

In His Letter to the Colossians

by T. Austin-Sparks

The gospel of Christ is the answer to the questions of purpose and control in the universe, and the evidence of this answer is found in personal experience and the witness of the Church.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28, Philippians 3:13, Colossians 1:5, Colossians 1:9-21

Topics: "The Preeminence of Christ", "The Hope of the Gospel"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound truths found in Paul's letter to the Colossians, highlighting the importance of understanding Christ as the answer to life's deepest questions and the ultimate purpose of existence. He explains that the gospel is not just good news but a response to the critical situations faced by believers, particularly in Colossae, where false teachings threatened their faith. Sparks asserts that Christ is central to all creation and the key to understanding the universe's design and purpose, encouraging believers to recognize His preeminence in their lives. He concludes that the hope of the gospel lies in Christ being all and in all, which brings unity and spiritual growth to the Church. The message serves as a reminder that true assurance and purpose come from a relationship with Jesus.

Transcript

As we come to this letter to the Colossians, by way of laying a foundation we will read some verses from the matchless first chapter.

"For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray and make request for you, that ye may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins: who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning; the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell; and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross;

through him, I say, whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens" (Col. 1:9-20).

Now, that forms quite a good foundation for speaking about the gospel - and do note that that is the gospel. All that is what Paul calls the 'good news'. It is the thing that Paul preached - "the gospel which I preach". In this letter, that word occurs not so many times as in other letters, but with a peculiar point. It occurs in this first chapter, verse 5: "...because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel"; and then in verse 21: "...if so be that ye continue in the faith, grounded and stedfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye heard, which was" - and here is the same word in the verb form - "preached in all creation under heaven" - "which was 'gospelled', 'good newsed', in all creation under heaven".

Good Tidings in an Emergency Situation

Now, if anything is to be good news, or good tidings, if it is to have a really keen edge to it, there must be a situation for which it brings relief, assurance, comfort or gratification. If it does not matter, then it is not good news. For example, supposing someone, with whom your life and heart are closely bound up, lies in a very serious and critical illness, and you call in medical help. You are under a great burden of anxiety: it matters very much to you which way it goes; and you wait for what seems an eternity for the doctor to come down and give you a report. When he comes down and says, 'It is all right, you need not worry; things are going all right, they will come through', that is good news indeed. It has an edge on it, because your heart is bound up with this matter. If there is a great decision in the balances, which is going to affect in some way your future, your career, your life, and a committee is sitting on it, and you are waiting outside with your heart, as we say, in your mouth, feeling most anxious as to how it is going: when someone comes out and says, 'All right, you have got the job, the appointment', that is good news. It brings to you an immense sense of relief. If there is a battle on, the issue of which will be serious for all concerned, and someone comes back from the scene of the fighting, and says 'It is going well, it is all right, we are going to get through!' - why, it is a tremendous relief. That is good tidings. It touches us, it means something to us. There has to be something in the nature of an emergency situation really to give point to good news.

The Emergency Situation at Colossae

Now, in the case of almost all Paul's letters, there was an emergency situation. Something had arisen in the nature of a threat to the Christian life of those with whom his heart was closely bound up; something had arisen which was causing many of those Christians real concern, worry and anxiety. They were in real difficulty; the future seemed to be in doubt. It was in order to meet such emergencies as these that Paul wrote his letters, and in them all he uses this word 'gospel', or 'good news' - good news for an emergency, good tidings for this critical situation.

In this letter to the Colossians it is peculiarly so. There was a real emergency on amongst the believers at Colossae. But it was the same emergency which takes different forms at different times - it is present today in its own form. What it amounted to was this: that there were certain people, considering themselves to be very knowledgeable, wise, intelligent, learned people, who had been dipping into a lot of mysterious stuff, and they were bringing their high-sounding ideas and theories to bear upon these Christians. It all had to do with the great magnitudes of life.

First of all, there was no less a matter in view than the very meaning of the created universe. Now that might be, of course, a realm for philosophical speculation; but you know that, in certain ways, that comes very near to the Christian heart. Is there a design for everything, or is everything either just taking a

mechanical course, or being carried on by some mysterious powers which are inimical to human well-being? Is there any real design behind this created universe? To push that one step further: Is there a purpose in everything? Sooner or later, Christians come up against these questions. Under duress, trial, pressure and suffering, sometimes we do not know what to make of things. This seems to be a topsy-turvy universe, full of enigmas and contradictions and paradoxes, and we have a bad time over it. Is there a plan in it - is there really a Divine control of everything in this universe, in human history and in all that is happening? Is there after all, to use a word which I do not think we fully appreciate, a Providence for everything and in everything? - that is to say, is everything being made to work together according to design and purpose, and to work out toward a great, Divine, beneficent end?

Now, these people were arguing about that, and the Christians at Colossae were being greatly disturbed by it all.

And then it came nearer to their own Christian existence. It touched upon their very life as children of God. Now, if any people in the world ought to be quite sure about these matters - that there is a Divine purpose and Divine pattern and Divine Providence - it is Christians, and the very life of the Christian is affected by whether this is so or not. The matter of our assurance, our confidence, our restfulness, our power, our testimony, rests upon having an answer to these questions. The meaning of this whole universe, the order and the purpose in it, the design and the control of it, the Providence over all events and happenings in the course of human history - these are things that come very near to the Christian. If we have any doubt about them, our Christianity goes for nothing, the very foundations are swept from under our feet, we do not know where we are.

That was the emergency at Colossae. The very life of the Christians, the very life of the Church, was threatened. And if its life is threatened, its growth is threatened. The whole matter of the spiritual growth of the Church and of the Christians is at stake in this - growth, development and maturity. If that is threatened, then something else will be threatened: the whole thing will disintegrate, will fall apart; its unity and cohesion will collapse; the whole thing will be scattered into fragments. And so the very hope of the Church and of the Christian is struck at, their hope and their destiny. These are neither small nor unpractical matters. They may come very near at some time or other, and they require an answer.

The Answer to the Situation

Now, it was to meet this whole situation, to answer all these serious questions and issues, that Paul wrote this letter: to confirm the Christians, to establish them, to sustain them, to encourage them; and he calls it 'good tidings', and it is. If you can give something to answer all that, it is indeed good tidings, is it not? That is 'gospel' indeed! You see, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ touches the uttermost bounds of this universe, and covers everything within those bounds, including human history, human happenings, world events, the course of things, the design in things, the end of things. The gospel touches it all at every point.

So Paul answers it, and he answers the whole of it in one word. His answer is: Christ. Christ is the answer. That answer is found inclusively in those words in chapter 3, verse 11, the last clause: "Christ is all, and in all." And what an immense 'all' Christ is if He covers the whole of that ground! If He reaches out and embraces all those mighty issues, what a Christ He is! The all-comprehending fact is emphatically and categorically stated by the Apostle in this letter. He states it in many sentences, but in this one statement he gathers it all up. The answer to all this is Christ. Christ is the explanation of all the happenings in

human history. Christ explains this universe, Christ gives character to this universe, Christ stands behind all the course of the events in this universe. Christ is the integrating Person of everything, the One in whom all things hold together.

'Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning;

Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.'

The Evidence That the Answer is Satisfactory

But perhaps you may say, 'It is all very well for Paul to make a categorical statement like that, but what is the evidence?' Well, the evidence is quite real. And it must be said that, if we are asking for the evidence, something has gone wrong with us! We ought to be the answer, we ought to be the evidence: because the witness to this is first of all the personal, spiritual experience of the child of God. You can leave the vast universe for the moment, if you like, and come to the little universe of your own life - for, after all, what is true in the microcosm is only a reflection of what is true in the great cosmic realm. God brings down His evidence from the circumferential to the very centre of the individual Christian life, and the answer is there. What is the experience of a truly born-again child of God?

Now you can test whether you are born again by this, and, thank God, I know that many of you will be able to say, 'Yes, that is true to my experience'. But I ask you: What is your experience as a truly born-again child of God? When you really came to the Lord Jesus - however you may put it: when you let Jesus come into your heart or into your life, or when you handed over your life to Him; when there was a transaction with Him, a new birth, by which you became a child of God - not by any 'sacrament' applied to you, but by the inward operation of His Spirit: when you became a child of God in a living, conscious way, what was the first consciousness that came to you, and has remained with you ever since?

Was it not, and is it not, this: 'There is now a purpose in life, of which I never knew before; there is a purpose in things. Now I have the sense - indeed I know - that I was not just born into this world and grew up, but there was a purpose behind it.' There is design in things; a sense - you may not be able to explain it all, what it all means - but you have the sense now that you have arrived at, or at least begun to realise, the very purpose of your existence. Is that true? When the Lord Jesus at last has His place in our hearts, the big question of life is answered - the big question as to the 'Why' of our existence. Till then, you wander about, you do all sorts of things, you fill up time, you employ heart and mind and hand, but you do not know what it is all for. You may have a very full life, a very full life indeed, outside of Christ, and yet come to the end without being able to answer the question, What is it all about?

One man, who had enjoyed such a full life, who had become well-known in the schools of learning, a great figure in the intellectual realm, in his dying moment cried: 'I am taking an awful leap into the dark'. He had no answer to the question. But the simple child of God, immediately they come to the Lord, has the answer in consciousness, if not in explanation, in his or her heart, and that is what is called 'rest'. "Come unto me", said Jesus, "and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Rest is in this: 'Well, I have been a wanderer, but now I have come home; I have been searching - I have found; I have been in quest of something - I did not know what it was - but now I have it'. There is purpose in this universe, and when Jesus Christ comes into His place, as this letter says, then you know there is purpose in your universe, and there will be purpose in the universe of everybody else, if only they will come that way.

And not only purpose, but more - control. The child of God very soon begins to realise that he or she has been taken under control, brought under a mastery; that there is a law of government set up in the consciousness, which is directive: which, on the one hand, says, 'Yes', the glorious 'Yes' of many liberties; on the other hand, 'No - careful, steady, watch!' We all know that. We do not hear those words, but we know that that is what is being said to us in our hearts. The Spirit of Christ within is just saying, 'Look to your steps - be careful, be watchful'. We have come under control. That is extended in many ways over the whole life, but it is a great reality. This universe is under control, it is under government. The evidence of it is found within our own experience when Christ comes to His place. And you can extend that into the future ages, when the whole universe will be like that, under Christ's control.

And then again: "in whom all things hold together". The wonderful thing about the Christian life is its integration, or, if you prefer another word, its unification. How scattered, how divided, we were before Christ got His place! We were 'all over the place', as we say - one thing after another, looking this way and looking that; hearts divided, lives divided; we in ourselves divided, a conflict within our own persons. When the Lord Jesus really gets His place as Lord within, the life is unified. We are just gathered up, poised, concentrated upon one thing. We have only one thing in view. What Paul said of himself becomes true: "but one thing I do..." (Phil. 3:13). We are people of "one thing". Christ unifies the life.

What about life itself, the life of the child of God? When the Lord Jesus is in His right place, the life of the child of God is secured, is established, is confirmed, and grows; there is spiritual growth and maturity. It is a wonderful thing. If, in some Christian lives, it is not realised as a fact, it is for very good reasons - or for bad reasons! - but if the Lord Jesus really is "all, and in all", in the life, if He 'in all things has the pre-eminence', it is wonderful to see the spiritual growth. Those who have much association with, or experience in dealing with, young Christians, have found this one of the most impressive things - how, where the Lord Jesus just gets His way, they go ahead spiritually, they grow. They come to understanding and knowledge which so many of the scholars seem to have missed. They have come to a real spiritual understanding. While other people are trying to get on along other lines - intellectually and so on - these young ones, who have not, many of them, the background of intellectual or scholastic training - they are just simple people - are just leaping ahead spiritually.

This growth in spiritual intelligence and understanding does not rest upon anything natural. It is coming about because Jesus has such a large place, and He is the source and centre and sum of all spiritual knowledge. Over against that, it is possible to have great acquisitions and qualifications in the academic realm, to be doing big things in that realm, and yet to find that the simple things of the Lord Jesus Christ are to you as a foreign language. You do not know what it is about - you cannot follow or join in at all. This is sad, but true. There are Christians, yes, true Christians, who just cannot talk about the things of the Lord. If there is to be growth, it can only come about through Jesus being given His place, fully and without question.

And then, as to destiny. The statement is that the destiny of this universe is with the Lord Jesus, and that that destiny is universal glory. But that is just a beautiful idea, an enchanting vista, is it not? How are you going to prove it? In your own heart! Is it not equally true with the other matters that we have already been considering, that, when the Lord Jesus really gets His place, you have a foretaste of that glory? No one can understand the Christian who has not the Christian's experience, but there it is. It is not just that we are making out that we are having a good time. It is something coming from the inside; it is something of a foretaste of the glory that is to be. We have got the answer to all these immense questions right in our own spiritual experience.

The Witness of the Church

But then the Apostle moves to the Church, and speaks about the Church: "And he is the head of... the church... the firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18). How does the Church bear witness to the fact, this great fact, that Jesus is the answer to these immense questions? I think the Church gives the answer both positively and negatively.

It gives the answer positively - though not as positively as it might have done - but it does give the answer in this, that, after all (and what an 'all' of these two thousand years!), the Church is still in existence. Think of that inrush of the forces of antagonism and hatred and murder upon the Church in its infancy, with the determination of the greatest empire that the world had ever known to wipe it out. After all, it is that empire that has gone; the Church continues. Think, too, of all that has set itself during the centuries since to bring the Church to an end, to destroy it, and still is set upon that. Oh, that men were not so blind that they misread history! If only those powers in the world today, great kingdoms, great empires, would rightly read history, they would see they are on an utterly vain mission, a fool's errand indeed, to try to destroy the testimony of Jesus on this earth. It is they who will be destroyed.

Yes, the very continuance and persistence of the Church is evidence that this is true - that Jesus Christ is the key to this universe, that He is the answer to all these questions. I say, the Church does not give the answer as clearly as it might. If only it had gone on as it began, what an answer it would be!

But it gives the answer negatively, as well as positively. It answers it negatively by the very fact that, whereas once it stood up to the world victoriously, weathered the storms triumphantly, it has now moved away from its centre, the Lord Jesus Christ, and brought in substitutes for His absolute headship and lordship. It has made other things its governing interests. The result has been disintegration, division, and all the rest. Yes, the thing is answered in the negative, and it will always be like that.

Let us be quite clear: it is not that the truth has broken down. If these things ever become a question with you, it will not be because they are open to question, but because something has gone wrong with you as it has gone wrong with the Church. It is not in the truth, but in that which is supposed to represent the truth, that the question lies. These substitutes for the headship of Jesus Christ, whether they be men or institutions or religious interests or Christian activities, whatever they may be, if they get in the place of the Lord Jesus Himself, lead to nothing but disunity and division. To put that more positively, if only men, leaders and all the rest, would say, 'Look here, all our institutions, our missions, our organizations, all our interests in Christianity, must be subservient to the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ', you would find a unity coming about, a oneness. We should all flow together on that ground. It is the mighty tide of His lordship that will cure it all.

Go down by the sea-shore. The tide is right out, and all the breakwaters are naked, dividing up the whole coastline as it were into sections. But as the tide comes up, the breakwaters, the dividing things, begin to disappear. You come back at full flood-tide, and you see nothing whatever of those dividing breakwaters. The rising tide has buried them all. And when Christ is all, and in all, 'in all things having the pre-eminence', all those things which belong to the low tide of spiritual life, the ebb-tide of spiritual life, will just disappear. The proof is in the Church.

We had a little taste of it during the recent visit to this country of Dr. Graham. There was one consuming passion to bring Christ into His place at the beginnings of life; all the different sections were found concerned with that. Where were the barriers, where were the 'breakwaters', where were the departmental

things? They had gone, buried under this high tide of concern that Christ should have His place in lives. Why should that be for three months only? Why should it be experienced only in a convention lasting a few days once a year? No, this position is God's thought for always. The key to it is just this - Christ all in all.

Perhaps we can see now why mention of the gospel in this letter is confined to one emphasis - "the hope of the gospel". Yes, the only occurrences of 'gospel' or 'good news' are in that connection - "the hope of the good news". The hope of the gospel is in Jesus Christ being all and in all. Hope is a Person, not an abstract nature in us - 'being hopeful' - which does not amount to much more than a periodical, variable optimism. Hope here is a Person. The hope of the good news is: He in all things having the pre-eminence. That is where the hope lies for you, for me, for the Church, for the world, for the universe. That is the hope of the gospel.

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