

Colossians: Christ and the Church Part 1
Colossians 1:1-8
Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on April 16, 2023

We may never be martyrs, but we can die to self, to sin, to the world, to our plans and ambitions. That is the significance of baptism; we died with Christ and rose to new life. – Vance Havner

Colossians Draws Us Upwards

This morning we begin a sermon series that will carry us through the next several months, through the summer and into the fall. We will be considering together the book of Colossians. The Apostle Paul wrote the church in Colossae a letter upon getting a report about some troubling heresies being taught.

Heresy is basically a belief that runs contrary to an established, orthodox doctrine. The heresy Paul dealt with was perhaps the most popular and widespread heresy in the first two centuries of the Church's existence. And while that specific heresy has passed away into the mists of time, variations of the same type of heretical belief are now fashionable.

Colossians draws our attention upward by stabilizing Christology, the teaching or doctrine of Jesus. Colossians will press us to seek things above and to walk in Christ. It provides a comprehensive picture of the fullness of Christ.

Colossians will also confirm the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Christ as the head of all Creation and the head of the Church.

I invite you to read with me verses one through eight of the first chapter of Colossians. (read text)

Colossae on the Map

The ancient town known as Colossae has long been one that exists only in history. In the twelfth century, what was left of it was leveled. However, in its pre-Christ heyday, Colossae was a thriving city with a robust mercantile trade. In fact, the most popular color of material was named after the town.

It was in what is today the western part of the country of Turkey. It was about 80 miles inland from Ephesus.

Colossae was located in the Lycus River Valley and was ten miles southeast of Laodicea. Early Church Fathers write about how the church in Colossae was founded during the two years that Paul spent ministering in Ephesus.¹

Two of Paul's visitors during this time would be Colossians who would become believers. Epaphras and the slave Philemon. At some point, Philemon even hosted the Colossian church in his home. Paul then sent Epaphras to share the gospel with the Lycan valley. The Colossian church grows and begins to thrive. And Paul never stepped one foot in it up to that point. He wanted to. He would write how he desired to get to Colossae to strengthen the church that he had such strong ties to.

So it makes sense that when there is a problem within the church, Epaphras seeks out Paul who was in prison at the time.

The Weird “Angel Cult of Colossae”

There was a growing heresy gaining traction and, in some churches, taking control. It was called Gnosticism, from the root word *gnosis* meaning knowledge. Gnostics claimed to have an elevated form of spiritual knowledge that was above all established teachings of other gods and religions, including Christianity.

It became so deeply ingrained and widespread in Colossae that Roman reports called it the “strange Angel Cult of Colossae.” Gnosticism claimed that there was a Supreme Being that was all spirit, not material. It considered the material to be evil. Meaning creation, humans, earth, all evil. To try to help get a better understanding of Gnosticism, let's utilize a set of Russian nesting dolls.

The littlest god, or demi-urge, was considered Yahweh and they considered Yahweh to also be Christ. Gnosticism taught that Christ was a god who attempted to bring people back to their superior spiritual nature, since the material was evil. And since material was evil, Jesus would have been evil because he came in contact with material by creating it. That is why Gnosticism taught that Jesus was so distant from the Supreme Being.

According to Gnosticism, if Jesus really were “God's Son,” he would not have been able to take on matter. So they taught that Jesus was some ghost-

¹ Acts 19:10 tells us that all residents in Asia (modern day Turkey) heard the word of the Lord. This would include the Colossians.

like phantom, some weird angel. Gnosticism did not believe that Jesus was real or incarnate. They also taught that Jesus alone wasn't enough to reach salvation, which they believed came through enlightenment. There was nothing found within Jesus, they taught, as being "enlightening."

Gnosticism started with Jesus and then would work its way up. It was a situation in which something must be added to Jesus to equal salvation. In Colossae, records show that they taught you needed to add some things to Christ: the disciplines of Judaism, the secret passwords and mantras of eastern mysticism, the astrology of Zoroastrianism, and the sacraments of Christianity. All of those things PLUS Jesus would lead one to intellectual, elevated thinking.

Gnostics taught that they were better than Christians, and they would browbeat and intimidate believers into thinking like a Gnostic. This is what Epaphras comes to Paul about. This is the message Epaphras brings to Paul in prison. Paul's response is perhaps the most sublime presentation of Christ found in Scripture.

Paul teaches in Colossians that Jesus Christ is, in fact, the Creator and, in fact, solely, all alone, by Himself, the all-sufficient Redeemer. Colossians will teach us the essential basic equation of the salvation math: Jesus plus NOTHING equals EVERYTHING.

Still a Problem

Although Gnosticism is long dead, it's DNA runs through several current, contemporary heresies. Churches and, let's be honest, preachers (all heresies begin in a pulpit somewhere) are, to this day, teaching that Jesus plus SOMETHING equals life.

Some churches teach that Christ plus your good deeds and actions equals salvation.² Others teach that Christ plus your good intentions and good living equals prosperity, which is the life God wants to give you.³ A good, long soak in the Christologically orthodox waters of Colossians will help wash away a lot of extra grime from these distortions.

Paul does want to address this problem, but he does not jump right into it.

² Ephesians 2:8 counters this.

³ This belief undergirds the arguments of all of Job's terrible comforters for about thirty chapters of Job.

He begins first with an introduction celebrating the church in Colossae that he has never seen in person. Paul typically praises churches before dealing with them pastorally and Colossae is no exception. At the time of Paul's writing, this is a city in significant decline. It is a shadow of its former wealth and size. However, it is important to remember that this poor, pagan people without God and without hope in this world found Jesus. Paul wishes to affirm their salvation. And that affirmation is truly a beautiful celebration that can encourage the Church today.

Joy

Despite never meeting the majority of the church he is writing the letter to, Paul refers to them as saints, brothers, and sisters. In fact, Paul uses purposefully elevated language to further describe them: they are faithful brothers and sisters.

Paul shares a mutual spiritual home and family life with these strangers simply by their shared confession in Christ. They are family by faith. Even better, Paul provides further definition. They were "in Christ." That is a simple, overlooked phrase. We can run right over it to get to the meatier bits in Colossians 1.

It is easy to overlook the significant of some words. At a restaurant in Oklahoma City called Ted's Café Escondido, the menu speaks of a "complimentary setup." You can easily breeze right past that as you determine what to order. But slow down, Champ. That "complimentary setup" means free chips and salsa (not so special) and ALSO free queso, free warm tortillas made in the store right in front of you, free relish of carrots, onions, and jalapenos, butter and, at the end of the meal, free sopapillas. See what I mean? There is a LOT implied in two words and we do NOT want to look beyond them or take them for granted.

Do not take being in Christ for granted. There is so much depth and beauty loaded in there. To be in Christ means that the Colossians, and all genuine Christians, had joined and taken part in ALL Christ had done, all that Christ WAS and IS, and all that He ever would be.

Paul would unpack this in other letters too. Being in Christ saturates the first chapter of Ephesians. In Ephesians one⁴, we learn that people who are in Christ are blessed with every spiritual blessing.

⁴ In Ephesians chapter one, the phrase "in Christ" is used ten times.

Those who are in Christ are connected to a power that existed before the foundations of the earth were laid. Those who are in Christ have as a result redemption and forgiveness of their sins in Him. This leads all who are in Christ to the hope of glory in Christ. New life in Christ is truly profound. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17)

For the Colossians, the old had gone and the new had come. Do you define yourself often, or consider yourself, as being “in Christ?” If not, why not? Paul celebrates the Colossians as being faithful brothers and sisters and seals that section with a unique greeting.

Paul’s New Word

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father.” Paul blended traditional Greek greetings with traditional Hebrew greetings. The customary greeting in the ancient Greek world was *chairen*, which was a form of “grace” and “greetings.”⁵ But Paul changes that to the freshly minted *charis*, “grace.” He is telling them that they are the recipients of God’s unmerited favor. Praise God for His grace! It is also a commissioning to live under grace. In other words, “May you be a great taker of grace by having the disposition, the dependency, and the humility that makes you a ready receptor of God’s grace.”

Are you a receiver of God’s grace who channels that on? Or are you a sort of dead-end depository of grace that is never seen from or heard from again? If Christians truly focused on extending grace rather than fixating on legalistic rules, the gospel would advance, and churches would burst at the seams. Paul understands that churches that do not live under and receive and extend God’s grace are susceptible to weird variants of Christianity – those Jesus plus groups.

The other half of the greeting, “peace,” came originally from the Hebrew *shalom*, which meant more than simply the absence of trouble. It also refers to a well-being that springs from a sense of the presence of God. Paul’s wish for the Colossian church was that they would understand more fully and enjoy more deeply God’s peace.

There must be grace before we can experience the peace of God. Grace (God’s work) comes before peace (our new relationship).

⁵ See James 1:1; Acts 15:23; 23:26.

Sadly, too many people chase after peace apart from God and his grace. They chase material, intellectual, social or even religious satisfaction. But it is all pointless and empty. Sinners can only find peace through God's grace and when they do, it is a beautiful exchange and is a cause for celebration.

Thanksgiving

Paul continues his greeting by listing the familiar trio; faith, hope, and love, but placed hope last. Faith, hope, and love are mentioned numerous times in the Bible, almost as shorthand the Apostles use for genuine Christianity. Faith is always mentioned first because apart of faith there is no Christian experience. And here Paul is specific about the object of faith being Christ Jesus.

Faith is not some charm on your bracelet. It isn't some component of your balanced life. You are not "okay" because you've got faith. Faith requires an object. Without an object in which to believe, faith has no real value. So, faith in a SOMETHING, that is what matters. The question is, what is the object of your faith? Faith in what? Faith in reincarnation? Faith that God is good? Faith in faith? What is the object of your faith?

Jesus Christ was the object of the Colossian faith. You see, salvation doesn't come simply by believing in belief, or even believing in a set of teachings or a creed. Salvation comes by believing in Jesus Christ. When John G. Paton was translating the Bible in the Outer Hebrides, he searched for the exact word to translate *believe*. Eventually he found it: the word meant "lean your whole weight upon."⁶ That is what the Colossians had done. They had placed all of their lives in the hands of Christ and that was something Paul found worth celebrating. What about you? How often to praise the Lord and celebrate leaning all of who you are into Christ, trusting him for salvation?

Paul moved on to commend the love the Colossians had for all of the saints. For Paul, faith was proven to be a reality in the life of a believer by seeing its work through love.⁷ Loving God is seen in how a person loves their neighbor, particularly another believer (John 13:34, 35). There are a load of people claiming to be Christians who are unloving. I sometimes see it in myself. And if you don't see it in yourself, look harder. It's in there and it slips out from time to time. I see this sort of loveless goodness.

⁶ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Complete* (Wheaton IL: Victor, 1981), 24.

⁷ Galatians 5:6.

As best as I can describe it, it is a belief with any grace or charity, making it occasionally questionable in character. When I see that in me, it reminds me of the old Mark Twain quote: “He is a good man – in the worst sort of way.” Paul confirms, love for brothers and sisters in Christ is a sign of true faith.

It is a beautiful thing when you see within the Church a love for all the saints – not just some, not just the lovable, not just the rich, not just the gatekeepers of power and influence, not just the popular, not just the outgoing, but a love for all. This is what made the early church so attractive to the ancient world and caused people to leave their lives and join it. Barbarians, Greeks, Jews, Romans, Africans, men, women, slave, free, educated, ignorant – all sat down at the same table. Despite their differences, they knew themselves to be one in Christ.

When was the last time you felt yourself to be one in Christ with a person who is so different, whose tastes and preferences are so different, whose skin color or background, or socio-economic background are so different from yours? Yet, you felt a shared, mutual sense of spiritual family simply because of being one in Christ? It is an ugly distortion that allows division like that. It gets back to more of that Jesus plus something equals compatible to my flavor of faith.

Paul says there is no time for that nonsense. And there was nothing else like that early church. The pagan world said the most vile and horrible things about the Church and the people within it. They accused them of sorcery, vices, incest, conspiracies to overthrow Rome and more. And yet, because the Church was living their faith in love, it grew and grew and grew and grew. This was a community held together not by hobbies or their favorite superhero or tv news channel host. This community was not bound by a common language or geography. Scores came to Christ because of the genuine love revealing authentic faith. Paul celebrates that love with joy.

That leads to their hope. In this instance, hope comes last. Paul saw their faith and love springing from their hope. The hope of Heaven caused their faith and love to come forward. As pagans, these people had been without God and hope. Then came Epaphras to share the gospel and the wonderful, surprising joy of salvation and the hope of heaven. This hope connected them together even as it drew criticism from the outside.

By sharing the same hope (1 Tim 1:1), sharing that same understanding, they were bound more closely in their love and that encouraged them to stronger faith. Now we truly see how important the hope of glory truly is for believers.

Success!

Paul would conclude his introduction by celebrating the gospel's success. He engages in some hyperbole. The gospel has not yet spread through "the whole world," but it was on its way. He is celebrating the dynamic power of the gospel in their lives. He was celebrating the universality of the gospel. To be clear, I don't mean a weird sense of universalism, meaning everyone, everywhere is going to heaven regardless. That is simply not true. No, this is a universalist aspect of the gospel, meaning that message is a message for EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE, for all time.

Unlike that Gnostic elitist foolishness, the good news of Jesus Christ was for everybody. This church in Colossae was a cause for celebration. And we can celebrate too as we read through this greeting:

- We are God's holy and faithful ones, saints.
- We are brothers and sisters with a common Heavenly Father.
- We are "in Christ" and a part of a wonderful mystery of His Body
- The grace of God has been freely poured on us
- We have peace, *shalom*, the well-being that results from divine grace and the presence of God.
- God has made it possible for us to have faith in Christ, love for ALL the saints, and hope laid up in heaven.

Let's rejoice and celebrate the good news of the abundance of life in Christ!

FURTHER THOUGHTS

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17)

For the Colossians, the old had gone and the new had come. Do you define yourself often, or consider yourself, as being “in Christ?” If not, why not?

Archaeologists discovered slabs of nameless people in Roman catacombs that carried two inscriptions: *en Cristo* (in Christ) and *en pace* (in peace). Radical newness found in Christ leads to eternity in peace, perfect peace.

What blessings do you consider as you think what it means to be in Christ?

Are you a receiver of God’s grace who channels that on? Or are you a sort of dead-end depository of grace that is never seen from or heard from again?

Without an object in which to believe, faith has no real value. So, faith in a SOMETHING, that is what matters. The question is, what is the object of your faith?

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

THERE IS NO WEDNESDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY THIS WEEK!

Silver Wings Update: Silver Wings Ministry was going to see “Hello Dolly” on Wednesday July 19th but that showing is sold out. However, they were able to secure 20 seats for the performance on Friday July 21st at 2:30PM. The cost is \$38 for seniors. Interested? Contact Cindy Everhart for more information.

Silver Wings Picnic and Egg Hunt: April 19th, 12PM Bring a brown bag lunch!

The Constitution and Bylaws Committee has proposed a new constitution and bylaws to replace the current edition being utilized by the church. The church family is invited to read, prayerfully reflect on changes recommended, and vote on at the next business meeting. There will be a Church Town Hall style meeting with Pastor Craig and representatives of the Constitution and Bylaws committee on Sunday **April 16th (TODAY) at 4PM** at the church if you have any questions about changes being proposed. If you have a smartphone, you can find the new constitution on the church’s app.

Pastor Craig, the deacons and finance committee recommend the transitional hiring of Richard Marsh as our Financial Administrator.

Richard has degrees in accounting and has served as both an accountant in the secular marketplace and as an Executive/Administrative Pastor in a sister church in our community. Pay would be a continuation of what is currently budgeted for that position. We are excited to see how God uses Richard to help lead us in the days ahead.

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL: JUNE 19-23 – 6-8:30PM This is for all children Pre-K through completed 5th Grade. We still need volunteers, and we will also need donations for snacks, volunteer suppers, crafts, and decorations. The donation boards will be posted in a few weeks.