generation of Israel on the doorstep of the Promised Land, "but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Hence, the children of Israel were not to consort with those who practiced divination, the sorcerers, the interpreters of omens, the mediums, or those who claimed to call up the dead. But God, in Old Testament times, had some things hidden, but later to be revealed to the children of the New Covenant. "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man," Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah, "all that God has prepared for those who love Him" (I Corinthians 2:9) - refers to the things hidden in the Old Testament but revealed by the apostles in the completed word of God, inspired by the Spirit of God. "For to us," emphasized the apostle to the Gentiles, "God revealed them through the Spirit" (I Corinthians 2:10).

- **Hidden from past ages and generations** - The apostle Paul noted that he had a stewardship to fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, a stewardship "for your benefit." This stewardship focused on "the mystery, which has been hidden from past ages and generations; but now has been manifested to His saints" (Colossians 1:26). Jesus' crucifixion, for example, was prophesied in the Old Testament, but the Jews did not connect those prophecies with the Messiah; it took that which was revealed to the holy apostles and new covenant prophets to bring that understanding to the fore. In the same way, what the apostle calls the mystery was hidden in the old covenant writings but brought into view under the terms of the new will of Christ.
- **The mystery** - There are a number of mysteries - secrets - in the New Testament. But in his writings here, the apostle breaks this one out as the mystery, a "stand alone" as contrasted to mysteries that have to be directly connected to their context. So the apostle, speaking in context of the mystery being manifested to the saints, adds, "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" (Colossians 1:27). The mystery is: Christ in you! Writing to the church at Rome, the same apostle spoke of "His Spirit who indwells you." This "Spirit of God" who "dwells in you" is also called "the Spirit of Christ" and "Christ in you" (Romans 8:9-11). The mystery - Christ in you - is the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The promise of the indwelling Spirit was openly prophesied to Israel, as was stated in Ezekiel's prophecy: "And I will put My Spirit within you," said the Lord God Almighty, "and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ezekiel 36:27). But what was hidden from the past ages and generations was that "God willed to make known to the Gentiles" the riches of the glory of the mystery.

Even at the beginning of the church as recorded in the second chapter of Acts, the mystery was still hidden. "For the promise," said Peter in the lead message, concerning the indwelling Spirit granted at a person's immersion in Jesus' name, "is for you and your children." But he did not stop there: "and," he added, "for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2:39). The inspired gospel preaching, not yet understood by the apostle who preached it, anticipated the indwelling Spirit for the Gentiles. But it would take another ten to thirteen years before the gospel would go to the Gentiles, that they would be able to be indwelt by the very Spirit of God.

How the Mystery was Hidden

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" exclaimed the apostle Paul to the Roman brethren. "How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Romans 11:33). The Father, in His infinite wisdom and knowledge, decided to hide what He calls "the mystery" in the pages of the Old Testament writings, but to reveal it to the new covenant saints. The particular focus of this mystery is that Holy Spirit would indwell those Gentiles who would obey the gospel of Christ. The Jewish people, had they been good scholars of the Old Testament, would have anticipated that God would put His Spirit within them during the time frame the prophets called "the last days." But that the Spirit would indwell faithful Gentiles would have been beyond their comprehension.

- **Promise to the patriarchs** - God gave the same promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though He worded it slightly differently. "In your seed," was one of the All Wise's statements to Abraham, "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). Someone, called "the seed of Abraham," was coming, through which all the Gentile peoples of the world would potentially be blessed. On the surface, this promise would seem to point to Jesus, "the son of David, the son of Abraham," as the genealogy of the Christ begins as recorded by Matthew. But Christ in the flesh did not, except for one brief get-away, go to the Gentiles; He said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). So it was not "Christ in the flesh" who would bless all the nations, it is "Christ in the Spirit" who is this blessing promised to Abraham. The mystery-the indwelling Spirit to the Gentiles - was hidden here at the foundational promise to Abraham, but revealed later through apostles such as Paul.
- **Living water** - The Lord Himself unlocked the key to understanding many of the hidden references to the mystery in the Old Testament writings. Speaking to the multitudes gathered for the fall Feast of Booths, Jesus stated: "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" (John 7:37,38). The apostle John, inspired by the Spirit Himself, pointed out that "living water" is a reference to the indwelling Spirit who would first come to those "born again" as recorded in Acts chapter two, then extended to the Gentiles as recorded in Acts chapter 10. The river of living water, then, of Ezekiel chapter 47 is a prophecy of the Holy Spirit flowing from Christians and bringing the dead world around them to life. The indwelling Spirit is the river pictured as flowing out of Jerusalem, half to the east and half to the west (Zechariah 14:8). He is the "waters" of Isaiah 55:1,2; the One making the desert bloom in Isaiah 35; and so many more references spicing the entire Old Testament.

"For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act," said the Lord Jesus through the prophet Isaiah. "For how can my name be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another" (Isaiah 48:11). "Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it?" He queried. "Is it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides Me, and righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:21-22). "Come near to Me," said Jesus the Savior, "listen to Me. From the first I have not spoken in secret, from the time it took place I was there. And now the Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit" (Isaiah 48:16). But the mystery is now revealed; Gentiles have come into the body of Christ, and all Christians have been given God's glory through the Spirit. "You are blessed," said the apostle Peter, "because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (I Peter 4:14).

Complete in Christ

Jesus was a preacher during the time of His stay on earth. In His own home, as described in Mark's gospel account, many were gathered, filling the house and spilling out onto the grounds outside, and Jesus "was speaking the word to them" (Mark 2:2). God, as prophesied in Isaiah, anointed Jesus "to preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18). John the Immerser was a preacher, "preaching an immersion of repentance for forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Peter said that the risen Christ spoke to the apostles and "ordered us to preach to the people" (Acts 10:42). Paul said of the other apostles and of himself, "we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers" (Acts 13:32). Clearly the God who is over all ordained preaching, as the apostle Paul noted: "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (I Corinthians 1:21). Paul thus noted that he "was to fully carry out the preaching of the word of God," not only the simplistic "death, burial, and resurrection of the Christ," but also "the mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

- **The proclamation** - It is the Spirit of Christ who is the causative agent in the new birth, so that those properly immersed are "born of water and the Spirit." He assists in prayers, He strengthens Christians in the inner man, and He, as "the hope of glory," is the guarantee of the saint's resurrection to life at the last day. "And we proclaim Him," says the apostle to the Gentiles, "admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). Paul was not merely proclaiming Christ, he was proclaiming "Christ in you"! By not "shrinking back," but preaching the "whole message of this life," Paul was giving to the brethren the information from God about the indwelling Spirit, and the power and tools necessary for their own personal transformation. In teaching, he was giving them the information; in admonishing, he was giving them the encouragement and motivation. If the saints would apply all diligence on their part, the Holy Spirit was guaranteed to do His part, and they would have the potential of being "perfect in Christ."
- **The purpose** - The apostle Paul, the other apostles, and all who would follow in their footsteps in preaching the whole gospel, have the goal that "we may present every man complete in Christ." Paul superadds, "And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me" (Colossians 1:29). It is highly significant that the teaching and admonishing which the apostle did among the brethren to present each of them perfect in Christ would be termed "labor." It took tremendous energy on Paul's part to preach to the lost, but it took additional tremendous energy to work with the brethren, encouraging and strengthening them as they fought through their own spiritual battles in their individual ways to be fully embracing and exhibiting the character of Christ. To exert that tremendous energy, great love, and consistent encouragement, Paul would need help from God, which he acknowledges in these words, "striving according to His power." But this was not low voltage, this power "mightily works within me"!!

God's goal is that each person be perfect or complete in Christ. The record of the human race's having perfect character based on their own effort is zero; it is clear then that they need to be "born from above," to be no longer "mere men." Moving past the elementary teachings about the Christ, they can press on to perfection (Hebrews 6:1); they can "perfect holiness in the fear of God" (II Corinthians 7:1). And the Supreme Potentate, in order to make this possible, also strengthens the leaders of the churches, working mightily within them so that they can be positive role models for the newer Christians coming into the fold of Christ.

Paul's Struggle

The battle for the mind is an intense one. Satan, the prince of the power of the air and the spirit working inside the minds of those who are disobedient, also throws every possible temptation in every possible way at the saints of God. He works inside the mind; he works through mass media, mass propaganda, and mass education; and he tries to take advantage of every weakness of the flesh that still has a hidden harbor in the life of the Christian. Men like the apostle Paul will work on themselves, and then labor intensively on behalf of others to assist in winning this war for the mind. For example, the apostle, after describing the beatings, the lashings, and the tribulations in the external realm connected with getting the gospel out to all creation, noted: "Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. "Who is weak," he empathized, "without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" (II Corinthians 11:28,29). He was not exaggerating when he spoke to the Colossian brethren about "presenting every man perfect in Christ." He was not engaging in hyperbole when he spoke of "striving" according to God's power to carry out this purpose.

- **The struggle** - Jesus spoke of how the good shepherd would leave the ninety-nine safe sheep to go after the one that was lost, setting the tone that what is important is the salvation of each person. Thus the apostle Paul, in his labors, was concerned about the eternity of each member of each congregation rather than just having some numbers occupying seating space. "For I want you to know," he sincerely adverts, "how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are Laodicea [which was a town located near Colossae], and for all those who have not personally seen my face" (Colossians 2:1). Paul describes his labors for the brethren - his personal time with them, his sending other teachers and preachers to work with them, and his prayers on their behalf - as struggle. He was aware of how intense and how constant the battle was for the soul of each of the brethren, and used this graphic word to describe his actions on their behalf.
- **The complete picture** - The apostle describes what he desires for each of the brethren in the congregations, "that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:2,3). In the midst of all the negative and destructive things that happen in the lives of Christians who have to live in this wicked world (but not be "of the world"), Paul's earnest desire was that the heart of each be encouraged. This is hugely important, because fighting off discouragement is one of the biggest battles taking place in the mind of the followers of Christ. He further adds that those hearts are to be knit together in love. Where real love is, there is also real encouragement. The use of the word knit gives a clear picture of how intertwined the lives and interests of the brethren in the family of God are to be. He additionally comments on their attaining to spiritual wealth - being rich in the important and eternal things.

All this springs from what the apostle terms "the full assurance of understanding." The experience of teaching the principles of God's word - seeing how they transform the lives and eternities of those so taught, - brings the confidence that the provisions God makes for the victories of the saint through His marvelous mercy and grace are absolutely true and not ever to be set aside. It is a struggle, but what a wonderful fight in which to be engaged!!

True Hidden Treasure

Many a grave robber worked over the tombs of the Pharaohs in the Valley of the Kings looking for hidden treasure. But one of the richest - the tomb of "King Tut" - was mostly missed because it was obscured by desert sand. But when Howard Carter and his sponsor were able to gain entrance to the actual chamber where the young king's mummy still lay, he could only marvel at the richness of the treasures within. Gold, silver, ebony, chariots - riches beyond what had been able to be garnered from the other tombs in the Valley - still amaze those who have the opportunity to see them or their replicas in person today. But these are earthly treasures of a dead king. What about the spiritual treasures of the eternal and living King!!!

- **Christ** - The apostle Paul, writing under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, sometimes strings together a series of grand and sweeping truths and concepts. In this section of his letter to the brethren in Colossae, He speaks of "all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding." Understanding itself is a big word, in this case referring to a comprehension of the entire plan of God being executed by and summed up in the Christ who has risen to glory and who also indwells the Christian's heart by faith. Assurance points to the certainty the individual would have in aligning his thoughts with God's, of being able to prove that he understands God's definitions and His concepts as revealed in the sacred writings. Full assurance even amplifies that already solid assurance. Wealth - spiritual wealth - is what the saints are looking for, the hidden treasures found "in a true knowledge of God's mystery - Christ!"
- **The Spirit of Christ** - Jesus the Christ at one point in history took human form, But He did not stay that way, as Paul stated, "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer" (II Corinthians 5:16). Since Christ was no longer in the flesh, did that mean that He ceased to exist? Paul's point clearly is that he not only knows the resurrected/glorified Christ, but the One also known as "Christ in you." Hence, when the apostle earlier spoke of the mystery as being "Christ in you" to the Gentiles, that is not a contradiction to his later statement that the mystery is "Christ." The Spirit of Christ is Christ in the Spirit.
- **Hidden treasures** - "God's mystery," avers the apostle, is "Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Again, what a sweeping statement! All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge! If a saint really desires wisdom and knowledge, the solution is to come to a full assurance of understanding the whole message about Christ. And these treasures are hidden. That means that the faithful follower of Christ is going to have to search the scriptures for them; he is going to have to dig them out. But these treasures are obviously worth digging for! "I say this," emphasizes the apostle, "that no one may delude you with persuasive argument" (Colossians 2:4). This world is doing everything possible to make people think that wisdom and knowledge are found everywhere but in Christ. The touted solutions to people's problems are pills and counseling, as one example. But the delusions of the apparently persuasive arguments are no substitute for the true treasures hidden in Christ.

"We speak God's wisdom in a mystery," the apostle Paul explained to the church in Corinth, "the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory" (I Corinthians 2:7). The Biblical world view - which focuses on what Christ has done, is doing, and will do - is antithetical to the world view presented to people by the forces of evil and darkness. Satan - the god of confusion and the god of this world - has been able to hijack the legitimate efforts of science and progress and turn them in an anti-biblical direction, to the destruction and devastation of those who do not turn to the Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and true knowledge. Keep digging!!

Stability of your Faith

The winds of evil and destruction are blowing with hurricane force over the entire mass of humanity. A Satanic cabal has been working for hundreds of years to take general control over the information and education channels, so that anti-Biblical prejudice is increasingly rampant across the globe. A belief in evolution is enshrined in the halls of academia, propped up and financed by the government of the U.S.A. The distorting effects of the Darwinian revolution pervade all aspects of public thinking, from dentistry to doctoring, from prescription pills to the cause of pilfering, from society's ills to sexual orientation. In working toward the eradication of the Bible as the base for Western Civilization, a kaleidoscope of celebrities, politicians, media moguls, and talking head professors are paraded before the public, almost all of whom attack the scripture - some with empty-headed bombast, some with carefully crafted argumentations and presentations. In the midst of these hurricane blasts, the saint needs to remember that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." All the brethren also need to recall that the apostle also warned, "I say these things so that no one may delude you with persuasive argument."

- **Paul's rejoicing** - The apostles, in imitation of their mentor Jesus, laid down their lives for the conversion and conservation of the brethren. "I have no greater joy," said the apostle John, "than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth" (III John 1:4). The apostle Paul, likewise maintained an information network by which he could, to some degree, monitor the progress of the Christians throughout the congregations among which he labored. "For though I am absent in body," comments he to the church at Colossae, "nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ" (Colossians 2:5). The winds of confusion were blowing with gale force even in those days, attempting to topple the standard of Christ and dislodge the faith of the brethren. Paul, though not physically present, assured them that he was spiritually with them, and this would comfort and encourage them. Having kept track of their progress in the gospel, he was excited that they were exercising good discipline, and that their faith was not being shaken by the terrors of persecution, the mind-bending philosophies of men, or the winds of false doctrine.
- **Receiving Christ** - The scripture uses the phrase "received Christ" in a couple of locations. Many moderns have shifted the wording to "accepted Christ," and then have imposed the idea that "Christ can be accepted by inviting Him into your heart." These are the sorts of false doctrines the word of God warns about. When Jesus spoke to the Jewish leadership, He commented, "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another shall come in his own name, you will receive him" (John 5:43). The word receive has to do with a willingness to recognize the claimed authority or position of the individual. "He came to His own," the apostle John noted, concerning Jesus' positioning Himself in the midst of the Jews, "and those who were His own did not receive Him." They, for the most part, were unwilling to recognize who He was. "But," he added, "as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become [at some future date] children of God" (John 1:11,12). Thus, when Paul commands, "As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him," he is noting that the brethren recognized Jesus' authority as King and Lord, and that they were to govern themselves accordingly (Colossians 2:6).

The brethren were stable because they were willing to abide in the teaching or doctrine of Christ. Even though the picture of Christ in glory was already being attacked, the apostles' doctrine being challenged and twisted, and the only source of revelation being subverted, these blessed and faithful brethren were holding fast. May we imitate their faith in today's climate!

As You Were Instructed

"What do you have," Paul questioned the Corinthian brethren concerning their faith in Christ, "you did not receive?" (I Corinthians 4:7). As Jesus anticipated in His prayer on the west side of the Kidron, all who come to be Christians believe in Christ as a result of the word of the apostles (John 17:22). By setting it up so that everything comes back to the apostles' doctrine, the Lord successfully blocked the development of any contradictory or confusing teachings among those who are really interested in truth. No council of Nicea could later determine doctrines, or a meeting of minds at Augsburg, or Westminster, or even Nashville, for that matter. All need to be taught, but the teaching must always be checked against the infallible standard of the word of God and the precepts and principles elucidated especially in the New Testament writings.

- **Walk in Christ** - Since the brethren in Colossae had recognized Jesus as being the Christ, they were to "walk in Him." The Christian life is often pictured as a walk (or sometimes a race or run). The idea is that the saint's steps are to be directed by the principles of the word of God on an hourly and daily basis. "Make straight paths for your feet," encourages the scripture (Hebrews 12:13). The disciple is to keep his proper focus and not stray from the way of truth. Thus, having been immersed into Christ, he will conduct all of his activity in Christ, and eventually be escorted by angels into the presence of Jesus Himself.
- **Rooted and growing** - Without proper roots, the plant will suffer - it will probably die or be easily uprooted. The apostle Paul was confident that the faith of the Colossians was properly grounded - "firmly rooted" was how he describes it. With the basic and solid teaching concerning Christ and the church in place, the individuals and the congregation could grow in numbers and in true spirituality, "being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed" (Colossians 2:7). With the forces of evil and the subtleties of false doctrine being so pervasive, the apostle was very enthusiastic about how good the initial teaching was in Colossae, and about how well the follow up efforts to solidify the brethren were going.
- **Gratitude** - Things of earth tend to obscure the clear view that even a saint should have concerning heaven and hell. This all-important issue is not complex: a person when he dies is either going to end up in glory or in the fires of hell. God wants this picture to be very clear so that the peoples of the earth might make a clear choice about where they will spend their eternities; Satan wants as much confusion as possible thrown into the mix so that the confused masses will not sort out truth from fiction and be cast into the same lake of fire that is the final location of the outcast and rebellious angel. The saints, educated in the eternal truths and having obeyed the gospel of his salvation, are aware of the final possible outcomes of mankind. Thus rescued from the domain of darkness, the followers of Christ are "overflowing with gratitude." They recognize that without the loving and forgiving intercession of Christ, their part also would be in what Jesus called "the Furnace." Instead, by God's grace, they will be able to praise the Almighty in the courts of glory forever!

Without the scripture, no one would know about the ultimate end of each person. Without the scripture, no one would know of the love of God, and His efforts to extricate man from the predicament he put himself in by his own sin. Without scripture, no one would know what a person must believe and do to be saved from his sins, and to have fellowship with the Father through the Holy Spirit. And without instruction, no one would know what the scripture teaches about those things. Each modern Christian must praise God, for he too is "established in [his] faith. just as [he] was instructed."

Captivating Forces

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul had a serious warning for the brethren. They were "no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:14). The fact that there are so many such warnings in the sacred scriptures for the saints of God indicates that the danger of being sucked in by all sorts of deception lurks around the next comer. The prince of the power of the air not only works inside the minds of men, but he is aided by the unrighteous' selfish desires - desires so strong that they will engage in trickery and all out deception to pull people of out the light of Christ's revelation into the darkness of their own thinking and philosophies.

- **Be on the alert** - Satan is described as being on the prowl; he is probing the minds of Christians to discover a weakness of which he can take advantage. Because he is subtle he often will attempt to blindside the saint and pull him into a false perspective without the disciple of Christ being as aware as he should be as to what is happening. "See to it that no one takes you captive," intones Paul, "through philosophy and empty deception" (Colossians 2:8). One of the ways the world works is to elevate some intelligent or clever philosopher like Aristotle, then parade his works and thinking as the "latest and greatest" ideas to ever come to this planet. This creates a well-orchestrated flow of public opinion in the direction of those ideas with the result that they are generally accepted as the status quo. Saints of God are seriously cautioned not to be taken in or taken captive by such prevailing popularities, but to compare them against the world-view and underlying tenor of the word of God.
- **Traditions of men** - All societies and cultures have their traditions; some are positive, some are harmless, and some are totally contrary to the directives of the God's sacred word. But, because they are so ingrained, the children of God can be unaware of the destructive effects of traditions which their relatives hold dear. And the Lord does not want His disciples to be held captive "according to the traditions of men." The exordium thus comes: "Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21). Family and societal traditions honestly have to be examined in the light of God's word, and those which run counter to its tenor and teachings must be discarded.
- **Elementary principles of this world** - "There is a way which seems right to a man," said the sage Solomon, "but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 16:25). Mankind has had a wide variety of ways though which they think they will enter a positive afterlife. Ranging from "being a good person," to suicide bombing, from being a priest to a being a human sacrifice, from pretending to maintain a good conscience or pretending to maintain some standard of law, all these are "elementary principles of the world" and do not accomplish in any way the redemption of man's soul. Pressures in societies are often very strong, although totally off base, and the Christian is warned against being pulled into these types of thinking.

But the apostles and the entire word of God are clear that the philosophies of the world, the tradition of men, the elementary principles of worldly thinking can take the unwary saint captive. The focus instead is to be "according to Christ," the awesome Christ of glory, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." In the face of these treasures from Christ, all the so-called learning and wisdom of the universities wither and blow away as the fluffy powder that they truly are. The "great philosophers" of the ages are calmly swept into the dustbin of eternity as nonsense, and the laws and regulations of men perish in the final collapse of this age. There is therefore no reason for the Christian to be taken captive by any of these.

The Fullness of Deity

Periodically the follower of Christ should stop for a moment and contemplate the awesomeness of God. He should take a short tour through the photographs from the Hubble telescope to begin to get a glimpse of the vastness of the universe, and to understand that this vastness is smaller than God. He should take a simple excursion through the workings of the cell to begin to get a smidgeon understanding of the marvels of God's engineering. He should take a visual flyby of the differing brightness and colors of the stars of the Milky Way, and take time to consider how many atoms it takes to make twelve grams of carbon. No matter which way and how far into the material realm a man might look, the evidence of a supremely amazing Creator is there. But the material realm, as awesome and marvelous as it is, is pale and uninteresting in comparison to the glory, the power, the intricacy of the spiritual realm. And it is to the spiritual realm the interest of the Christian is drawn, as he seeks to know the things hidden from the past generations, but now revealed through the writings of the New Testament apostles and prophets.

- **The body of Christ** - Everything about the awesome God dwelt in the body of Jesus as He walked on the surface of this earth. This point the apostle Paul had acknowledged earlier in this letter, commenting, "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him" (Colossians 1:19). The tense on the verb here is past, emphasizing Jesus in the flesh. But here in what we moderns have broken down into the second chapter of this epistle to the Colossians, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write this blockbuster: "For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). The tense of the verb here is present, showing how everything about God now dwells. And He dwells - in all His fulness - in the present body of Christ, the church! The word translated Deity indicates, more strongly than any other word of the Bible, that everything about God dwells in the body of Christ. When the superlatives - "all the fulness" are added - it is clear that there is nothing more to Deity, the Godhead, than that which abides in the church of the truly living God. "Do you not know that you [plural] are a temple of God," explained Paul, referring to the congregation as a whole, "and that the Spirit of God dwells in you [plural]" (1 Corinthians 3:16). This is a powerfully amazing truth that the saint of God should really and repeatedly contemplate.
- **In Christ** - There are two locations of the spiritual realm: in Christ, or outside of Christ. Those who are outside of Christ are trapped in the domain of darkness; those who have been immersed into Christ are those for whom all blessings flow. A key emphasis, then, has to be placed on the beginning words of the apostle's statement: "In Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form."

It is a challenge to try to think of all the awesomeness of God dwelling in the body of Christ, the true tabernacle, the church of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus, of course, in the last days of His living in the flesh, anticipated the total unity of the brethren in Christ with the Father, Son, and Spirit. "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them," noted the Christ in His prayer from the west side of the Kidron, looking past the cross, past the resurrection, past the ascension, looking to the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, "that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity" (John 17:22,23). "In Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form." Now!

Completeness

The scripture, in describing Christ, abounds in superlatives. The apostle Paul, in painting a picture of the Jesus who now is, stated that He is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:21). Because language seems inadequate to address fully the awesomeness of the great and eternal God, these "over the top" statements are sprinkled through the sacred writings - after a while they could lose their intended punch for the reader if he is not carefully processing every word which proceeds from the mouth of God. But of all the elevated language, loaded with all the powerful expressions that words can bear, there is none more superlative than this statement to the Colossian brethren: "In Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form."

- **Complete** - The apostle Paul is going to build from this statement. After noting that through Christ in the Spirit everything about God pervades the body of Christ, he then adds, "and in Him you have been made complete" (Colossians 2:10). Everything about God dwells in the church, and everything about God dwells in the individual Christian. The Spirit dwells in the saint, and, as Jesus put it, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23). Since everything about God dwells in the individual Christian, it is logical that in Christ each Christian has been made complete. What else could there be? After all, Christ "is the head over all rule and authority." More superlatives!
- **Spiritual circumcision** - When a person is growing up and reaches sufficient maturity for God to hold him responsible for his actions, his first sin results in the formation of a spiritual body of sin within him. Much like the scales which formed over the eyes of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road, this body of sin drops like a spiritual sheath around the core of the individual and prevents his inner man from seeing the glory of God or having fellowship with Him. Hence, like a spiritual crucifixion which takes place in immersion to remove this "body of sin" (Romans 6:6), a spiritual circumcision is also used to describe the removal of this sheath or "veil" (II Corinthians 3:16). "And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands," Paul informs us, "in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in immersion" (Colossians 2:11,12). With the body of the sins of the flesh removed in this spiritual circumcision, the individual's inner man is seeing the glory of God and is being renewed day by day, even if the outer man is decaying. The question is whether the saint will look at the things not seen (the eternal), or whether his focus will be on that which is seen (the temporal). Paul's writing here is clearly intended to assist the disciple of Christ to direct his attention to Christ on the throne.

The loving Father earnestly desires that His spiritual children adopt and imitate His character, to be truly complete or perfect in Christ. Hence He arranged the spiritual circumcision to get rid of the old self, and to make way for the new self in the image of Christ. Similar encouragement comes from the writer of Hebrews: "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:1,2). The One who is "the head over all rule and authority" is the One who has made the saint complete, and who in all His fulness dwells in the collective body of Christ. How could any thinking Christian, then, be pulled back into the weak and elementary principles of the world?

Buried and Raised in Immersion

The apostle Peter said, "Immersion now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21). The notes in The Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, edited by Spiros Zodhiates, says this in its commentary on 1 Peter 3:21: "[Baptism] is the testimony of an already cleansed soul"; in other words, immersion does not save a person, it is merely the public declaration that this individual is already saved. Peter made the simple statement in a portion of a sentence; Spiros Zodhiates took a page and a half of his publication of the Bible to justify his contradiction of Peter. Some relevant notes on the same topic from the Zondervan NIV Study Bible state: "In NT [New Testament] times baptism so closely followed conversion that the two were considered part of one event ... baptism is not a means by which we enter into a vital relationship with Jesus Christ..." The thrust again is that - conversion or salvation occurs prior to immersion, and immersion is not necessary to have fellowship with Christ. These notes from these study Bibles are not aberrations; they are standard fare from the study Bible notes and sundry commentaries. Each individual who begins to look into this eternally vital issue is going to have to figure out whether they believe the apostle Peter or the commentaries. Indeed, all the writings of the New Testament are consistent, as is to be expected, with Peter's simple asseveration: "Immersion now saves you."

- **In Him** - All the eternal blessings are "in Christ." God is not going to allow anyone to make an "end run" around Christ; as Jesus Himself stated, "No one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). Hence, anyone outside of Christ is lost and damned to hell for all eternity; the only solution is to enter "into Christ." Scripturally, how can a person enter into Christ? Once again, the answer is simple and consistent: the unsaved has to be "immersed into Christ" (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). The apostle Paul, then, in corresponding with the Colossian Christians, exhorts the brethren not to be taken captive by philosophies alien to the teaching and principles of God's word, turning their attention to what is "in Christ." In Him dwells the fulness of Deity; In Him the saints have been made complete; in Him the brethren were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision.
- **Immersion and burial** - The means by which the individual participates in being made complete and sharing in the spiritual circumcision is explained by the apostle: "Having been buried with Him in immersion, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12). The word of God is again consistent, describing the eradication of the old self and the bringing of a new creature into existence. "We have been buried with Him in immersion," Paul reminded the brethren in Rome (Romans 6:4). In this way the "old self was crucified with Him" and the "body of sin" was done away with (Romans 6:6). What power, and what a blessing!
- **Immersion and resurrection** - Just as a spiritual death really occurs in immersion, so also a spiritual resurrection occurs when the individual comes up out of the water. The newly spiritually born saints are raised up with Christ "through faith in the working of God." What is seen by the physical eye is that the individual was dry, then he is wet. But those who operate by the faith revealed in the New Testament writings recognize that God's awesome and tremendous power was used to bring this new creature into existence in the likeness of Jesus' resurrection, but in the realm not seen by the physical eye.

It is highly significant that - although the individual must personally believe the gospel of Christ, and be obedient to it in immersion - it is God who does the work! Immersion is not a work a believer does to try to earn his salvation; it is his willing participation in the plan and power of God. It is a marvelous plan, and it is energized by mega-power!!

Made Alive

"God was well-pleased," affirmed Paul to the Corinthian brethren, "through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). The message is not peddled or sold; it is announced with all the necessary backing from Him who sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high. The word of God has to be sharper than any two-edged sword; it has to pierce dulled hearts, pry open deaf ears, and penetrate blind eyes. Blessed indeed, in the words of Jesus, are those whose hearts have been pierced as at Pentecost, 30 AD, and "your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear" (Matthew 13:16). Thus it is that those who have been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's Son have, had their understanding moved from the physical to the spiritual, and comprehend the power of the preached word to save and to strengthen.

- **Dead in your transgressions** - Man without the information from what is now God's written revelation does not know about the effects of sin in regard to his relationship or fellowship with God. To some degree he knows what sin is, or that word would not exist in his vocabulary. But without the message preached he would not know that he is separated from God by his first sin, and he would have no clue what to do about it. "You were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh," the apostle Paul reminds the brethren. He has just finished talking about how the brethren were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision in the removal of the body of flesh by virtue of their immersion into Christ. But now he goes back to re-emphasize the dreadfulness of their condition prior to that circumcision made without hands - dead!
- **Together with Christ** - The opposite of death, of course, is life. Life! Life! Life! The contrast has to be super emphasized to pierce dulled hearts, pry open deaf ears, and penetrate blinded eyes. When you were dead, says the Holy Spirit through Paul, "He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions" (Colossians 2:13). Not only is the condition of saint prior to his conversion re-emphasized, but the awesomeness and wonderfulness of what happens next is re-emphasized as well - of his being brought to life in Christ, coming up out of the waters of immersion, raised up by the same power God used in raising Jesus from the dead. This considerable power (that God used in raising Jesus from the dead and seating Him at the right hand of power) is greater than the power God used in bringing the universe into existence. And the Almighty would like His saints to know that this power was not only used in bringing them into existence as new creations in Christ, but that same power is also used to strengthen and sustain them daily in the spiritual battles they fight in overcoming the forces of darkness.

All of this takes place in the realm of faith, the realm of the unseen. It cannot be overstated that all anyone can know about that realm is what is revealed in the word of God. "The word of God is living and active," but this is only seen by an eye trained by that word (Hebrews 4:12). "In the exercise of His will," said James, "He brought us forth by the word of truth" (James 1:18). "You have been born again," added Peter, "not of the seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). God has sent forth His word into the world, revealing the greatness of His salvation and His plan for spiritual union with those who are willing to walk in His ways. Those who were thus dead in their sins and transgressions have been made alive in Christ through their obedience to the gospel as revealed in the written word. "And this is the word which was preached to you!" (1 Peter 1:25).

Debt Canceled

Indebtedness is a tremendously heavy burden. The proverb is indeed true: "The borrower becomes the lender's slave" (Proverbs 22:7). Those who have labored under the burden of debt have a good idea of what it would be like for all the past bills and borrowed money suddenly to be forgiven. No debt, no hold-over interest-everything paid in full! God, the ultimate teacher, allows indebtedness to occur in the physical realm to communicate what happens in the spiritual realm. The idea is that when a person sins against God he has placed himself in the position of such spiritual indebtedness that he cannot ever repay. Jesus, for example, told a parable of a slave who owed his king 10,000 talents. When he was, of course, unable to repay, the king graciously forgave him the debt. That slave, however, had a fellow slave who owed him 100 copper pennies, and threw him into debtor's prison until he would repay. When the king found out about the situation, he called the first slave into his presence, and angrily threw him into prison because of his unwillingness to forgive a fellow slave a small debt when he himself had been forgiven such a large debt. "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you," said Jesus, "if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). The point is clear, that monetary debt is used to paint a picture of spiritual indebtedness occurring because of sin against God.

- **Certificate of debt** - God, with tremendous power, is able to take people who are spiritually dead, forgive their sins, and make them spiritually alive as they come up out of the waters of immersion into Christ. The apostle Paul makes a point of emphasizing that He has "forgiven us all our transgressions." He then expands upon that, saying that He has "canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us" (Colossians 2:14). The decrees registering against each person are the commandments of God enfolded into the beginning portion of the gospel. "Now we know that whatever the Law says," intoned Paul to the Romans, "it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God" (Romans 3:19). The early portion of preaching the gospel is to bring the previously unaware to a knowledge of the righteous requirement of the glory of God. Therefore, in accordance with the well-communicated plan of the All Wise, the now informed sinner recognizes his need for the Savior. But the decrees are hostile; they not only show him that he is a sinner, but also that they condemn him to eternal death for his violation of these standards; they present him with the certificate of an insurmountable debt. But, praise God, through Jesus' gospel, this certificate can be canceled.
- **Certificate nailed to the cross** - When the paperwork disappears, there is no crime! Cases can only be tried for which there is a record of the violation. Debt can only be collected when there is the proper paperwork trail. So of this certificate of debt against the sinner, "He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14). By the power of God, in the spiritual realm not seen by the physical eye, the paperwork of indebtedness has perished on the cross with Jesus.

This is a powerful and life-giving principle, that the past for the one now called a saint is gone! There is no hold-over from the past preventing progress in the present. But as powerful and life-giving as that is, it is weaker than the next step revealed in the picture of God. Forgiveness is for the past; what provides power for the future?

The Great Public Display

In connection with Jesus' resurrection and His ascension to glory, Satan suffered a crushing blow and a tremendous defeat. "Through death," a process culminating in Christ's accession to the right hand of power, He rendered "powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14). The awesome spiritual battle between the forces of Michael the archangel and the hosts of the devil took place in heaven, resulting in the Satan's loss of access to the courts of glory and of his ability to have dominion over the people of God. What an awesome, unfathomable victory this was, and how important it is for the saints to begin to comprehend the Almighty's great power toward us who believe, and of His love toward those who potentially would obey the gospel.

- **Disarmament** - "Angels," said the apostle Peter, "are greater in might and power" than the sons of men, those who of the dust of the earth (II Peter 2:11). Those whose eyes see the physical realm can only begin to imagine the strength and grandeur of these angelic beings in comparison to mere men. But "through the cross" (not "by the cross") on into Jesus' resurrection and ascension, God "disarmed the rulers and authorities" (Colossians 2:15). Speaking of Satan, or Beelzebul calling him "a strong man," Jesus noted that "when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied, and distributes his plunder" (Luke 11:21,22). Jesus, then, during the years of His earthly sojourn, anticipated the time when He would disarm the prince of darkness and his minions, and triumphantly take those who would otherwise have been captive into the fellowship of glory. At the time Paul wrote to the brethren in Colossae, this disarming had already been accomplished; Jesus had risen from the dead, ascended to glory, and the forces of darkness had already been banished forever from the courts of heaven.
- **Public triumph** - No one from the physical realm saw the event Jesus thusly described prophetically, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18). Similarly, the Galatian Christians did not physically see Jesus crucified. Yet the apostle Paul would say, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (Galatians 3:1). The point was that the preaching of the gospel presented such a clear picture to the spiritual "eyes" of the Galatian brethren that the crucifixion was regarded as a public spectacle even though far from Jerusalem. A step further into this realm is what Paul described to the brethren in Rome, speaking of the redemption which was accomplished in Christ, "whom," stated the apostle, "God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith" (Romans 3:25). The act of propitiation occurred when Jesus sprinkled His own blood to cleanse heaven and open the opportunity for others to be freed from guilty consciences through that blood. But no one saw that sprinkling with a physical eye; it was revealed to the apostles through the Holy Spirit, and the preaching of that made it a public event. Similarly, "when He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him." The public display was the revelation given through the apostles of Jesus' victory over the forces of darkness, and their being cast out of heaven.

The triumph of Jesus over Satan and his angels was one of total victory. A physical representation of the complete conquest of Christ is given in the description of the defeat of the last king of Judah at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon: "And they slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him with bronze fetters and brought him to Babylon" (II Kings 25:7). This is a portrait of absolute abjection. The saint of God has had presented to him the true picture of Satan's defeat through the resurrection and ascension of Christ; hence the terminology of public display is used.

Christ is the Substance

On what basis was the old covenant established? On what basis were the sacrifices instituted and the regulations for the people imposed? The old covenant was established on the basis of the priesthood of Moses, as contrasted with the new covenant's being established on the basis of the priesthood of Christ, as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrew Christians notes: "For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also" (Hebrews 7:12). Hence that which was established through Moses was replaced by that which is established through Christ. The law of Moses was supplanted by the faith of Christ.

- **Trappings of the Law** - God used many instructions and regulations under the terms of the old covenant to establish His moral code and to separate His people Israel from the pagan influences of the world around them. But because the saints of the new covenant are governed by a different system of thought, the Colossians were instructed not to be persuaded to come back under the weak and elementary system of the Law. "Therefore let no one act as your judge," he exhorts the brethren, "in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day" (Colossians 2:16). The Christian was not to let anyone pressure him into being brought back into the system of clean and unclean foods or the libations of the old covenant. It was not necessary for him to observe the Passover, Pentecost, or the Feast of Booths. Gone was the requirement of keeping the feast of the new moon, or meeting in the synagogue on the Sabbath and doing no work. No one - not even the most hard-cased convert from the Pharisees - could pass honest judgment on the Christian for refusing to knuckle under to these seeming godly demands.
- **Shadow not substance** - The things of the law of Moses were physical types and foreshadows of the things of Christ and Christianity. The Sabbath, the new moon festival, the temple, and even the dietary regulations were "things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:17). The Old Covenant was a covenant for a physical people, with physical blessings for obedience and physical cursings for disobedience. Christ, however, is a spiritual High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, and the New Covenant is of necessity a spiritual covenant. People who are of "the flesh" gravitate toward physical things because they cannot perceive the value of spiritual things. Hence the various aspects of the Law - even today - have appeal for those who have not truly been born from above, as Jesus stated: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). The dietary laws, the special feast days, the physical priesthood, all draw religiously interested people to them if they are operating in ignorance.

The substance, clearly, is Christ, particularly Christ in glory. The grand event of the temple was the offering of the high priest of Israel on the Day of Atonement; this stately prefigured the offering of Christ's own blood in heaven itself. The Passover pointed to the day of Christ's crucifixion as the ultimate Passover lamb. Pentecost, the Feast of the Beginning of the Harvest, set in motion the true harvest of the first souls as recorded in Acts chapter two. The Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Ingathering in the fall, was a type of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, wherein all the redeemed have been gathered as the angels finished the final reaping of the souls of men. The Sabbath foreshadowed the rest that comes from the peace of being reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Christ, and the dietary regulations of clean and unclean set a basis for discerning of moral and immoral behavior. The saint of the new covenant, then, is to focus on the glorified Christ, and not get pulled back into the things of the physical covenant.

Early Gnosticism and Visionaries

In the religious realm there have always been those who drew attention to themselves or gained leverage by claiming to be visionaries. In the days of King Ahab of Israel, all the false prophets were claiming to have visions from God, encouraging Ahab to go to war against Syria. They gained earthly leverage and fame by telling the king what he wanted to hear. Of course, the true prophet of the Lord - Micaiah - had a different message that was not what the king wanted to hear, and was sent to suffer the privation of nothing but bread and water until the successful return of Ahab. As the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah concerning all the false prophets, "I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied" (Jeremiah 23:21). The apostle Peter brought the concept forward in his second epistle, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies" (II Peter 2:1). The war for the mind and soul of each person on this planet is a fierce one.

- **Visionary inflation** - The developing Gnostics claimed to have inside information to which the apostles were not privy. The so-called Gospel of Thomas, for example, begins with these words: "These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down" (emphasis added). Those hidden words are the signal that this is supposedly new information. Paul apprises the Colossian brethren about these types. "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize." warns he, "by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind" (Colossians 2:18). Since in Greek philosophy the body was bad, one of the ways to handle the body was by "self-abasement" - whipping it, or punishing it in some way. Paul was telling the brethren not to be impressed by such punishment, often so extreme as to attract a lot of attention. Nor were they to pay any attention to those who claimed to be able to see angels and worship them, or any of the other multitude of things that this type of people claim to have seen. To follow such visionaries was to follow them to spiritual death, to be defrauded of the prize of eternal life.
- **Hold to the Head** - The Lord Jesus had made it plain that all the doctrines and revelations were going to begin with the apostles. Any New Testament prophet could only iterate on what the apostles were also revealing. Thus another name for the teachings of the new covenant is the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42). The false brethren, taking their stand on their supposed visions, were "not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God" (Colossians 2:19). The positive exhortation is clearly to hold to the true teachings of Jesus, revealed to modern day brethren in what is written in the word of God. Then the body of Christ, comprised of various members with different gifts and capacities, grows with the real growth that comes only from God.

The prize very obviously is the eternal life which comes through the proper resurrection from the dead. The battle for the soul is a fearsome one, in which the prince of darkness creates every possible form of diversion and false doctrine, appealing to every possible weakness of the flesh. Hence the apostle Paul warns them, and through them he warns us, of the tremendous dangers of the deceptive appeal coming through the visionaries of the day. The developing Gnosticism of his day has not died: it just morphed slightly and changed its name to Catholicism and Calvinism. Let no one defraud us of our prize.

Failure of the Do Nots

Doctrine of human origin, in order to have some pretense of holiness, always sets up a system of do's and don't's. The All Wise, anticipating the direction that false teaching would go, set up His own system of do's and don't's, the covenant which came through Moses. The apostle Paul, writing to the churches of Galatia, noted that "if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law" (Galatians 3:21), The point is that if God's law does not produce the righteousness that leads to eternal life, then any lesser man-made system of law will certainly not produce righteousness either. Hence, from even the strongest law position - that which was given by God - legitimate pressure cannot be put on new covenant saints to keep the Sabbath or the festivals or the regulations on food and drink. Much less, then, can disciples of Christ be pressured by those laws and regulations which come through the visionaries and the developing Gnostics of the first century.

- **Dying to elementary principles** - The decrees of the law of God which were hostile to the newly immersed follower of Christ were taken out of way, nailed to the cross with Christ. The death of the individual to old things was not, however, limited to the decrees of the Law. "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world," asseverated Paul, "why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to [worldly] decrees" (Colossians 2:20). The saint also is released from, if necessary, the decrees and feasts and fasts of pagan religions, or to the man-made rules of disciplining the flesh. Paul lumps all of these into the term "elementary principles of the world." In being buried with Christ in immersion, the saint died to these principles as well as any power his past life might attempt to hold over him.
- **Ineffectiveness of worldly decrees** - Why, then, would the saint submit to the myriad of rules and regulations issued by mere men, regardless of what heavenly visions they used to try to justify the imposition of their ideas upon fellow man? "Why," says Paul, "do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using) - in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?" (Colossians 2:21,22). A check list of things that may be done and a check list of things that may not be done absolve the individual of the responsibility of thinking through his situation and making his own value judgment as to what should be done next. Under the terms of the new covenant, saints walk by faith, fixing their eyes on Jesus in glory. This fixation transforms their inner persons, and works outward to transform their judgment and behavior. A system of law, then, is inimical to the system of faith, and there is no sense in which the child of the new covenant should devolve into the primitive, childish system of God-made law, or worse - man-made law.

Wherever the saint has not put to death his flesh, these man-made regulations have appeal. Hence Paul's deep and intense warning. "These are matters which have, to be sure," he avers, "the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:23). The untaught or the unwary can be pulled into these doctrines, Thus, it is imperative that the saint of God become fully aware of the nature of the faith of Christ, and why it succeeds where everything else fails. These other systems have the appearance of wisdom, but really have no wisdom at all. The individual Christian, in order to successfully overcome his flesh, must know how to implement the principles of the faith, Furthermore, he must really increasingly understand the wisdom of God in order to articulate to others the principles of the faith, that other saints may begin to enjoy the victories over fleshly indulgence!

Overcoming Fleshly Indulgence

One of the characteristics of members of the human race is feeling frustrated over their own weaknesses of the flesh. Some, of course, never admit to having any such weaknesses, or refuse to ever try to deal with themselves. But there are those who at times in their lives, or when certain circumstances have occurred, who are willing to look at those moral or character failures, and who then are upset or angry at themselves for having falling short of the glory of God. They then, not knowing about the principles of God for victory, or not understanding how to apply those principles, are open to man-made "solutions." "These have," Paul avers, "the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:23).

- **Doctrine of penance** - One widely accepted teaching, promulgated by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern or Greek Catholics, is penance. Part of penance is that some penalty has to be paid for the commission of sin. Sometimes, then, as exemplified by the late Pope John Paul II, a person will whip themselves or have themselves whipped in order to penalize the body for sins committed. Sometimes they will crawl miles on their knees, ending up bloodied at some shrine in punishment. The idea is that this sort of hurting the body somehow expiates the sin that the "bad, bad body" committed. Millions upon millions believe in the efficacy of such severe treatment of the body.
- **Other self-abasement** - There are many more types of self-abasement practiced by individuals in their various religions. Some guy sitting on a flag pole - for years at a time - might generate curiosity for a moment in passers by, but it does not help him to overcome fleshly indulgences. The privations of a monkish existence may seem to help a person be holy, but the inspired record notes that there is "no value" in such isolation from the sinful human race; he still has to live with himself. "Fasting" for the purpose of punishing the body is similarly a waste. The problem is that fleshly indulgence does not originate in the body; the body itself is not sinful. As Jesus noted, "For from within, out of the heart of man, proceed evil thoughts", etc. (Mark 7:21). The human heart is corrupted from within, so beating on the body will not change the heart.
- **Focus on Christ** - The way God works is to take the focus off the sin-stricken, guilt-laden individual and to have him focus on Christ - specifically Christ in glory. The gospel of Christ is presented to the lost, describing how Jesus died to pay the price for the sinner's transgressions, how He rose from the dead and set in motion the eventual resurrection of the righteous to eternal life, and how He ascended to glory as the great High Priest and King. The repentant individual, upon believing the message of the Christ, confesses Jesus as Lord and is then immersed in the name of Jesus. He is thus buried with Christ, and raised to walk in newness of life, raised up with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenlies. "If then you have been raised up with Christ," the apostle positively challenges the brethren, "keep seeking the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). The focus clearly is to be "on things above, where Christ is."

The transforming power of the gospel to change the inner man is found in the revelation of Christ in glory to the inner man. When a person is immersed into Christ, "the body of the flesh" is removed in a spiritual circumcision. The "veil is removed in Christ"; the inner man in conjunction with the scripture can see the glory of the Lord, and be transformed into that same image. The only "punishment" inflicted is that the old man of sin is crucified, or that the individual's spiritual heart is circumcised. This is the exciting prescription that will enable the sincere person to overcome fleshly indulgence.

Raised Up with Christ

One of the great challenges for Christians is to see themselves as Christ sees them. The god of this world - Satan - is doing everything he can to have the saints of God think lowly of themselves; if he can keep their picture of themselves in the gutter, he can keep stomping on them. But Jesus has called His sheep out of this world, and those who hear His voice truly learn to walk by faith rather than by sight. They learn to see themselves in light of the gospel. They are disciplined by the word to understand where they really are in the realm of faith. They are step by step counseled by God's sacred script to focus on Jesus in glory, and to experience the transformation of character from the inside out.

- **If then...** - The Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul, is willing to place a bit of a challenge before those making the claim of being followers of Christ. "If then you have been raised up with Christ," comes the friendly provocation, "keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). The challenge here is not "if then you have been buried with Christ," although that would be plausible. The direction here is focused on being "raised up with Christ." The teaching of the scripture is that the sinful man is buried with Christ in immersion, but more importantly, that the new self is raised up with Christ, resurrected to walk in newness of life. The apostle Paul words his statement in such a manner as to provoke thought on the significance of new self in Christ. "If then..." makes the thoughtful individual question himself, saying, "Was I really raised up with Christ when I was immersed? Is this my thought process, or am I still locked into thinking I am still of this earth, that I still am 'from below'?"
- **Raised up** - As important as it is for the old sinful self to be buried with Christ in the waters of immersion, it is more important that it be recognized that the new self has been raised up with Christ. It is worth reaffirming that "as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). It is of note that "if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection," that likeness of His resurrection being the new life in Christ (Romans 6:5). As Christ is now in His glorified state "dead to sin and alive to God," saints are to "even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" - Christians are to picture themselves by faith as Christ is in His glorified state (Romans 6:11). God, affirmed Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians, "raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). By faith, then, the disciple of Christ is seated on the throne in heaven with Christ, being a part of the "royal priesthood"!!
- **Things above** - Where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, there are no problems. Jesus is beyond the trials and temptations of earth. He is not going to be assassinated, or bribed, or pressured. His position is secure, and His word is sure. The saint, then, is exhorted to make this Christ in glory his focus, to "keep seeking the things above." Every day, so long as his body treads on the surface of earth, the disciple of Christ needs to keep looking to the things above!

Spiritually speaking, the faithful follower of Christ is already living in heaven. Earthly speaking, he is occupying space on the surface of planet earth. But in the realm of the unseen, in the realm that the scripture reveals, the saint is ushered into the very holy of holies, into heaven itself, seated with Christ on the throne, in the awesome presence of the Father. Hence, if he walks by faith rather than by sight, he fixes his attention on the things above where Christ is!

The Proper Focus

The outcast angel, Satan, is going down, down eventually to the hell fire prepared for him and his fellow rebellious angels. At the vortex of the downward spiral, the prince of darkness is sucking every possible member of the human race down with him, working in the minds of men wherever possible - twisting perception in their minds, getting their focus in the wrong direction. Christ, then, has come as light into the world, to enlighten and educate those who are willing in the ways of God and in the ways that are straight and true. To do that, the wisdom of God brought Christ into the world, and used Him as the Word, the vehicle of communication for this education and enlightenment of the willing. God wove His story in the matrix of human history so that its truthfulness might be established for the honest but probing inquirer. At the right time He sent His Son into the world, born as a baby, reared to manhood, anointed by the Holy Spirit in the waters of the Jordan, crucified on Calvary, raised from the dead, and ascended to the throne of heaven. This picture, portrayed through the records of the word of God, when obeyed by the trusting hearer of this message, delivers him from that dark downward pull and lifts him to the courts of glory.

- **Set your mind** - It is the mind which truly directs the individual. The body is not some uncontrolled separate entity; the decisions are always made in the mind. Hence, where the mind goes, the individual goes. Thus the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul issues this directive, "Set your mind on things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2). The thrust of the passage is that the saint's mind is to be totally focused on the things above, to be fixated on the spiritual realm rather than mesmerized by the material realm. This focus is to be a very determined focus, an unwavering gaze by the mind's eye, totally riveted and pegged on the view of Christ in glory.
- **Things above** - Things of earth have to be dealt with. The crops need harvested, the weeds need uprooted, the clothes need mended. But the mundane must not impact the focus of the disciple of Christ. Nor can the massive upheavals that from time to time plague the residents of earth and the Christians caught in them. "Why are the nations in an uproar," asked the psalmist, "and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Christ" (Psalm 2:1,2). The affairs of this earthly world are one continual uproar after another as the heathen peoples of the world are successively pulled into Satan's domain and rebel against the Mighty and Compassionate Creator. The encouragement for the children of God is to recognize that this is how earth is, and to raise their sights to the heavenly realms where all is peace and glory.
- **Christ in glory** - What is there really to compare with Christ in all His glory? The purpose of the gospel is to draw mankind's attention to the Lord, beginning with the need for forgiveness of sins. The story of Christ does clearly establish God's love for the lost race, but as it crescendos to its final outcome of the King's accession to the throne above, the disciple's attention and affection is directed to and eventually fixed on Jesus reigning in His majesty. The brilliance of Him and His court is such that it pales into insignificance any of earth's turmoil.

The saint, then, is doubly exhorted to "keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." If he can maintain this focus, his interests will be properly spiritual, his attitude will be great, and his habit will be one of prayer. This, therefore, is the "mind set on things above, not on the things that are on earth."

Died and Hidden

The great and loving God is totally committed to the spiritual success of each of His spiritual children. The Father is "not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). Saints are requested to pray for all men, even for kings and those in authority. "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior," asseverated the apostle Paul, "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:3,4). Clearly, then, the earnest intent of the Creator is that each person be saved initially, and be able to stay strong in the faith to his last breath. Principles for the spiritual success of each saint, therefore, are going to be inculcated in the follow-up teaching of the word of God. The Almighty thus does His best to help each of His spiritual children to have success in overcoming the forces of despair and darkness that can overwhelm the disciple in his fight of faith.

- **Dying with Christ** - One of the huge principles built into the gospel is making certain that the past is not a barrier to present progress. The apostle Paul in this epistle to the Colossian brethren had emphasized that the focus of the saints is to be on "the things above." But one of the big challenges in establishing and maintaining that focus is ensuring that the past sin and guilt does not obscure the powerful and life-changing vision of Christ in glory. The initial part of obedience to the gospel deals with the elimination of the old self in the waters of immersion. (If the theme seems to be a little repetitive, apparently it needs to be!) "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death," the apostle definitively stated to the brethren in Rome, "certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with" (Romans 6:5,6). The same power that worked with Jesus to raise Him from the dead is the same power at work in making sure that the old "body of sin" is truly executed in a spiritual crucifixion. This old self, therefore, is clearly dead and buried. "For you have died," Paul thus superadds in his comments to the Colossians.
- **Hidden** - The body of Christ had to be buried in the sight of witnesses, and His resurrected body had to be demonstrated to be alive in the presence of witnesses, as Peter noted in his comments to the first Gentiles to be saved: "God raised Him up on the third day," the apostle testified, "and granted that He should become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us, who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead" (Acts 10:40,41). But, by contrast, the All Wise did not want the body of Moses found. "So Moses died there in the land of Moab," is the tag end of Deuteronomy, "according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab...but no man knows his burial place to this day" (Deuteronomy 34:5,6). The devil wanted the hidden body found, and there was quite the argument between Satan and Michael the archangel over that body. In the same way, the devil would like your "body of sin" - that was buried in the waters of immersion - to be found. But the Lord is equally emphatic: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God."

If something is hidden, no one can find it. If it can be found, it is not hidden. The scripture is clear: the past life is hidden; Satan cannot bring it up as a point of discouragement. God is interested in the spiritual success of His children, and He is not willing that the past be used as a demotivating tool by the forces of darkness. Move on!!!

When Christ is our Life

Members of the human race are dedicated to many diversionary, earthly things. Some are dedicated to the continual rounds of beauty pageants; some to following the paths of the auto racing circuit; some to traipsing around the country from rodeo to rodeo. These are just some random selections out of the hundreds or thousands of things that occupy people's lives. For some, the family farm occupies their total interest and time. For some, the business enterprise constitutes their total focus. For some, the family – children, grandchildren, family reunions - take up the great majority of their interest and avocation. For some, the upcoming Communist revolution absorbs what author Benjamin Gitlow called "The Whole of their Lives." No matter what it is, it is what absorbs their life's focus: it is their life.

- **The life of the Christian** - For the saint of God, the new life beckons. "The world," said Paul to the Galatians, "has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). With the world and the cross behind him, what would be before him? "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed," writes he to the Colossian church, "then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:4). No longer is the racing circuit the life of the saint, no longer the farm, no longer even the family. "Christ is our life." Christ is now the total focus of the saint's thoughts and affections. Jesus and the upcoming nuptials to His bride - the church - occupy the interest of his/her time and tabloids. Conversations with the Christ garner his attention and effort. The spread of Christ's gospel, and the affects of His spiritual revolution absorb his intense interest and whet his desire for the latest news of progress. Christ, indeed, is our life!
- **Attaining to glory** - Life on earth is short, no matter if it should last as long as Methuselah's 969 years. What is important is that each disciple of Jesus attain to eternal glory. The challenges of attaining to that glory are not to be minimized, however. The saints are fellow heirs of the riches of the glory of Christ, asseverated Paul, "if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may be glorified with Him" (Romans 8:17). All the positive motivations of the scripture are designed to help the brothers and sisters of Christ power through the trials and travails of earthly existence successfully so that they may enter into eternal fellowship with Him who lives forever and ever. "After you have suffered for a little while," contributed the apostle Peter, "the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10).
- **Revealed in Glory** - The presentation of the triumphant saints - "those who had come off victorious from the beast and from his image and from the number of his name" (Revelation 15:2) - is one of the signal events of all eternal history. "For the anxious longing of the creation," averred Paul, "waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19). It is worth everything a Christian might have to endure in life to hear the approving words of Jesus, "Well done, good and faithful slave" (Matthew 25:23). "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time," superadded the apostle Paul, "are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). What encouraging words: "When Christ is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory!!!"

Such glory is worth going after. The sin of glory-seeking is not the seeking of glory itself; the sin is where a person might seek for that glory. "How can you believe," Jesus excoriated the Jews, "when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that comes from the one and only God?" (John 5:44). Blessed are "those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality" (Romans 2:7). If Christ is indeed our life, then we will be revealed with Him in glory!

Death to Earthly Members

The war, observed the apostle Paul, is between the Spirit and the flesh. The human body is part of the material creation, subject to the laws of nature and the storms of an earthly existence. The body, then, operates on the basis of maximum benefit with minimum effort. This natural tendency leads to the formation of a spiritual type of "body of flesh" which develops when the descendant of Adam commits his first sin. In the initial stage of the spiritual war, the forces of darkness win as the flesh now takes ascendancy over the spirit of the man, his heart is corrupted, and he has now become locked into the domain of Satan. But the gospel of Christ comes to the rescue, as the individual now reaches for victory as he puts off the "body of the flesh" in his immersion into Christ. However, the battle still rages daily in the Christian as it raged daily in Christ Himself. "The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit," affirmed Paul to the Galatian churches, "and the Spirit against the flesh" (Galatians 5:17). Hence the need for continuing exhortation for the brethren in this spiritual war.

- **Consider the body dead** - "You have died," was Paul's blunt statement, "and your life is hidden with Christ." The eventual goal of the saint is to participate in Christ's glory at His second coming. "Therefore," exhorts the apostle, "consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). Because of his immersion into Christ, the old self is indeed buried, but the saint of God has to continue to program his mind as to the truthfulness of that fact. The disciple of Christ is to consider his body as dead - no ability to be aroused in any way by sinful desires. No more sexual immorality; no more impure or unsavory thoughts; no more being pulled along by the strong but immoral passions, the fire in the bosom referred to by Proverbs; no more slaving after evil desires, plans or plots to get what is forbidden; no more being driven by greed, by what John D. Rockefeller called "just one more dollar." Paul's comment that greed "amounts to idolatry" is significant, and establishes that not all idols have physical form.
- **The wrath of God** - The wrath of God is unbearable, and the human mind cannot really process the intensity and eternal duration of His anger. While the Christian is pictured as delivered from that wrath, he is continually warned not to drift away from the faith or be pulled back into fleshly lusts or he will experience that fierce anger of the Lord. "For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come," is the apostle's admonition, "and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them" (Colossians 3:6,7). The follower of Christ has been delivered from the lifestyle of the darkness; why would he go back into it again? The downward pull can be powerful, but the saint is given every positive reason to overcome, as well as the warning as to what will happen if he drifts back into the old life. The picture of the fires of hell still has to burn in the recesses of the saint's mind as a powerful incentive to move forward in Christ.

The scripture is emphatic that the deeds of the flesh are a part of the past life of the Christian. "In them you once walked," avers the apostle. "You were living in them," he stresses. "What benefit," the same apostle asked the brethren in Rome, "were you then deriving of the things of which you are now ashamed?" (Romans 6:21). After asking that probing question, he came back to the same point he had mentioned to the Colossians, "For the outcome of those things is death." The overall message of the word of God is clear: Put the past things to death, and continue to turn to God that you may live!

Out with the Old; in with the New

The scripture draws a clear line of demarcation; there is the world, and there is the church. One of the major thrusts of the epistle to the Colossians is laid out early and simply by the apostle Paul. "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness," was the apostle's description, "and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). The apostle Peter is on board with the same theme, pointing out that the brethren are to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9). The apostle John likewise issues his similar exordium, calling the saints out of the world because "the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever" (I John 2:17). One of the goals of God is to help the saint move from an earthly focus to having his mind truly set on the things above.

- **Put aside** - The apostle Paul reminded the brethren in Colossae that they had been buried with Christ in immersion, and that they had been raised up with Him through their faith in God's working. The old self was gone; the new self was raised up out of the waters of immersion. This new creature, then, is to make certain the old stuff stays gone. "But now you also," asseverates the apostle Paul, "put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth" (Colossians 3:8). Many of these characteristics arise from personal interactions. The saint is to move away from these bad attitude issues and over to the character of Christ. Malice - the deliberate attempt to create ruckuses, division, and destruction - is one that should definitely be put aside. Slander - spreading evil statements about people that are not true - is also very destructive, and is to be eschewed strongly by the saint of God. Abusive speech "put downs" of every kind - are extremely destructive, and the saint is to move his line of talk to that which builds up rather than destroys.
- **Lay aside** - "Do not lie to one another," warns the apostle, "since you have laid aside the old self with its evil practices" (Colossians 3:9). Satan is the father of lies, noted Jesus, and God wants Christians to eliminate that habit from their lives. "All liars," is the message of the apocalypse of John, "their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). "Outside" the eternal city, the same apocalypse informs saints, is "everyone who loves and practices lying" (Revelation 22:15). The Christian is thusly exhorted to lay aside that old self, with any and all of its evil practices.
- **Put on the new self** - The important aspect is not so much that the old self is gone - although that is highly significant - but the more important part is the putting on of the new self. You laid aside the old self, affirms the apostle, "and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him" (Colossians 3:10). That new self was "put on" in the image of Christ in immersion. "For all of you who were immersed into Christ," declared Paul, "have clothed yourself with Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

Over and over and over again the new testament scriptures work on the idea that there is a totally new creation coming up out of that water. This new creation is not simply the old creature forgiven; this is a brand new being on the inside of that human shell, a treasure-powered son of God inside an earthen vessel. The focus of the word of God, and the interest of the heavenly Father, is on the continued development, use, and victory of that new creation. The old man of sin is gone; bring on the new creation in Christ Jesus!

The New Image

Many Christians, amazingly, have a hard time understanding the Biblical concept of the new creation. One of the reasons for that difficulty is that the formation of the new creation is entirely in the realm of that which is unseen, the realm of faith. Forgiveness of sins cannot be seen, which is why there can be all the fake "plans of salvation" that exclude the proper immersion. The indwelling Holy Spirit cannot be seen, which is why some people discount His importance. And the new creation cannot be seen, which is why many do not believe in the possibilities connected with it. "For we are His workmanship," asserted the apostle Paul, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). These good works are not just helping little old ladies across the street; they have to do with carrying the gospel to the ends of the world in the face of all the opposition that the minions of Satan can offer.

- **The new self** - What a blessing it is for the saint to be a "new self." Gone is the old one with whatever guilt feelings were associated with it. This new self was initially "put on" in immersion in Jesus' name, and is a powerful spiritual being superior to mere man (1 Corinthians 3:3). This new self operates with a clean conscience, purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ - blood sprinkled on the heart when the body was washed. This new self functions with the power of the Spirit in the inner man. This new self has been ushered into the very presence of God in the Holy of Holies, and is seated with Christ on the throne. This new self, therefore, has instant and powerful access to all the power provided through prayer by the authority of the great intercessor according to the order of Melchizedek, Jesus Christ Himself.
- **Image of the One who created him** - This new creation, attested Paul, is "being renewed to a true knowledge in the image of the One who created him." Because of the intensity of the spiritual warfare, and because of the challenge of renewing the mind, a continual renewal of this new creation is taking place by the power of the Almighty God. God "saved us," Paul informed us, "not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5,6). This renewal keeps the disciple of Christ empowered with the strength to walk in the footsteps of Christ, to be holy as the Father is holy. This renewal in the image of Christ the Son of God makes it possible for the new creature to take up the sword of the Spirit and fight the good fight of faith victoriously!

One of the exciting things about this new creature in Christ is that the potential is open to all members of the human race, regardless of background or upbringing. This renewal, affirms Paul, is one "in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman - but Christ is all, and in all" (Colossians 3:11). God doesn't care whether a person comes from the North African coast, the Greek speaking part of southern Europe and western Asia, or whether he is from the steppes of what is now Ukraine: what is important is that he is a new creation in Christ Jesus. The Lord of all does not regard whether a person is of Jewish or Gentile background; what is important is whether that saint is being renewed in the image of the One who created him. The Almighty is not concerned whether the individual is male or female in the fleshly body, or whether the person is slave or free. What is important is whether he is a new creation in Christ Jesus, and whether that new creation is undergoing the continual processes of renewal. The message is clear: keep renewing the new creation!!

The New Heart

Since Christians are fantastic new creations in Christ Jesus, what should their behavior be? Over and over again, the new covenant writings stress that the old man of sin was done away with, and that a new being has come up out of the water. "As Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father," was Paul's reminder, "so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). "I have been crucified with Christ," was the apostle's personal application for the benefit of the Galatians, "and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 5:20). "God," emphasized Peter, "has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). "Moreover," the Father had prophesied, "I will give you a new heart and put a new Spirit within you" (Ezekiel 36:26). The Almighty has done much to bring these new creations into existence, and therefore has much instruction for each.

- **The chosen of God** - Jesus, the Lamb of God of the book of Revelation, "is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful" (Revelation 17:14). Christians are "the called" because they heard the message of the gospel and obeyed it; they are "chosen" because they have been sifted out of the masses of mankind by the winnowing fork of Jesus; and they are "faithful" because they have maintained their God-ordained beliefs and practices through all the fiery challenges that earth can offer. "And so," says Paul to the brethren at Colossae, "as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved..." (Colossians 3:12). The saints of God are those for whom the Father looked down the ages in eagerness, choosing them out of this world, setting them apart for His purposes as holy, and showering His love upon them.
- **Put on a new heart** - When each disciple of Christ was immersed into Christ, he received a new heart, or what the apostle Paul called "circumcision...of the heart, by the Spirit" (Romans 2:29). But this new heart, like the new self, must continue to be put on. "Put on a heart of compassion..." is the apostle's exhortation. Every day, with the rest of the clothing, the new heart must be donned!
- **These qualities** - The qualities of the new heart are not vague or nondescript. The first on the list is compassion, that ability to feel with those who are hurting or in need of encouragement. He continues with kindness, the thoughtful actions of those who think of ways to help others or to show them favors that strengthen the bonds of love and sharing. Next is humility, the willingness to do whatever needs honorably to be done, to suffer as Christ suffered if necessary for the sake of others and the gospel. This is followed by gentleness, that calming strength-like quality to move people and situations in the right direction. These are coupled with patience, the capability of cheerfully waiting for people and for the Lord to accomplish what needs to be done next.

The children of God work together inside the framework of what is called "the church of God" or "the body of Christ." As a result, they occasionally bump into each other in the process of getting that work done, and tempers could fly or jealousy could flare. Instead, these that put on the new heart are "bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so should you" (Colossians 3:13). Even if the complaint is legitimate, let the followers of Christ work it out, keeping in mind the big picture of how much Christ forgave each of them. The cause of Christ is great, and the spread of the gospel is of utmost importance and urgency. It is imperative, then, that no deeds of the flesh interfere with the brethren's ability to work together; it is critical that each saint of God continue to put on the new heart!

A new creation focus through Colossians

Love and Peace

The whole world craves love and peace. The problem is that the world wants love and peace on its terms, unaware of why there is a shortage of love and peace in the first place. Since sin entered the world through Adam - and the angel of darkness has been able to spread his fires of rebellion to engulf and inflame the masses of mankind - there has been a separation between man and God, a separation from the love and peace of Him who is love and who proclaims peace. Thus, in order for love and peace to be propagated, men have to, in the words of Jesus to the future apostle Paul on the Damascus Road, "open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18). The true children of God have made this turn in their immersions into Christ, and therefore can experience the love and peace of God on His terms.

- **Put on love** - In the masterful will and plan of God, men have - by their own choices - sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. "For God has shut up all in disobedience," observed the apostle, "that He might show mercy to all" (Romans 11:32). This gave the All Wise the opportunity to show forth His love for all mankind, reaching through the darkness to rescue any that are willing to accept and obey the terms of His rescue. "God demonstrates His own love toward us," asseverated the apostle, "in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Understanding the love of God, then, is tied to consciousness of His forgiveness. Saints, therefore, are to forgive one another. "Just as the Lord forgave you," the apostle reminds them, "so also should you." From that, he builds logically to the next point: "And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (Colossians 3:14). Real love is what drew the saint to obeying the gospel - an understanding that God's love is what provided the sacrifice of Christ for his sins, and for opening the door of repentance for his salvation through immersion into Christ. The disciple of Jesus is thus united with the Father in the likeness of Jesus' death, to come forth in the likeness of His resurrection. The love of God promoted this unity, and the faithful obedience of the new saint made it complete. This love, then, is to abound among the brethren, and thus draw them together into what the apostle called "the perfect bond of unity."
- **Resounding peace** - Real love results in real unity, and real unity with God results in peace. Through the death of Christ, the barrier between a man and his God has been tom down, and there is now peace for this individual in his inner man. "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts," exhorts Paul, "to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful" (Colossians 3:15). The saint has a choice as to whether or not he lets this peace rule in his heart; he can continue to be stressed and agitated if he so chooses. The word of God plainly tells the follower of Jesus that he needs to kick off the top any of the other things reigning in his heart as "king of the hill." and let the peace of Christ rule there. This peace allows the brethren to work together effectively, and produces the blessed unity - what the Holy Spirit here calls "in one body." Not two, or three, or 600; ONE body!!

When the brethren in Christ put the proper value on the spiritual things accomplished by the All Powerful God through the Savior, then the goodness of God begins to flow through the body of Christ. The challenges of earthly existence fade when compared to "the things above, where Christ is." The saints, then, recognizing this truth in increasing degree, can fulfill the command to "be thankful."

The Word of Christ

"The voice of the LORD is powerful," said the sweet psalmist of Israel, "the voice of the LORD is majestic" (Psalm 29:4). "The voice of the LORD," added David, breaks the cedars of Lebanon in pieces, hews out flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, makes the deer to calve, strips the forests bare, "and in His temple everything says, 'Glory!'" Who is this LORD who has such a powerful voice? It is "the LORD who sits as King forever" (Psalm 29:10). It is the same as the Lord whom Isaiah saw sitting on His throne, who in despair cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined...for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). This same LORD of hosts is described by the apostle John as Jesus in glory (John 12:36-42). So it was the word of Christ that brought the universe into existence, the word of Christ that thundered from Sinai, the word of Christ that brought new creations into existence in their immersions in Jesus' name.

- **The whole word** - The word of Christ is not limited to the specific events mentioned above. Really the whole scripture is the word of Christ, with a special emphasis on the teachings of the new covenant. "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you," exhorts the apostle Paul. This is the powerful word, more powerful than the physical description of the word which breaks the cedars of Lebanon in pieces; this is the word that can take a lost and alien sinner, free him from sin, grant him the indwelling Spirit, and bring him into existence as a new creation in Christ. This word, then, is to richly dwell within - not sparingly, nor sparsely. The saint of God really is to immerse himself in the word, memorize the word, talk about the word, teach the word, and spread the word. "And these words I am commanding you today," the Almighty laid down as a principle in Israel, to be built upon by the church; "shall be on your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy 6:6,7).
- **Wisdom** - In Israel, the children were to be taught by the parents to talk about the word of God. In Christianity, under the terms of the new covenant, a disciple of a teacher is compared to a child. "I appeal to you for my child," said Paul to Philemon, church leader in Colossae. This child, stated the apostle, "I have begotten in my imprisonment - Onesimus" (Philemon 1:10). Onesimus, runaway slave, was sent back to his earthly master after Paul taught him the gospel, immersed him, and got him on the right track. These "children," therefore, are to have the word of God talked about all the time in their presence. "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you," is the apostle's opener, "with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another..." Children of the faith are being guided in accordance with the word of God, being taught its principles, and being admonished where necessary. It is clear, also, that the children are to desire the teaching and accept the admonitions without turning into a bunch of squalling, complaining brats.

One of the major ways in which this teaching and admonishing of the children of the faith is "with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts." It is patently clear that this is when the saints sit in their houses and walk by the way and when they lie down and when they rise up; it is not a verse referring only to the assemblies of the brethren. The continuing overall goal is that "the word of Christ" is to dwell richly within each disciple of Christ in every way possible, that each might be filled up to the fullness of Christ. Fill 'em up!!

Whatever You Do

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free," Paul reminded the Galatian brethren. Certainly freedom from sin was one aspect of the general liberty which Christ has brought to the saints. "Truly, truly, I say to you," was His gambit to the Jewish hierarchy, "everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin" (John 8:34). Could a man free himself from that slavery? Of course not; only Jesus can free the captive. "If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed," He informed them and the world (John 8:36). But in order to be so truly free, a person has to be able to handle the responsibility that comes with freedom. If a person has the liberty to decide whether to work or not to work, he has to be able to discipline himself to labor for his food or he will starve. Spiritually speaking, then, the saint of God is free to exercise a lot of liberty in the use of his time, money, energy, and talents. The Father's idea is that if a person is mature enough for the privilege of sonship in Christ, then he is mature enough to manage himself for the glory of God.

- **Whatever** - One of the blessings that comes with freedom is the flexibility to be creative. In societies where there is no freedom, everything and everyone is regimented, and there is no room for independent or creative thought. In the freedom of being in Christ, then, the Father expects His children to show a lot of initiative and ingenuity in figuring out how to get the gospel spread, and how to make the local church function. He has given general guidelines for the individual and for the congregation in which He expects that initiative and ingenuity to operate, but there is tremendous freedom within those boundaries. "And whatever you do in word or deed," asseverates the apostle Paul, "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17). Whatever is a big word, big enough for every saint of God to find room for his creativity and energy to operate positively for the forward movement of God's kingdom.
- **In the name of the Lord** - The expression, "in the name of the Lord Jesus," means by the authority of the Lord Jesus. Someone can mumble the words "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," but that does not mean that he is operating under the authority of Jesus Christ. The apostle is pointing out that the saint has a lot of freedom to say and to do many things for the cause of the gospel, but those things have to be said and done in consonance with the terms and tenor of the new covenant. A Christian could not be down at the local tavern drinking and getting drunk with the other patrons and legitimately claim that he was operating under the authority of the name of Jesus Christ. What is required here is absolute honesty with God, and when that honesty is operating, there are many legitimate and creative presentations and activities that can be initiated so that God's kingdom can be advanced.
- **Thankfulness** - Properly understood, it is a pleasure and a blessing to serve the living God. What higher calling could there possibly be, than to serve the great and awesome Creator? What more noble or fulfilling purpose could there possibly be than in participating in Jesus' plan of seeking and saving the lost? What else could last for all eternity other than the work and words said for the name of the Lord Jesus? For the favor of being allowed to participate, saints are "giving thanks through Him to God the Father."

Saints of the church of the living God have immense freedom to go, speak, and accomplish things for the distribution of the gospel, the saving of souls, and conservation of the Christians. What great and encouraging words: "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus." So, let's go and do!

Some Family Dynamics

The backbone of every society, including the church of the living God, is the family. The devil, the god of confusion and the author of rebellion, therefore has always done everything possible to destroy the family unit. Men and women do not get married with the plan and intention of being miserable, but marriages often end up in divorce, or with major hard feelings or bare toleration between the husband and wife; from where did all this destruction come? The first family had to deal with the oldest brother in the family murdering the second son; the picture has not changed since the early chapters of Genesis, and whence cometh all this dissension and hatred? God, then, in bringing into existence "a new and living way," is also presenting instruction which will restore and enhance the happy family living experience.

- **Wives** - The first set of exhortations is going to come to the women. "Wives," addresses the apostle Paul, "be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (Colossians 3:18). In this day and age, those tend to be "fighting words"! But the scripture paints a long and consistent picture that women are more designed to be in a supporting role, and that they in the marriage relationship are to be submissive to their husbands. The simple question that comes to mind here is: who is smarter, "us" or God? The obvious answer is God, but to get women to realize that the marriage is going to work much more harmoniously if they are subject to their husbands is a difficult challenge. So if the husband is not running contrary to the principles of the scripture, the wife should work to make it work, "as is fitting in the Lord." It is true, but it requires the Christian wife to be able really to trust God, as the apostle Peter put it: "Entrust [your] souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (1 Peter 4:19).
- **Husbands** - Next, some instruction for the men. "Husbands," says Paul, "love your wives and do not be embittered against them" (Colossians 3:19). "As Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her," affirmed the apostle in another place, so husbands ought to love their own wives (Ephesians 5:25). A loving husband oversees the family operation in an intelligent and disciplined manner, thinking ahead and planning ahead. He thinks of creative ways to communicate to his wife that he loves her, and reinforces that with all consideration, as he really lays down his life for the wife and family. Even Christian women, by nature, generally are more emotional than their men. The men have to understand those emotions, as Peter instructed, and because women are not men, and have different priorities and interests, the men "are not to be embittered against them."
- **Children** - Parents have the obligation to pass on to their children the instruction of the Lord. So, a pithy quote from the inspired apostle Paul is brought forward for the kids' edification and contemplation. "Children," he intones, "be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord" (Colossians 3:20). This is clear; no irrational arguments or tantrum-like behaviors are going to change this word from the Lord.
- **Fathers** - Dads have a tremendous responsibility, with the wife's full input and cooperation, to train children up in the ways of the Lord. "Fathers," is how the apostle calls them to attention, "do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart" (Colossians 3:21). Dads need to be consistent so the children already have a good idea of what is expected and what decisions will be rendered. They have to be reasonable, gathering input, before they hand out punishment or before they set a course or point out direction. Expectations need to be within the range of each child, and much instruction and training is necessary to help them meet those expectations. Those children need real encouragement, and wisdom is required to help them not to lose heart.

These instructions will help the family on its positive course, and defeat the devil's destructive efforts. May the modern Christian family heed all this inspired advice.

Working Like Slaves

Some estimate as many as two-thirds of the first century Christians were slaves. Onesimus, featured in Paul's epistle to Philemon, was a slave run away from a Christian master, and men with names such as Tertius (#3) and Quartus (#4) show up in the writings of the new covenant. Since some Christians were slave masters, and since some Christians were slaves, the word of God is going to have some instructions for both.

It is comparatively easy for moderns to look back at the Roman Empire days and say that the Christian slave owners should have simply released their slaves. Slave release was not easy to accomplish without the slaves being conscripted by someone else. Hence, often the best solution was for the slaves to remain with their kind and Christian master. "Were you called as a slave [did you become a Christian when you were already a slave]?" Paul posited in addressing the Corinthians. "Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that" (I Corinthians 7:21). If a slave, follow the instructions for slaves.

- **Upbeat obedience** - It is almost incomprehensible that God's long-term plan should include massive numbers of Christians being slaves. But thus it was, and thus the instructions. "Slaves," exhorted Paul, "in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord" (Colossian 3:22). The Lord would be the One inspecting all the work, even that which could not otherwise be seen. He is the One who is the Master in heaven, not merely one of the "masters on earth." Slaves were therefore to be respectfully obedient to their masters, and to do their work correctly at every level.
- **Work heartily** - The concept of "slaves" and "slave labor" go together. If there were no work to be done, there would be no economic reason to have slaves. Slaves were there to work; hence the scripture gives the instruction: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossians 3:23,24). Those first century Christian slaves were to have a great attitude in their work; how much more, then, those who freely choose their employment or do their housework at home! The Lord does not like it when there is a lot of complaining and general bad attitudes. The record of the sons of Israel in the wilderness shows clearly that God wants His children to be positive and upbeat, understanding that their circumstances are part of God's overall and long-term plan. "Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord," noted the inspired record, "and when the Lord heard it, His anger kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp" (Numbers 11:1). "Whatever you do, do your work heartily!"
- **Consequences** - Because Jesus Himself is the Big Boss brethren must remember that He knows whether the job was done correctly or whether it was sloppily done by way of mere "external service." "For he who does wrong," the apostle informs the brethren, "will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality!" (Colossians 3:25). Sobering thoughts, designed to move the saint over to full and quality production.

No matter what the saint's circumstance, he is working for God and he is to do his job well and with a great attitude. The best accolade is worth striving for, the words from the Lord Jesus at the culmination of judgment: "Well done, good and faithful slave!" (Matthew 25:21). It is indeed from the Lord Himself that faithful saints will receive the reward of the eternal inheritance, and it is because it is indeed the Lord Himself that they serve.

Slaves and Masters

As loathsome as it is, God has allowed the practice of slavery throughout the history of mankind. God has also allowed murder, thievery, lying, coveting, and adultery. Since man has free will, then all kinds of evil are allowed until Jesus comes and puts an end to it all. So slavery is a part of human existence. Slavery is usually thought of in terms of a slave master owning one or multiple slaves. But there is slavery on a larger scale than this, where the master is not an individual but a government. Under the yoke of the Babylonians, then of the Persians, the men of Nehemiah's day noted in their prayer to the Almighty, "But they [their ancestors in Israel] in their own kingdom, with Your great goodness which You gave them, with the broad and rich land which You set before them, did not serve You or turn from their evil deeds. Behold, we are *slaves* today, and as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, behold, we are *slaves* on it. And its abundant produce is for the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins; they also rule over our bodies and over our cattle as they please, so we are in great distress" (Nehemiah 9:35-37).

Just as God uses physical death to teach a message about spiritual death — both a first and second death — He also uses physical slavery to teach about spiritual slavery. Jesus, in discussing this with the higher ranking Jews, commented, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin" (John 8:34). Once enslaved, the question would be, how can a person be set free? "If therefore the Son shall make you free," Jesus adverted, "you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). The Son of God, of course, died and rose again to set men free from their slavery to sin. This becomes actuated on an individual basis, however, at the time of a person's obedience to the gospel. In immersion, the old self is buried and a new self is resurrected, "that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin, for he who has died is freed from sin" (Romans 6,7). That is freedom indeed!

- **Treatment of slaves** - Because so many of the early Christians were slaves, there were instructions for those slaves regarding their conduct. But in order to have slaves, it is clear that there must also be masters. Some early Christians, then, would also be slaveholders, such as Philemon. "Masters," comes Paul's instruction, "grant to your slaves justice and fairness" (Colossians 4:1). Very few experiences on earth are more frustrating than those where there is injustice or unfairness. When the boss has "pets, who can't do anything wrong," there is tremendous agitation among the rest of the workers. Before punishment is to be meted out, the master needs to be certain of the guilt. Furthermore, the punishment needs to match the severity of the offense, or the sentencing is still injustice. And the slaves need to be treated fairly; the boss or master has to reward or punish based on the individual's performance (or lack of it) in relation to what he can do. Jesus was directly talking about slaves when He laid down this principle: "From everyone who has been given much, much shall be required" (Luke 12:48).
- **Remember the ultimate Master** - "Great and small," the line reads, "God made them all." Even though slave masters have a higher standing on an earthly basis than their slaves, there is a great leveling before the King of Kings. Masters, then, are to be "knowing that you too have a Master in heaven." Earthly masters will give an accounting of how they treated their slaves, servants, or employees.

All men will ultimately stand before the judgment throne of Christ, and they will be judged according to the things written in the books. The key, whether a person be slave or free, is whether his name is written in the Lamb's book of life. Better to be a slave on earth and enter the courts of glory than to be a master and be thrown into the lake of fire.

Devoted to Prayer

What can be accomplished through prayer? “Then Joshua spoke to the Lord,” noted the Old Testament records, “in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of the Lord, ‘O sun, stand still at Gibeon, and O moon in the valley of Aijalon.’ So the sun stood still and the moon stopped until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies” (Joshua 10:12,13). That was an awesome prayer, with awesome results — results that obviously only God could accomplish. There are many other prayers recorded in the Old Testament writings, wherein God did some great and mighty things in the physical realm to establish His power over all. Jesus Himself prayed some powerful prayers, including that which set the stage for His raising Lazarus from the dead. “Father,” said He, “I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You hear Me always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that You did send Me” (John 11:41,42). He was not kidding when He said, “If you have faith and ... you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive” (Matthew 21:21,22). You just have to have a knowledgeable enough faith to know what to ask for and when.

- **Devote yourselves** - The apostle Paul, therefore, was going to encourage the brethren in the congregations over which he had any influence to pray. “Devote yourselves to prayer,” is his exhortation to the brethren in Colossae, “keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). The prayers of the saints, in the economy of God, have tremendous power in the spiritual realm. The great things that were accomplished through the recorded prayers of the Old Testament were done in the physical realm to set the stage for the saints’ understanding of what could be accomplished in the spiritual realm. “Elijah,” said James, “prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:17,18). That statement was to provide the backing for the application to the new covenant saint’s prayers, as James noted, “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16). The individual Christian, if he really devotes himself to prayer, can pray some big prayers for progress and open doors in the spiritual realm, and have God do some of the really powerful and mighty works for the spread of the gospel. God is, as Paul taught the Ephesians, “able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20). The brethren just need to think and ask!
- **Alert and thankful** - The apostle in his encouragement appealed to the disciples to keep alert in their prayers. When saints take the time to sit down in protracted prayer, it is possible to become sleepy. So the follower of Christ has to make provision to stay alert in this way, having appropriate breaks and developing techniques to help himself not to drift into a sleepy mode during prayer time. Also, there is a tendency for the mind to wander during prayer. So the saint has to develop habits of keeping his mind focused during prayer, such as writing the prayers down or saying them out loud. Furthermore, the prayers and petitions are to be coupled with “an attitude of thanksgiving.” The firm but loving Father is not particularly delighted in answering requests from ungrateful brats. The sons of God should be, and need to be, truly thankful for all the provisions which come from God’s extensive grace.

Prayer - properly understood - because it can accomplish so much, is something the Christian really desires to do. Prayer is the means by which healthy praise and thanksgiving can be offered to the great and awesome God. And prayer is the mechanism through which God works to accomplish His great and mighty work in spreading the gospel and changing people’s lives and eternities!

Prayers for Open Doors

The inspired record of the book of Acts, when looked at from the side of the disciples of Christ, is a record of prayer followed by preaching. The prayer was necessary, and really set in motion the conditions for the success they had from preaching the word. Before Jesus began His ministry, He prayed and fasted. Before the preaching on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples prayed. They prayed as recorded in the fourth chapter of Acts, and they were able to preach the word of God with boldness when the building shook; the apostles preached in the temple, were jailed, then preached again; “and every day in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42). Before Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the first missionary journey, specifically targeting the Gentiles, the key brethren fasted and prayed. The example is pretty clear: get the praying in so the preaching can get going!

- **Door for the word** - The apostle Paul was encouraging the brethren in Colossae to devote themselves to prayer, exhorting them to keep alert in those prayers with an attitude of thanksgiving. He then added a focus, saying, “praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that I may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned” (Colossians 4:3). Preaching and teaching the gospel is hard work. So many people have to be worked through to find those who are truly interested. Many times, it seems that there is a brick wall in front of the teacher/preacher. But sometimes what the scripture often calls “an open door” avails, when people in a certain area are receptive to the gospel. When that happens, the faithful deliverer of the word of truth must be prepared to charge through that door, because it may be awhile before another one opens. Hence the apostle was imploring the brethren to pray that one of those doors would open again for him.
- **Speak forth the mystery** - When the apostle Paul worked in an area, he did not hold back on what he was preaching. To the elders at Ephesus, he affirmed that “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable,” and that “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:20,27). Earlier in this epistle, the apostle had explained that his goal was to “fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,” which he then explained as the “mystery ... which is Christ in you.” The apostle’s mission was not simply to deliver a message on forgiveness of sins which comes through immersion in the name of Jesus Christ. He knew he needed to also preach *the mystery*, the indwelling Spirit. Without preaching the mystery, the message of the Christ is extremely incomplete, truncated after the first step, cutting off the teaching necessary for the growth of the Christian. But when the indwelling Spirit — Christ in you, the hope of glory — is preached, then all the doors of understanding and growth are opened for the saints. It is not surprising, then, that Satan should oppose this message which results in transformation and victory for the saint, and that this would be the reason “for which,” as the apostle comments, “I have been imprisoned.” He also was expressing his desire that the saints pray that, concerning this mystery, “in order that I may make it clear as I ought to speak” (Colossians 4:4). Because the preaching of the indwelling Holy Spirit is on a level of spirituality that is higher than forgiveness of sins, it requires much clear teaching to bring the significance of its truths to the brethren.

May God open for us the doors for the word, that we might speak forth the mystery, and that we may make it clear in our speech as well!!!

Making the Most of the Opportunity

Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. That, of course, must be the mission of the church, and therefore the mission of every member of the church. One of the challenges is helping the brethren see that this too is their mission. When people first become Christians, they generally are focused on themselves; they want relief from a guilty conscience and forgiveness of sins. But as God continues their education or discipleship, His goal is to move them from that focus on themselves to a strong focus on others who are outside of Christ. To do that, God has to implant His love and care for the lost in their breasts. He has to give them the confidence and assurance that they are capable of carrying out His mission. He has to provide them with the courage necessary to face the obstacles and persecution often connected with seeking and saving the lost. He has to help them develop the commitment necessary for the patience needed in working with the lost and helping them understand their desperate condition. And God has to have the teaching in place that helps the saint develop the deep conviction of the truthfulness of God's claims as revealed in the written word of God. As these qualities increasingly develop within the disciple of Christ, he becomes a more effective "fisher of men."

- **Wisdom toward outsiders** - Most of the effective work in seeking and saving the lost is going to develop from the individual or private conversations that spring up as Christians intermingle with those who are lost or of the world. Hence comes the imperative exordium from the apostle Paul, "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). Those who are serious anglers spend a lot of time figuring out how best to be successful in their fishing. The money spent on the appropriate fly rods, the lures, the "flies" themselves, is astounding. How much more, then, should saints of God be diligent in their preparation in "fishing for men"! If the disciple of Christ is not mentally, spiritually, and emotionally prepared, he will miss many of the opportunities to set up Bible studies. The opportunity will be there, but he won't see it because he is really not looking for it. Therefore Christ wants His followers to be geared up and ready to "redeem the time," to make the most of that opportunity.
- **Intelligent speech** - Since most of the opportunities develop out of personal or private conversations, the Father wants His children to engage in intelligent but purpose-driven communication. The prefacing words are "conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders." These are followed by, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person" (Colossians 4:6). Gracious speech is forgiving, but it is also "giving." It always is teaching or motivating, with discernment expressing concern for the individual on the other end of the conversation. But that speech is also "seasoned with salt"; that is, there are always "trolling hooks" being pulled through the waters of the conversation to see if there is an opening for directing the conversation toward setting up a Bible study or moving things forward spiritually.

All these things fit the category of what might be called "skills." Basically, in the use of any skill, the more a person practices his skill the better he becomes. So it is with conversation; it is a skill. Hence, the more the saint practices his technique in getting the Bible study, the more effective he will become in so doing. This cumulative improvement in the skill set is even called in our vernacular "know how." God wants each of His messengers to get enough of that "know how" so that they can respond properly "to each person." So ... let's get out there and "make the most of the opportunity!" — for the glory of God, the salvation of the lost, and the expansion of Jesus' kingdom!!

Paul's Condition in Rome

Back in New Testament times, there was no Facebook or any such posting to let others know of their condition. Travel was slow, by comparison, and communication was therefore as slow as travel. The result was that much of what was going on was unreported and known only to the individuals directly involved. So any information transmitted would be of more importance and of necessity brief in comparison to what can be communicated when information transfer is easy. Thus, if the apostle Paul wanted the brethren to know what was going on in his life, he had to find trustworthy people who could have access to him in prison, who had the flexibility and the finances to be able to travel, and who would be received as trustworthy on the other end. When therefore the scripture lists someone as bringing a report from an important individual such as Paul, many factors had to align for that to happen, and as such it was worthy of note in what would become the inspired record.

- **Tychicus** - Among the salient members of Paul's team was Tychicus. According to the record of the book of Acts, he was from the Roman province of Asia, with its capital at Ephesus (Acts 20:4). "As to all my affairs," says Paul regarding his circumstances in prison and what he can accomplish through his network, "Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information" (Colossians 4:7). Tychicus clearly was trustworthy — "faithful" — on both ends of the information transmission line; he was trusted by Paul and trusted by the Colossians. This "beloved brother" then could bring all the pertinent information, and would bring it accurately.
- **Purpose** - The brethren in Colossae clearly loved the apostle, and were hungry for news about his activities; what came was sparse and not necessarily accurate. This statement by Paul would thus be excitedly received by the saints at Colossae: "For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts" (Colossians 4:8). Tychicus was not only a messenger boy, he was also a preacher of the word and capable of bringing the encouragement of the eternal gospel to the Christians. This encouragement which comes through the preaching and teaching of God's word is the core of the saint's life, and never to be shunted aside.
- **Onesimus** - Coming with Tychicus was a runaway slave, as Paul informs the brethren. "With him," he states, "Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number" (Colossians 4:9). Onesimus was not one of their number when he ran away from his master, Philemon, who was a member of the congregation at Colossae. Paul describes him as one "whom I have begotten in my imprisonment" (Philemon 1:10). The apostle immersed Onesimus when the slave found him in prison; Paul taught him the gospel, including the importance of repentance. The slave who had run away was willing to take Paul's advice and willingly return to and submit to his master. Paul thus called him "faithful and beloved," and wanted the congregation to receive him as one of their "number."

The apostle was in no sense wanting, in Onesimus' case, to "throw him under the bus." Tychicus, likewise, a faithful brother and understanding the worth of each man's soul — whether slave or free — was willing to let this converted runaway have equal standing with him in the Lord. "They," affirms the apostle concerning both men, "will inform you of the whole situation here." Paul was thus demonstrating his trust in Onesimus, and showing the church at Colossae how teamwork can be accomplished in Christ. The brethren would then have the whole picture of Paul's circumstances through two faithful and beloved men! What edification, and what an example for present day Christians!!

Workers from “the Circumcision”

Over the years, Paul was able to accumulate a team who worked with him in spreading the gospel. On his first missionary journey, Barnabas was at first the lead man, with Paul doing quite a bit of preaching also, and with John Mark as the young man who was necessary in doing all the daily chores. During that journey, Mark left them when they arrived on the mainland of what is now Turkey, and returned to Jerusalem. Paul was first known as Saul, and was listed secondly, as in “Barnabas and Saul.” But on the western side of Cyprus, Paul received his apostleship from the Lord Jesus, evidenced in striking blind a Jewish false teacher. Luke, in the book of Acts, notes the change in Paul’s status to a full-fledged apostle by changing Saul’s name to Paul. Paul’s position as an apostle of Jesus is subtly noted by the alteration in Luke’s description of that early traveling party: “Paul and his companions” (Acts 12:25-13:13). Paul and Barnabas separated after the first missionary journey, and on the second mission Paul was accompanied by Silas, who was a prophet, who was a Roman citizen, and who had been a leading man in the congregation at Jerusalem. After that Timothy was added to the contingent in Lystra, and Luke at Philippi.

- **Aristarchus** - Aristarchus shows up on Paul’s third missionary journey. When a silversmith named Demetrius incited a disturbance in Ephesus, “the city was filled with confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia” (Acts 19:29). As Paul and his crew finished up their work on the final missionary journey, Aristarchus was one of those in the ship accompanying Paul and the offering collected from the Gentile churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). And on the trip to Rome, on which Paul was a prisoner who had made his appeal to Caesar, Aristarchus was, along with Luke, a passenger, as the historian recorded: “And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica (Acts 27:2). Later, as Paul writes this letter from Rome to the brethren in Colossae, he notes, “Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings” (Colossians 4:10). Aristarchus (as later information indicates) was a Jewish Christian, still working with Paul in Rome, and had been arrested also and imprisoned with Paul. Clearly a dedicated man of God!
- **Mark and Justus** - Mark’s background has already been noted, including his desertion from the party on Paul’s first missionary journey, and the apostle’s refusal to take Mark with him on the second. After stating that Aristarchus sent his greetings to the church in Colossae, Paul adds, “and also Barnabas’ cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him); and also Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision; and they have proved to be an encouragement to me” (Colossians 4:10,11). It is worthy of note that these men are described as “workers” as contrasted to “loafers,” and that their work was for the kingdom of God (which is the church). Jesus, an English name from the Greek, was a common name, equivalent to Joshua. But, as was somewhat customary, Justus was a substitute name because of the reverence given to the name Jesus. It is clear that Paul appreciated their work and the encouragement it gave him.

Real names, real people, real situations ... these are the things which give these letters credibility as authentic rather than the made-up fake letters which tend to circulate even to this day. In addition, modern Christians get a glimpse into the workings of Paul and his teammates as they worked to spread the gospel and strengthen the saints. These are instructive for positive modeling in working together today!

Closing Greetings and Comments

An insightful phrase or a positive comment can be words which help a person turn his life around, or help him stay on track. A special card, an encouraging text, a telephone call, or a meaningful post can be the difference between a day which isn't going so well and one which seems like it has cheerful rays of sunshine all through it. For those first century Christians who often underwent severe persecution, those expressions of love and encouragement would be especially uplifting.

- **Epaphras** - Epaphras was a faithful brother who was also imprisoned with Paul in Rome (Philemon 1:23). This man was apparently a preacher and teacher also, and had already been alluded to as the one who had done much of the early teaching in Colossae (Colossians 1:7). "Epaphras, who is one of your number," says Paul, "a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God" (Colossians 4:12). What encouragement these comments would bring! How exciting it would be for these brethren to know that the one who taught them so much continued to labor for them in prayer! How clear it is from these comments which have been favorably recorded that God wants each saint to stand perfect before Him, and that have the full assurance that each is doing God's will. "For I bear him witness," continues the apostle, "that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis" (Colossians 4:13). Laodicea and Hierapolis were nearby towns which had congregations, and Epaphras, with true concern for the souls of the lost, had labored in them as well as Colossae, and honestly continued to desire that the saints remain faithful.
- **Others** - "Luke, the beloved physician," Paul also records, "sends you his greetings, and also Demas" (Colossians 4:14). It is in this epistle that modern brethren learn that the great preacher, teacher, and historian Luke was a physician. Here also Demas is noted, who later abandoned the faith even though he obviously and commendably worked alongside Paul. "Demas," Paul commented to Timothy shortly before the apostle's passing from earthly life, "having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (2 Timothy 4:10). How sad that is, and serves as a clear warning as to how important it is for each saint to continue to make forward progress in his faith.
- **Final instructions** - As the apostle closes the letter, he issues a staccato-like series of instructions. "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea," he says, regarding their sister congregation close by (Colossians 4:15). Greet, he also requests, "also Nympha and the church that is in her house." Whether there was a group of people meeting in Nympha's home or whether it was a greeting for her Christian family, moderns do not have enough information to know for certain. "And when this letter is read among you," the apostle also directed, "have it also read among the Laodiceans; and you, for your part, read my letter that is coming from Laodicea" (Colossians 4:16). The Holy Spirit chose to have the letter to the Colossians recorded in the eternal word of God, whereas the letter to the Laodiceans must have had material better included in other New Testament writings. "And say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.'" (Colossians 4:17). It is a plausible conjecture that Archippus was the son of Philemon and his wife Apphia, and was doing much preaching and teaching in the area around Colossae.

"I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (Colossians 4:18). Sometimes the apostle dictated his letters; here, in prison in Rome, he sends at least his closing greeting in his own handwriting, in Greek capital letters according to the style of the day. "Remember," he pleads, "my imprisonment. Grace be with you."