

Today we're kicking off a new series anchored in the book of Colossians called "Freedom in Christ." This is a great next step coming out of Easter, celebrating all that Jesus made possible through His sacrificial death and resurrection. It is only because we are *in Christ* that are able to live fully and freely. And that's what we're going to see as we walk through this series.

### **Background & Setting**

As you find your way to Colossians chapter 1, I want to give you a bit of the background and setting for this letter and the occasion for its writing. Paul, who is likely imprisoned in Rome, is writing the letter with his best buddy, Timothy, who probably served as Paul's secretary.

The letter is written to the church in Colossae, a small, Roman province in Phrygia, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. There wasn't much to Colossae, it wasn't very impressive compared to the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, which were nearby. The community was primarily Gentile with plenty of paganism and idolatry, but there was a legitimate Jewish presence in the city as well. The church likely began during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus. During that time, a Colossian named Epaphras (short for Epaphroditus), traveled to Ephesus and responded to Paul's sharing of the Gospel—he gave his life to Christ. Epaphras took the Gospel home, to Colossae, shared his new-found faith with others and the church in Colossae was born! Think about the impact the Gospel had on that guy: a brand new, baby Christian, couldn't keep quiet about the good news of what God had done in Christ. People came to faith because of his willingness to share his story. A whole city was impacted because his life was so gripped by Jesus. To be clear, Paul didn't plant the

church in Colossae. God used Epaphras to do that. Epaphras the evangelist...

At some point, the church hit a snag. There were some destructive teachings, or philosophies, that put the fledgling Christians' faith at risk. Scholars differ about who the specific group was behind the teaching because the false teachings aren't clearly from just one group or another. There are definitely some Jewish elements. But there is also some sort of local, pagan, mystic stuff going on. I think a good explanation for this dangerous teaching is that it comes from the context of the local Jewish and pagan folk belief. If the Christians grabbed onto the lies that were being promoted, they could be led away from who they truly were in Christ. Instead of being free in Christ, they'd find themselves enslaved again to the ideas and philosophies of men, trying to *earn* their way to God through their works and rituals. By His grace, God, in Christ Jesus, had set them free. Epaphras told Paul what was going on and, with Timothy, Paul writes a letter to the church to warn and encourage them. He wants them to know who they truly are because they're *in Christ* and that nothing and no one compares to Jesus, His plans, His power or His authority.

So, with that bit of background in place, let's take a look at the first two verses of chapter 1. I'm reading from the NIV. [READ v 1-2]

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

<sup>2</sup>To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father."

### **Greeting** (v 1-2)

Paul had probably never been to Colossae, but he definitely felt a pastoral call to care well for the Christians in that community because of his connection with Epaphras. He wasn't just some guy with an interest in the people, he's an apostle, hand-picked by God, to do the work of the

Gospel, particularly with Gentiles. The Colossians knew who he was, because of Epaphras, and they likely had great respect for him. As an apostle, he [Paul] spoke with authority.

Paul makes it clear that he's not writing on his own, but Timothy, his best friend, was with him. And, immediately, the encouragement and instruction begin. He refers to Timothy as 'our brother' reminding the Colossians that they're all in it together—Tim isn't just Paul's brother in Christ but a brother to the Colossians, too. We're family. We're together. You're part of something bigger than just your congregation. You're not alone.

And Paul takes his opening greeting even further into the encouragement zone: He says, "To God's holy people in Colossae...in Christ." In Colossae...in Christ. You saints, you faithful men and women in Colossae, you are who you are because you're in Christ. Paul is being super intentional, right from the start, to let them know that everything they are, everything they enjoy and have, is because they're *in Christ*. They may reside in Colossae, but they live in the sphere of Christ.<sup>1</sup> They're part of the body of believers. And, for Paul, who is as Jewish as a man can be, to recognize those Colossians as brothers and sisters in Christ communicates volumes to them. In Christ, they're equals. And, in Christ, they are recipients of the grace and peace that only comes from God 'our Father.' He alone is our Source of grace and peace. He alone has the authority to lavish those things up on us.

From the start, Paul wants them to be reminded of the truth of who and Whose they are. We're in this together. Because we're in Christ, we enjoy all God has for us.

### **Giving Thanks** (v 3-8)

Now, take a look at verses 3-8. [READ]

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<sup>1</sup> Garland, David E. *The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1998), 42.

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people— <sup>5</sup> the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel <sup>6</sup> that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. <sup>7</sup> You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup> and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.”

Paul says, ‘We always thank God for you...’ and he lists a bunch of encouraging qualities he knows about them. He begins by highlighting their faith—not just the fact that they *have* faith in Christ, which is huge—but that their faith, which draws its strength from being connected to Christ, is what enables them to love others so well. Being *in Christ* encompasses every bit of the believer—including how they [we] love others. How we ‘do life’ is affected by the indwelling presence of Jesus. It makes sense that when our faith is healthy, our love will be, too. So that’s a good pause-point for us: how’s your love? Do you love your spouse, your stepchildren, your parents, your friends with the love of Jesus overflowing from you, or is your love limited to your best efforts? Being in Christ includes every part of us... including how we love.

To take it further, Paul knows that their faith and love actually bubble-over from the hope they have in Christ—which is stored up in heaven. He’s not talking about a fingers-crossed sort of hope, or a ‘wishing’ things will happen kind of hope. He’s describing a hope that is certain because it’s anchored in the promises of God. This kind of hope is not optimism but assurance. In other words, because the Colossians are in Christ, they are sure of what God has done, is doing and will do, and that influences every facet of their lives. There is nothing, no part of their lives, that being in Christ does not touch and influence. And the hope they enjoy ‘got into them’ when they heard the gospel. The hope that Paul is describing is not

subjective, built on circumstances or feelings, but is objectively based on what God has accomplished in Christ that we might be forgiven and free.

*Hope gets in...*

This is why we share the gospel, friends. It's the Good News of what God has done. The gospel has power because it's God's good news. When we hear the good news that we can be forgiven, redeemed, restored; when we hear that we don't have to be objects of God's wrath but recipients of His grace and mercy; when we learn that we can have new life in Christ that changes our today and our eternity, hope gets in. When we begin to realize what it means to be free and to live fully as the people that God designed us to be for His glory, hope gets in. And that hope isn't anchored in us being good enough, fast enough or smart enough. It's anchored in the finished work of Jesus that we celebrated last week and the communion we shared this morning where we rehearsed that Jesus gave all of Himself for us. When we share the gospel, hope can get into the hearts of those who hear it and they, too, can be found in Christ with every part of their lives impacted by His presence.

That's what Paul was talking about in verse 6 when he says the gospel was bearing fruit throughout the whole world. "The message of God's love for all humankind and Jesus' sacrificial death to redeem us by grace speaks in any language or culture."<sup>2</sup> He's thanking God for the impact of the gospel. When people hear the gospel, lives can be changed. When people are in Christ, they're never the same. Their thinking is different. Their hearts are different. Their attitudes are different. Their marriages are different. Their parenting is different. How they handle money is different. Their work ethic is different. They are changed because they're in Christ and when you're in Christ, every bit of you is affected. Not that it all happens immediately, because transformation is ongoing for those in Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 49.

Paul reminds them that that's exactly what happened when their friend Epaphras shared the gospel with them—they were changed. The apostle is rehearsing the truth of who they've become and are still becoming. Paul thanks God for the solid foundation Epaphras laid by sharing the true gospel. The presence of Christ in their lives is obvious because of how well they love each other.

### **Prayer** (v 9-14)

Now, look at verses 9-14. [READ]

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, <sup>10</sup> so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, <sup>12</sup> and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. <sup>13</sup> For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

'Epaphras told us about how Christ has moved in you, and we haven't stopped praying for you since...' Think about that for a moment: Paul and Tim have never met the Colossian church, this group of new believers, but they pray for them all the time. Why? Because they're family. They're brothers and sisters in Christ. They want God's best for them. They want the Colossians to be used for God's glory regardless of circumstances or the culture around them.

This is important for us to remember: You don't need to know someone personally to pray for them. Many of our seasoned saints have prayer lists that are full of people they've never met because they know what Paul knows...God wants us to pray for each other, to bear one another's burdens. Too often, I think we pray for our friends and families but forget

to pray for the greater body of Christ. This is a good prompting for all of us to pray for our missionaries, our brothers and sisters in marketplace ministries: that's every one of you working at Intel, the insurance agency, the grocery store, gas station, community college or coffee shop. That's all of you as you work out there in the world. Pray for our students on high school and college campuses, and any other saints that the Lord brings to mind. Now, I know that you can't pray for everyone every day, but what if your prayer list included a different group of believers each day? Mondays you pray for the believers on our campuses. Tuesday you pray for our missionaries and so forth. Just an idea and a reminder that it's a privilege to go to the Father on the behalf of others.

### *Knowledge of God's will (9b)*

Paul had some specific things that he was talking to the Lord about regarding the Colossians. [Paul prays] He prayed specifically that the Colossians would know God's will. This is essential not just for the Colossians, but for us! We need to know what God wants. Many Christians don't know God's will, so they default to their own best thinking. You may have a great mind, but it doesn't begin to compare to the One who made *you* **and** the mind you enjoy. Too many of us make our plans and ask God to bless them instead of asking God to help us see what He's doing and joining Him in that. Jesus made it clear that He only did what the Father was doing—He didn't do anything by Himself (John 5:19). That's important for us to hold on to. We must stay intimately connected with Jesus. He is the vine, we're the branches. Apart from Him we can do...nothing (John 15).

Paul was explicit with the Colossians that God's will could only be attained through the wisdom and understanding of the Holy Spirit who was available only to those who were completely committed to Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit of God, indwelling and communicating with the believers, would guide them to knowing God's will. This was crucial for them to cling to because the deceptive teachers around them were

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 65.

saying that spiritual wisdom and understanding could be found in other ways—ways that relied on human effort instead of intimacy with Christ.

### *Worthy Lives (10-12)*

Paul is drilling down on the idea that knowing God's will is not from human wisdom or understanding, but is only available to those who are in Christ—not by any other means. If they'll truly seek to know God's will through the wisdom and understanding of the Spirit as they nurture their relationship with Christ, they will live God-honoring lives (fruitful, fully pleasing in every way). Here's why: knowing God's will forces us to interact with it and pushes us align our thinking and our conduct with it. If I know what God wants me to do, I have a choice: Do it or do not. If I do, that honors God and is, ultimately, what's best for me too. If I do not do it, then I kink the relationship hose with God. I'm still His kid. I'm still loved. I'm still forgiven. But the relationship isn't what either of us want it to be. And, if I'm in Christ, I *can't stand* to be out of alignment with my Father so, with all the power He gives me, I adjust and align myself with His will. The relationship flows again as it should, there's peace, there's closeness *and* my faith grows. As we walk in obedience to God's will, our lives please God. Is my greatest desire to please God in every way? If not, what needs to change?

Paul then lists four, intermingled, traits of the Spirit-led life that pleases God. The first is bearing fruit in every good work (10b). In other words, since your life has been changed because you're in Christ, the fruit that your life *produces* will point to your connection to Christ. To say it the opposite way, if the fruit of your life *doesn't* point people to Jesus, then something's wrong. I know we're still in process and not perfect but, we should still be growing, maturing, and becoming increasingly like Jesus and the fruit we produce should show that. Our lives please God when our fruitfulness is evidence of our connection with Christ.

### *Knowing God (10c)*

Which leads to the second trait, that's tied to the first, and that's growing in the knowledge of God. To know Him is to do His will. This isn't about



information related to God, it's not about having a big brain, or just knowing *about* God, this is tied to knowing God's will. The more you know Him, the more you'll want what He wants, which will stretch your faith and mature you and make you even fruitier (more fruitful). And the more fruitful you become, the more you want to know Him, which stretches your faith, maturing you and making you more fruitful. It's a positive feedback loop. It's an upward spiral. Knowing God is critical in a culture that celebrates knowing everything *but* God. It's how we discern what is true from the swarm of lies buzzing all around us. That was true for the Colossians and it's certainly true for us. The Colossians were being confronted with teachings that suggested what they really needed was to understand a particular philosophy or mystical teaching, *then* they'd really live the good life. That's the same trash that's in our culture today: you don't need God...you need 'this' (from food, to sex, to crystals, to Oprah's latest book)!

#### *Divine Power (11)*

Unfortunately, we all realize that knowing God's will doesn't mean automatic obedience. We've all known what God wants and been disobedient. That's why Paul prays that God would give the Colossians divine power to not only discern but to do God's will. The power that Paul is talking about is the same power that raised Christ from the dead. It's the same power that enables Paul to proclaim the gospel and empowers other Christians to live in ways that please God. Our strength is in God alone. Just as we are dependent on Christ to save us, we are dependent upon Him to empower us to live in ways that make Him smile. But that only happens when we remain in Christ—close, connected, like the vine to the branch. This is a constant thing, an ever-present thing...not a one-and-done.

And this is critical because there is plenty of 'life' that comes our way and is very tough. There are circumstances, seasons and situations that we just have to bear. And Paul prays that they would have great endurance and patience. Endurance "is the power to cope and be content in all

circumstances.”<sup>4</sup> It’s the opposite of grumbling, complaining and shrugging your shoulders like Eeyore, ‘Oh well.’ Endurance is about holding on during the tough stuff and continuing to press toward the goal. Paul knew that they were going to need God’s power to do that. They were also going to need His power to be patient with malicious people. They would need God’s strength to not bite back or give in to bitterness. God’s power is available to those who are in Christ because God is faithful. No other person, philosophy or methodology can provide the power the Colossians need to persevere in the faith, resist temptation and deceitful teachers. The same is true for us. We need God’s power and it’s readily, freely, available to us as we walk in obedience with Christ.

### *Joyful Thanks (12-14)*

Our lives please God when we are fruitful, growing in our knowledge of Him, as we trust Him to empower us to weather the storms of circumstances and people, and as we joyfully give thanks to Him for all He’s done. Paul reminds the Colossians of exactly what God has done: He’s qualified you to share in the inheritance of His holy people in the kingdom of light. This is language usually reserved for the Jewish people. But now, gentiles have equal access to the Father because of the redemption provided through Jesus Christ, His Son. That means, in Christ, gentiles are now saints (holy ones, people set apart to God) and are heirs to the inheritance of God’s promised people. Jew, Greek, slave, free, woman or man, it doesn’t matter: in Christ all this is for you!

You’re part of a whole new kingdom now. You were once in bondage to sin and darkness, like the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. But because you have been redeemed through Christ’s death and resurrection, you have been set free, rescued, to become a citizen of the kingdom of light. You have a new King, and you are part of a new kingdom. When people are rescued from terrorists, when the child who was missing is found safe, when people are liberated from an evil dictator, the usual, typical, normal response is celebration: irrepressible joy and thanks. Paul is reminding

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 75

the Colossians that they have been freed, liberated, redeemed and made alive in Christ. *That* ought to generate some deep gratitude and overflowing joy—even through the trials and pains, as they lean on God. Because they know, even when it's ugly, that God is faithful and because they're in Christ, He will meet them right where they are. He will give incomparable wisdom and understanding. He'll give them His strength—the power to stand strong. And they know all this to be true because their hope is rooted in their new King, not in their circumstances or their culture. And their assurance gives them the privilege of choosing joy filled gratitude. And *that* makes their King smile.

## **Wrap**

Friends, there's plenty going on around us that is distracting, deceptive and just plain evil. There are so many opinions and voices that it's hard to discern just one. That's why we have to get and stay close to Jesus. We need to be able to hear His voice above all others so we can walk in obedience and live lives that make our Father smile. If you're in Christ, you are forgiven and have been set free. You have the privilege of leaning into the Holy Spirit for wisdom and understanding, to know God and His will *and* the power to walk in obedience. In Christ, your life, how you live and love and serve, will produce fruit that points everyone to the Source of your life. People see your life in Christ and hope begins to creep in. Every bit of what Paul was talking about in this text orbits around Jesus and what it means for them to be in Christ.

You may reside in Placerville, Cameron Park, Folsom, or El Dorado Hills, but you *live in Christ*. He is your hope, your joy, your King, your strength and your Redeemer. And as you walk with Him, moment by moment, you will live a life that pleases Him in every way regardless of the circumstances or culture around you. Because you're *in Christ*.