

Pauls Answer

WHO IS JESUS?

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STUDY SEVEN: PAUL'S ANSWER

Paul's introductions to his letters

The following table identifies the titles Paul gives to Jesus in his introductory comments in his letters.

'Christ Jesus' or 'Jesus Christ'	Romans 1:1,6; 1 Corinthians 1:1,2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1; Philemon 1.
God's 'Son'	Romans 1:2
The Son of God	Romans 1:4
Jesus Christ our Lord	Romans 1:4
The Lord Jesus Christ	Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2,3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; Philemon 3.
Their Lord and ours	1 Corinthians 1:2
Christ	Colossians 1:2
Christ Jesus our hope	1 Timothy 1:1
Christ Jesus our Lord	1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2
Christ Jesus our Saviour	Titus 1:4

In contrast to the overwhelming concentration of modern evangelicalism on Jesus as 'our Saviour', we see in the above introductory greetings that Paul identifies Jesus primarily as Lord and Christ. He is called 'Saviour' only once (Titus 1:4), while God is called 'Saviour' twice (1 Timothy 1:1 and Titus 1:3). We note that Jesus is called 'our hope' in 1 Timothy 1:1, and it is instructive that in these two instances where Paul calls Jesus 'Saviour' and 'hope' that he also refers to God as our Saviour. In this way, even as he calls Jesus 'Saviour' and 'our hope', he is identifying him as having equal standing with God.

From his introductory comments we can reasonably conclude that the identity of Jesus Christ as *Saviour* was not of primary significance in Paul's mind. Overwhelmingly his focus is on Jesus as Lord and Christ. If we consider also the content of the letters we see that what Paul finds necessary to give teaching on is how our belief in this Lord and Christ affects our relationship with God, and how it ought to affect our relationship with our fellow human beings. Having reminded his readers that the One in whom they believe is both Lord and Christ, Paul proceeds to outline the ramifications of this. Already in Jesus Christ's own teaching he has indicated that *he* is the bread of life, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and life. He has taught us that these things which we see as our salvation are not separate and distinct from him, but that they are intrinsically *in him*. The dichotomy in which we understand that we receive Jesus Christ and he gives us salvation as something distinct and separate from himself, so that our salvation is more or less the reward for believing in him, or, for believing in the effectiveness of his death on the cross, cannot hold. Rather, when we receive Jesus Christ we are in that act, receiving salvation in its most absolute and complete sense, whether we realize it or not.

Let us look now at the letters of Paul and consider his understanding of the person of Jesus Christ and the relationship of the person of Jesus Christ to our salvation.

The Letter to the Romans

Having taken more than his usual time to reaffirm the identity of Jesus Christ in his introduction to this letter Paul expresses his desire to visit the Roman Christians, then proceeds with two and a half chapters' teaching on our sinfulness before launching into a five and a half chapter description of the effect of the gospel. We may take note of the following statements:

[1] '... in preaching the Gospel of his Son' (1:9). Paul here identifies the content, focus and source of the Gospel: God's Son. He does not specify either the death of Christ or the salvation achieved by Christ, but simply 'his Son'.

[2] 'This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe' (3:22) and 'so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus' (3:26b). In both of these we see that the focus of faith is Jesus. Those who have faith in Jesus Christ are justified, accepted as righteous.

[3] 'The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.' (4:23,24). Here the focus of faith is neither Christ nor his cross-work, but God the Father.

[4] 'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.' (3:25a). This is one of the few statements in the Scripture where the death or cross or blood of Christ is stated as the object of faith.

In addition to the above, 'faith' is referred to by itself without any object or focus, in the following:

- 1:8: ... your faith is being reported
- 1:12 ... encouraged by each other's faith
- 1:17 ... a righteousness that is by faith from first to last
- 1:18 ... the righteous shall live by faith
- 3:27 ... on that (principle) of faith
- 3:28 ... a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law
- 3:30 ... God will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith
- 3:31 ... do we nullify the law by this faith?
- 4:5 ... his faith is credited as righteousness
- 4:9 ... Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness
- 4:13 ... through the righteousness that comes by faith
- 4:16 ... the promise comes by faith
- 5:1 ... we have been justified through faith
- 5:2 ... we have gained access by faith.

As we look at these we may be tempted to think that faith stands alone, and has value irrespective of its focus, or that we are left to ourselves to work out just who or what it is that we are supposed to believe. Does Paul clarify the issue anywhere? Yes. He does. In the next section of his letter, chapters 9 to 11, where he is addressing the question of the fate of Israel, he makes a clear statement concerning precisely what it is that we must believe. Having identified Jesus as 'Christ, who is God over all, forever praised' in 9:5, he teaches in 10:8-13:

1. We will be saved if we confess with our mouth : 'Jesus is Lord'. Here is the verbal expression of the belief that Jesus is God.
2. We will be saved if we believe in our heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. Considering that Paul has stated in 1:4 that the resurrection proves that Jesus is the Son of God, this belief that God raised Jesus from the dead, is believing that he is the divine Son.
3. It is this belief and confession that saves and justifies.
4. The Lord blesses richly all who call on him.
5. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

From these we understand that faith is of no account in itself. By 'faith' Paul means what he defines here: the belief and confession that Jesus is the Lord, the Son of God; it is faith in this name, it is calling on this name, that ushers a person into salvation. Let us take good note here that salvation is not the focus of faith, but comes to us through faith. We do not believe, we do not focus our faith, in salvation (justification, righteousness, and so on): we believe and confess that Jesus is the Lord, and through that confession, through that faith, we receive not only the Lord but along with him his gift of salvation as well.

Let us note also that in the remaining chapters of the letter Paul consistently refers to the gospel in a way that focuses it on the person of Jesus Christ. Just as in 1:9 he calls God's good news 'the gospel of his Son' so here also Paul defines it as: 'the gospel of God' 15:16; 'the gospel of Christ' 15:19; 'my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ' 16:25. Just as in John 3:16 our minds subconsciously insert a reference to the saving death of Christ, so also here. We automatically redefine the gospel as

the cross-work of Jesus Christ rather than the *person* of Christ. If we read further in we Romans find that *obedience* is seen by Paul as the appropriate response to the gospel, along with faith (1:5; 6:17; 15:18; 16:26). This of necessity focuses on a person: one obeys a person, not an action. But this aspect of obedience will be dealt with in a separate study.

The first letter to the Corinthians

Let us notice first of all that Paul describes Christians as those 'who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:2), and he refers to his preaching as 'our testimony about Christ' (1:5) and 'the testimony about God' (2:1). In 1:24 Christ is called 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' and in 3:11 the only 'foundation'.

The cross of Christ comes into focus in 1:17, 18 & 23 and in 2:2. In these verses Paul states that the message of the cross is 'foolishness to those who are perishing', that the proclamation of 'Christ crucified' is 'a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles', and that all Paul was interested in preaching was 'Jesus Christ and him crucified.' As we have seen in other 'Who is Jesus?' studies, the identification of Jesus as 'Christ' (= Greek *christos* = Hebrew Messiah), is also his identification as the 'Son of God.' To the Jews the concept of a crucified Messiah is a stumbling block. To the Gentiles (Greeks), the concept of a Son of God, or God, being crucified is foolishness. Paul states in 1:17 and 2:1-5 that he purposely refused to reduce the offensiveness of this message by clothing it with human eloquence. He told it as it was: the Christ/Messiah, the Son of God, was crucified. The offense, the foolishness, lies not in the crucifixion, but in the crucifixion of *the Christ, the Son of God*. But it is precisely the fact that it *is* the Christ who is crucified that gives the cross its power. This is taken up in chapter 15.

Here Paul spends half a verse stating 'that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (15:3b), then six verses identifying the witnesses to Christ's resurrection (4-9). He then spends a lengthy section (12-34) chewing over the implications of denying Christ's resurrection. If Christ has not been raised, he states, then 'our preaching is useless and so is your faith' (14), 'your faith is futile; and you are still in your sins' (17), 'we are to be pitied more than all men' (19), so 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (32). To those who deny the resurrection he says: 'come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning' and calls them 'ignorant of God' (34). Why such strong speech? Because, as he has pointed out in Romans 1:4, the resurrection proves that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. **To deny the resurrection of Christ is to deny his deity; to deny his deity is to render all he said invalid, nullifying all his claims about himself, and all that he promised. All that he has promised to those who believe in him depends on his being who he claimed, which in turn depends on his resurrection.**

In other words, the crucifixion means precisely nothing, if it is not followed by the resurrection. The resurrection proves that Jesus is the one he claimed to be. **The crucifixion is meaningful then only if we first understand and believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.**

The second letter to the Corinthians

Although not much doctrinal teaching is given in 2 Corinthians there are a few salient points:

[1] In 1:19 Paul identifies 'the Son of God, Jesus Christ' as the subject of his preaching.

[2] In 2:12 he calls the gospel 'the gospel of Christ'.

[3] In 2:14 & 15 Paul places side by side two interesting expressions. Instead of saying 'the gospel' he says 'the fragrance of the knowledge of God' and 'the aroma of Christ', thus implying that 'the knowledge of God' and 'Christ' are one and the same message.

[4] In 3:7-18 he teaches that the 'veil' with which Moses had to cover his face to hide the glory of God is taken away in Christ, and that now we, having seen Christ, behold and reflect the glory of the Lord. As Paul states 'whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away'. This is for Paul the surpassing glory of the gospel: that in seeing Jesus we with unveiled faces now see the Lord.

[5] This thought continues with greater clarity in 4:1-6. Here Paul points out that the 'god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (4); and that God has 'made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (6). Here the gospel is seen as the 'gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' and, 'the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'. For this reason what Paul preached was 'Jesus Christ as Lord' (5); it is through this preaching of Jesus Christ as Lord that God is known. The whole focus of the gospel here is God's self-revelation in his Son, Jesus Christ.

We see here in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 that that which has been hidden, and is still hidden from those who do not know Christ, that is, the glory of God, is revealed in Jesus Christ. We are here reminded again of the words of Isaiah 40:5 'and the glory of the Lord will be revealed' and of Habakkuk 2:14: 'for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.' We are reminded also of those words of Jesus in John 17:4: 'I have brought you glory on earth by completing the

work you gave me to do'; and also of John (1:14): 'we have seen his glory ...' This is the primary and most important statement of the gospel: in seeing Jesus we see God. Without this breaking into our darkness, our blindness, our ignorance, we cannot see God, we cannot know God; nor can we receive from the hand of a God we do not know, the benefits of the second statement of the gospel, which concerns the cross.

[6] In chapter 11 Paul gives a warning not to pay any attention to those who corrupt the gospel by preaching 'a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached' (4). We know from the above that he preached Jesus Christ as Lord, in whom the glory of God is revealed. Any Jesus less than this is not the Biblical Jesus; to embrace any lesser Jesus is to embrace something that is a different gospel.

The letter to the Galatians

Paul's purpose in writing to the Galatians was to abort the corruptions of the gospel which were being taught there, namely, that it is necessary to keep the Jewish law in order to remain in a right relationship with God. Because of this his emphasis is on the completeness of the cross-work of Christ and our full assurance of salvation, based on that work. But even here, where he is fighting to maintain that by means of the substitutionary death of Christ we are justified, acquitted and removed from the curse resting on those who disobey the law, even here that death is never the focus of faith. Faith is always 'faith in Jesus Christ' (2:15,16; 3:22,26); 'faith in Christ' (2:16); or 'faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (2:20).

In recalling his dramatic experience of the Damascus road Paul states 'But when God ... was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles ...' In this statement we have both Paul's understanding of his conversion - God revealed his Son, and his one-word summary of his preaching content - 'him', that is God's Son.

Equally instructive is Paul's description of the Galatians' pre-conversion and post-conversion states: 'formerly ... you did not know God ... but now ... you know God' (4:8,9). For Paul the Gospel is, first and foremost, the revelation of the true God, and believing the Gospel involved a turning away from 'those who by nature are not gods' (4:8).

The letter to the Ephesians

Our usual way of viewing our salvation is to see it as something separate and apart from Jesus Christ, something that he gives to us. And indeed it is something he gives to us, but not in such a way that we can have the salvation apart from him. The fact is that when we have him, we also have salvation. It is impossible to have one without the other. Paul expresses this right through the first three chapters of Ephesians, by use of the little word 'in'. Almost every aspect of our salvation that he mentions he roots fairly and squarely 'in Christ.'

Consider:

- 1:3 we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms *in Christ*.
- 1:4 we were chosen *in him* before the creation of the world.
- 1:6 he has freely given us his grace *in the One he loves*,
- 1:7 *in him* we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
- 1:11 *in him* were also chosen.
- 1:13 we were marked *in him* with the seal, the promised Holy Spirit.
- 2:6 we are seated in the heavenly realms *in Christ*.
- 2:7 God has expressed his kindness to us *in Christ Jesus*.
- 2:10 we are created *in Christ Jesus*, to do good works.
- 2:13 *in Christ Jesus* we who were far away have been brought near.
- 2:14 *he himself* is our peace.
- 2:22/3 *in him* we are being built into God's dwelling place.
- 3:6 we are sharers together in the promise *in Christ Jesus*
- 3:12 *in him* we approach God with freedom and confidence.

Everything is *in Christ*. If we recollect Christ's self-description in John's Gospel we will understand that this is the only way it can possibly be. Salvation is eternal life, and Jesus claimed repeatedly to be 'the life'. Salvation is not something Jesus gives away, distinct from himself, but rather that which is essentially part and parcel of knowing him. Did he not say in John 17:3: 'Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent'? **Knowing Jesus Christ is having eternal life: knowing Jesus is being saved**. All of the benefits of salvation, many of which are listed above, are *in Christ*. If we do not know him we are not saved.

Yet incredibly, many within the church persistently offer the world salvation apart from any true knowledge of God or his Christ. Persistently many within the church fail to identify the Jesus whom it offers to the world. Persistently many within the church assume that the world knows already who Jesus is. Persistently many assume that the world knows God, and that all the world has to do is to accept the forgiveness God offers to the world through the cross-work of Jesus.

Paul makes it quite clear here in Ephesians that such a course of approach is wrong. Salvation resides *in Christ*. Apart from the Biblical Jesus there is no salvation. Christ, not his cross, is the primary focus of Biblical faith.

The letter to the Philippians

As we read through Philippians we notice:

1. Paul describes gospel preaching as preaching 'Christ' (1:15,17,18).
2. He describes the gospel as 'the gospel of Christ' (1:27).
3. He teaches that the goal of God's action in Christ (incarnation, death, resurrection, exaltation) is that 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (2:6-11).
4. He states what he values most is 'the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'; and his own goal is 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection' (3:8,10).
5. Similarly, two times he encourages his readers to 'Rejoice in the Lord' (3:1, 4:4) and describes believers as those who 'glory in Christ Jesus' (3:3).

Everything centres on the person of Jesus Christ.

The letter to the Colossians

When we come to the letter to the Colossians we enter different territory. Whereas in the other centres to which he wrote Paul had to address practical and moral issues, and, in the case of Rome, Philippi and Galatia, to correct or warn against legalistic false teaching which negated the cross-work of Jesus Christ, here in Colosse he had to address a situation where heretical teaching was not only negating the cross-work of Christ but also denying his identity. The Colossian heresy, while containing elements of Jewish legalism, taught also that one must aspire to a higher wisdom, a deeper knowledge, beyond Jesus, and progress beyond one's knowledge of Christ to further revelation. So here, as in no other letter, **Paul takes great pains to clearly identify Jesus as the one who fully and finally reveals the Father, and to show how essential an accurate belief in his true identity is for our salvation.**

Having given a brief description of what God has done for us in Christ (1:12-14) Paul then grounds this work of salvation in the person of Christ. He tells us:

[1] Christ is the image of the invisible God (1:15).

As Jesus himself told us, when we see him, we see God. The coming of Jesus means that no one need be ignorant about God ever again. No one need ever again say 'If I could see God I would believe in him.' In Jesus we see God.

[2] He is the firstborn over all creation (1:15).

There are those who stumble over this 'firstborn' concept, considering it to indicate that there was a time when Christ was not, and that therefore he is inferior to the Father and less than God. Such was the Arian controversy in the early church; and such is the contention of some modern day cults. We must understand that 'firstborn' speaks not of priority in terms of *time*, but in terms of *rank and authority*. It is all about position. Paul's statement here teaches us that Jesus Christ stands in the position of authority over all creation. (There are those today who teach that Jesus is the first thing Jehovah created, failing to realise that *firstborn* does not equal *first created*. The two words are quite distinct, the two concepts different. That which is born possesses precisely, and without reduction, the same nature or essence as its parent; that which is created has an entirely different nature or essence from its creator.)

[3] By Jesus Christ all things were created (1:16).

Paul gives us an all-encompassing list of the things created by Christ. He leaves no room for anything to exist that Christ did not create. Anything that the false teachers might suggest as something to aspire to beyond Christ is here placed firmly under the creative hand of Christ. Everything is less than Christ, dependent on him for its very existence. There is nothing beyond Christ. There is nothing bigger or better than Christ.

[4] All things were created for him (1:16).

Not only is everything dependent on Christ for its existence, but its whole purpose resides in Christ. Everything finds its fulfillment, its goal, its reason for being, in Christ. He is the one who puts meaning and significance into everything. Apart from him, everything is meaningless, everything is useless, everything has no purpose.

[5] He is before all things (1:17).

Here Paul teaches the eternity of Christ. In this again the supremacy and the deity of Christ are indicated.

[6] In him all things hold together (1:17).

Jesus Christ is the cohesive principle of the universe. As it says in Hebrews 1:3, 'he sustains all things by his powerful word'. Were he to withdraw his word everything would cease to be. We each exist in our unique molecular structure, with our personalized DNA, only because of the sustaining word of Christ. The grand cosmic laws by which innumerable universes hold together, and the intricate laws of life within, both of which are still barely understood by scientists, all depend on the word of Christ. Everything exists in the form in which it exists because of the sustaining word of Jesus Christ. Only because of this sustaining word can we depend on the stability of anything.

[7] He is the head of the body, the church (1:18).

Here Paul puts Christ in the position of authority and supremacy in the church. Far from Christians needing to reach beyond Christ for further revelation or further fullness, Christ stands at the head of the church. There is nothing above Christ. There is no authority, no power beyond Christ, no source of further inspiration or instruction. Christ is the head.

[8] He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (1:18).

In this Paul teaches us two things: (1) Jesus Christ is the beginning, the source or origin of the church. To him the church owes its existence, its life. (2) He is also the first to rise from the dead: the first to triumph over sin and death and Satan, and in this he is the prototype and guarantee of our resurrection. He is the mighty conqueror over this the greatest of our enemies (which Paul teaches further in 2:13ff). Because the church thus owes both its life and its victory over sin and death to Christ, he has supremacy in everything in the church. Whereas the false teachers were pointing the believers past Christ to mystical esoteric knowledge, and past Christ to reliance on their own piety, Paul calls them back to this one-eyed focus on Christ: in the church, as in the greater cosmos, Christ has the supremacy in all things, because the church is dependant on him from start to finish.

[9] God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (1:19).

Having already so described the position and power of Christ as to give him equality with the Father, Paul here probes right into the very nature and essence of Christ: in him all God's fullness dwells. Let us take care not to miss the two absolutes in this statement: *all* and *fullness*. If we ask the question: 'How can a mere man triumph over sin, death, and Satan? How come the resurrection?' the answer is here, as it is in Romans 1:4: the man Jesus of Nazareth is also, at the same time, the Christ, the Son of God, as fully God as God the Father. In him *all* the *fullness* of God dwells. Nothing less than God. Nothing short of God. Not only the totality of divine power, the totality of divine attributes, but also the totality of the divine nature and essence, dwells in Christ. This is what is behind the resurrection. This is he who stands as head of the church.

[10] We proclaim him (1:28).

In this brief statement we have the most succinct, yet most comprehensive statement of the gospel proclamation. Jesus Christ was the content of Paul's preaching.

[11] Christ is the mystery of God in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2b, 3).

Here Paul confronts the false teachers head on. They taught that there was knowledge of God beyond Christ, that there were treasures of wisdom to be found, more enlightening and precious than the knowledge of Christ, further mysteries and secrets about God to be unveiled, and that knowing these mysteries would bring them to higher levels of salvation, more intimate union with the divine. Paul says "No!" Christ is God's secret. When you see him the secret is out in the open, the mystery, all mysteries, are unveiled. Everything that there is to be known about God is here laid open before your eyes in Jesus Christ. Here in his own way, Paul affirms what Jesus himself has said: he is the light, he is the truth, in seeing him we see the Father, in knowing him we know the Father. Not in part, not some of the truth about him, but *all*. (Compare 4:3 where Paul speaks of proclaiming 'the mystery of Christ'.) There are many within the church today who are making the same mistake as the false teachers in Colossae: looking beyond and beside Jesus Christ for additional knowledge and revelation of and/or from God. The extent to which they are doing this represents the extent to which they have failed to understand the completeness of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

[12] You received Christ Jesus as Lord (2:6).

Paul here reminds the Colossians of their original response to the gospel. Note carefully: he does not say 'you received Christ Jesus as Saviour'; he says 'you received Christ Jesus as *Lord*.' It is common today for the idea of 'receiving Jesus as Lord', or 'making Jesus Lord' to be taught as a subsequent (or even optional) step some time after a supposed initial step of receiving Christ as 'Saviour'. Such a concept was foreign to Paul's mind. To respond to the gospel was to 'receive Christ Jesus as Lord.' Our evangelical traditions have so twisted the gospel to focus on our need of salvation and the way the cross of Christ meets that need, that the Biblical focus of the gospel on the person of Christ has been lost, and in that loss, so also has the Biblical response to the gospel been lost. John has already pointed out to us that it is receiving Jesus, believing in him, believing in his name, that issues in salvation. This receiving, this believing, is receiving him as the one he claimed to be, believing that he is the one he claimed to be. The question the Bible asks is never 'have you received Jesus Christ as Saviour?' but 'do you believe that he is the Lord? Do you receive him on these terms?' In other words, 'do you acknowledge that here in this man, God confronts you, demanding your recognition, demanding your repentance, demanding your trust?' So Paul states 'you received Christ Jesus as Lord.' When they heard the gospel message they said 'Yes! I acknowledge that Jesus Christ is God. I acknowledge that he is my Lord.'

[13] In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (2:9).

Not content with what he has written in 1:19 Paul needs to say it again, and more forcefully. Note again the absolutes: *all* and *fullness*. And Paul makes sure that we do not assume he merely means that all the divine qualities live in Christ. There are two Greek words which he could have used; one means 'quality', one means 'essence.' He chose the latter. He tells us here: all that God is in his being, all the essential being of God, lives in Jesus Christ. And lest we think that this indwelling was of a mystical, intangible nature he adds: in bodily form. In the human body of Jesus of Nazareth dwells the fullness, the full essence or being, of God. Here in this man, we are confronted by God.

This forceful and comprehensive treatment of the person of Jesus Christ, in which Paul repeatedly identifies him as God, has a specific purpose. In reducing Jesus Christ the false teachers had reduced the effectiveness of the cross of Christ, and as consequence of both of these reductions minimized both salvation and assurance of salvation. The Colossians Christians were reeling under the impact of this, striving to advance to the superior knowledge supposedly there beyond Christ, bound to a great set of rules and regulations which must be kept in order to be complete, submitting to all sorts of extreme actions, in order to reach the spiritual goals set by the false teachers. With their eyes off Christ they looked to themselves and saw there only incompleteness, only inadequacy, only lack and failure. To this depressed, introspective, insecure church, Paul says: get your eyes back on Jesus. Remember who he is. Your salvation does not rest in yourselves: it rests in him. You received him as Lord, so keep on living *in him*, get your roots down into *him*, be built up *in him*, and strengthened *in him* (2:6). Your life, your stability, your strength - they are all *in him*. Not only this, but because all the fullness of God lives in him, you are complete *in him* (2:10). You do not attain your spiritual goals, you do not reach fullness or perfection, in yourself, in anything you do. You are complete *in Christ*. All that God asks of you, all that God expects of you, all that God intends you to be: it is all *in Christ*.

No more do the Colossians need to search beyond for *more*. Everything is in Christ. All of God, all the knowledge and wisdom of God, and all of their own completeness, is in Christ. Are our ears open to what Paul is saying here? Have we recognized here in Colossae symptoms of our own reduced Christianity? Do we not see here some of the same pernicious suggestions that have entered into our churches, taking our eyes off Christ, putting our eyes onto ourselves and our own spirituality, enticing us on to something beyond Christ, something additional to Christ?

The Colossian Christians had one advantage over us: they had at least originally received Jesus Christ as Lord. They had that to be recalled to. But have we? Have we ever actually received the Biblical Jesus? Do we have any memory of knowing him as he is described here in this letter? Or has he merely been someone loosely identified as 'Saviour' or even more loosely as 'Jesus', whom we have 'received' or 'asked into our hearts' (whatever each of these means) because we wanted to avoid ending up in hell?

The letter of Paul to the Colossians stands as a challenge to each one of us. Is the Jesus Paul here describes *our* Jesus? Or are we following a lesser Jesus, as impotent as the Jesus of the Colossian heresy? Are we living with confidence in the presence of God, knowing we are complete in the true Jesus, or are we wallowing in insecurity and uncertainty in God's presence, slaves to legalistic add-ons to an inadequate notion of salvation, because our Jesus is not the Jesus of Scripture?

The first letter to the Thessalonians

The choice the Thessalonians made when they decided to believe Paul's message was no easy choice. It involved not only ridicule and persecution but a total reorientation of their lives. It involved a casting out of their previously held concepts of god and the taking on board of a whole new understanding. But they made this choice. It is reported of them that they 'turned to God

from idols to serve the living and true God' (1:9). Their 'faith in God became known everywhere' (1:8). This description of their response is significant. Such was the content of Paul's gospel proclamation that it gave the Thessalonians a whole new understanding of who God is. So powerful was his proclamation of the gospel that it caused the Thessalonians to reject all that they had previously believed about "god" and to embrace the concept of "god" outlined in that gospel. Paul's gospel, which twice in this letter he calls 'the gospel of God' (2:8,9), identified the true God. How? By proclaiming Jesus Christ (see Acts 17:1-3,7). This proclamation of Jesus Christ so clearly and forcefully identified the true God that the Thessalonians turned their backs on their idols and believed in the God revealed in the gospel.

Here again the first and primary statement of the gospel is a statement about the true identity of Jesus Christ. The statement about the cross-work, essential though it surely is, does not identify God, and can only confer its benefits when the first statement is received. The first statement of the gospel wherein the true God is identified by the proclamation of Jesus Christ, is what calls a person to repentance and faith. With this repentance and faith the Thessalonians responded.

The second letter to the Thessalonians

In Paul's thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-12) there are two statements that only make sense if we understand that the first and primary statement of the gospel is the identification of God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

[1] 'He will punish those who do not know God ... ' (1:8). Contrary to current evangelical emphasis that we escape punishment by receiving God's gift of salvation wrought for us by the death of Jesus, **Paul's statement here indicates that we escape punishment by knowing God** . How do we know God? By seeing him in the face of his Son. How do we do this? By hearing and believing the first statement of the gospel, that Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate.

[2] 'He will punish those who ... do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (1:8). What is the command of the gospel that we have to obey? That which Paul gave to the Philippian jailer: Believe in the Lord Jesus! (Acts 16:31) That which Paul defined for the Romans: Confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead! (Romans 10:9) That which Jesus himself stated: The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent. (John 6:29). The gospel of our Lord Jesus calls us, yes, commands us, to recognize here in this man the Lord of glory, the Almighty God. **It commands us to cast aside our notion of god, and in this act of repentance to accept as our God, Jesus Christ** . It commands us to believe *in him*, and to *honour him* as God. It is this call to this radical belief, this radical repentance, that we must obey. Those who do not obey this gospel challenge are already condemned, as Jesus stated in John 3:18, because they have not believed in the name of God's only Son.

The two sections of this verse make an instructive equation: not knowing God = not obeying the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. Stated positively: knowing God = obeying the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

The letters to Timothy

In each of these letters Paul makes a summary statement of the gospel:

[1] 'Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:

He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.' (1 Timothy 3:16)

[2] 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel for which I am suffering.' (2 Timothy 2:8,9).

In both of these we see Jesus Christ identified as both human and divine. This is the mystery. This is the gospel: that God has come to us, dwelt among us, revealed himself to us, taking away the dark blindness of our ignorance about him, showing us precisely who he is, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the descendent of David. For this gospel, which once Paul, denying the deity of Christ (1 Timothy 1:13), sought to destroy, he now suffers, and is prepared to suffer anything (2 Timothy 2:8-10). Paul considers his previous denial of Jesus Christ to be blasphemy (1:13), and, even though in his pre-conversion state he had considered himself zealous for the honour of God, he now describes that state as one of 'ignorance and unbelief' (1:13).

In addition Paul describes himself and his co-workers as having 'put our faith in the living God' (1 Timothy 4:10), and Christians as those who confess 'the name of the Lord.' (2 Timothy 2:19).

Summary:

In summary, Paul in his letters has much to say about the salvation obtained by the death of Jesus Christ for those who believe in him. This cannot be denied. Yet this salvation, in which we are assured of our on-going relationship with God, in which we stand in the presence of God with confidence and joy, is not the primary focus of our faith. Nor is the death of Christ on the cross, by which our salvation is obtained, ever stated by Paul to be the primary focus of our faith. Once, in Romans 3:25, Paul mentions 'faith in his blood'; and indisputably it is the blood (= death) of Jesus that enables those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to stand in the presence of God with absolute trust and assurance. But trust in the complete and finished work of Christ exists for Paul only in those who are believers in Christ Jesus the Lord. Faith for Paul, is always faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord. Without this faith the death of Christ does nothing for us, and salvation is not ours. Paul knows of no division in which we can first believe in Jesus as Saviour, accepting as ours the benefits of his cross, and at some subsequent meeting with Jesus, let him be, or make him, our Lord. The Jesus of Paul's teaching is always Lord, and it is this Jesus on whom the Christian confession focuses. To receive the Paul's Jesus is to receive him as the Lord. In turning to him we are turning to the living God.