

Sermon Series:

New Life in Christ

A study of the book of Colossians



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE COLOSSIANS (Colossians 1:1-8; John 16:5-15)

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Today we're coming to a new series on the book of Colossians. We've looked at a couple of different kinds of biblical literature over the last year or so. At the end of 2019 we spent several weeks looking at the psalms. The psalms are songs and hymns and prayers to God. They give us some words to express our emotions - joy or sorrow, puzzlement or rejoicing in the greatness of who God is. Then at the beginning of this year we looked at Joshua which was a historical account and as we looked through that historical account we sought to find out things about God as we saw how he acted and how people reacted to that. Then at the end of last year we spent several weeks looking at who God is and so that was a theological discussion. We looked at the whole Bible and tried to see the picture of God that is revealed in it.

Now we're coming to a different kind of a literature as we come to look at this a letter from Paul. In this letter we're going to find that he uses a wide variety of styles. Sometimes he's going to tell us stories about people like Epaphras. Sometimes he does have a bit of a theological argument. In Colossians they're not as developed as say in the book of Romans where he has a long theological argument that he develops. But it does have some theological passages. It also has prayers and songs which we will see even starting this week and then there's a lot of practical application - how to take what he's teaching and apply it to your lives. The style is not very formal. It's like a letter that you would write rather than like a paper I would write for a bible class where I take all the information and try and organize it in a logical way and stick to an outline and write it very formally. It's a letter and you know for yourselves in a letter you start talking about something and then that reminds you of something else and you talk about that and it reminds me of somewhere else. It's not easy to outline it logically. Paul tends to go on little diversions - we'll see one today - when he gets excited about something and discusses it for a while and then he comes back to what he was originally talking about. It's a very personal way of communicating and sharing his heart with these people.

We're going to look at shorter passages in this series so that we can go a little bit deeper into what the text says. The book is only four chapters long, but we're not going to take one chapter a week. We're going to take several verses at a time so we look at what he's saying because when Paul writes, every word counts. He's a very thoughtful as a writer.

Just some quick background information now. Like I said, it's only four chapters long. There are two main sections other than the introduction and the closing. First of all, Paul is going to set out the fact that Christ alone is all that they need and then he's going to explore how Christ should be reflected in all of their lives. We can see this in the key verse of the whole book of which is found in Colossian 2:6 – *“Just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your lord you must continue to follow him.”* You accepted Jesus as your lord and you accepted that he was the only way to salvation. In the same way Christ is also the only thing that you need to live as a Christian in all areas of life.

Today we are going to start on the introduction of the letter. There are two parts of the introduction - a greeting and Paul's prayers for the Colossians. We'll just look at the first part of Paul's prayers for them.

Greeting

Now, if I were going to write a letter to this church today, I would probably start with: “Dear Grace Christian Church” and then there would be the body of the letter and I would sign off by saying, “Grace and Peace, (which is a blessing) Becky” The only difference with Paul's letter is that he puts all of this at the beginning as was the custom at that time. In those first couple of verses he says:

From: Paul and Timothy

To: The city of Colossae

Blessing: God give you grace and peace

There is no question that this letter is from Paul as it states. Paul was in prison when he wrote it. Traditionally he's been thought to be in prison at Rome, but today people think he might have been in Ephesus which was a shorter distance away from Colossae. Timothy was like an ‘apprentice’ who travelled with Paul and eventually led some churches. Paul later wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to help him in his pastoral role. We think Colossians was probably written about 64 AD, so it's one of the later letters of Paul. Colossae is in what's modern day Turkey. Ephesus was on the coast of the Aegean sea and Colossae's a bit inland from that. The church would have had a mix of Jews and Gentiles in it. The church actually wasn't started by Paul. It seems that it was started by Epaphras. We don't have a record of Paul ever going to Colossae but because of his relationship with Epaphras, he knew a lot about the church.

Now, you'll notice that Paul doesn't just say from Paul and Timothy, etc. He adds descriptive phrases which set up some basic relationships and understandings of who people are. He says:

From: “Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle”

To: “God's holy (set apart) people in the city of Colossae”

Right at the beginning of his letter, he reminds them that their first relationship is with God. They are God's people. He is not an apostle because he chose the role but because God chose him for it. Also, God has set them apart as His people. Many translations use the word “saints” which means holy people or set apart people. Immediately he sets up that vertical relationship. We are God's and we're here because God has chosen us.

Then, Paul goes on to set up a horizontal relationship. He refers to:

*Timothy our brother
the faithful brothers and sisters in Colossae
God our Father*

He is setting up a family relationship where we are God's family under our father God. It's a very positive and strong image that you'll see throughout Colossians. It's important to what he wants to teach them. Now, just like us today, back then, family was really important. It was the building block of the community but also like now, families weren't always positive because we're sinful human beings and families can get pretty messed up. One of the things Paul is saying here is that it doesn't matter what your earthly family is, now you're in a new family - God's family - and this is a positive thing. There's equality under the father and there needs to be that filial relationship between each other. Later, he's going to explain the results of that family relationship in detail.

We're God's people, and we're God's family, and all of this is because of Christ.

*Paul ... an apostle of Christ
faithful brothers and sisters in Christ*

This is the central theme that we're going to see throughout Colossians. Everything goes back to Christ. Repeatedly we'll see "of Christ" or "in Christ" or "from Christ", and more. He's emphasising that everything relates back to Christ and our relationship with Christ. Paul's beginning to set up this web of relationships of which they're a part – all focused around Christ - and this is fundamental to their identity as Christians.

Now for us that means that we too are God's saints, God's holy people. As I look at you this morning, I see Saint Ross and Saint Margaret and Saint Dev and Saint Kim. You may not think of yourselves as saints, but you are! God has set you apart. It's not that you're particularly righteous - it just means that you're God's people.

We also need to realize we're brothers and sisters, children of our heavenly Father. As I look out I see Sister Karen and Brother Dinesh and Sister Val and Brother Graham. We are a family whether we feel like it or not. That's what we are and part of our job as a church is to learn how to live that out in practical ways. That commitment that we have to each other is because our first commitment is to God. The basis of all of this is that we are in Christ

Paul's Prayers

The first thing Paul does now is to let them know that he is praying for them. He says:

*We always pray for you and
we give thanks to God
the father of our lord Jesus Christ*

It's interesting because the first time he says God is our father but this time he says God is Christ's father. By inference, He's saying that Christ is our brother. He's further strengthening that family relationship.

Next weekend we'll look at the petition, that Paul has for the Colossians, but this week we're going to look at the thanksgiving. He does this first, I think, because he wants to start on a positive note. In some letters, like Galatians where they were making some serious mistakes about the Gospel, Paul had to step in pretty firmly and say, "No you're doing it wrong you got to get it right." When he talks to the Colossians, on the other hand, he's basically going to say, "Look you're doing a great job! I just have some pointers to help you do it even better. I want to help you go even deeper in your relationship with God."

So, what is it that he thanks God for?

*for we have heard of
your faith in Christ Jesus and
your love for all God's people*

Faith and love - those are some of the core heart attitudes of the Christian life. Again, we see it's all about relationships. The vertical relationship is their faith in Christ. They are not sinfully rebelling against Christ - they have faith in Christ. And they are not acting selfishly and sinfully with each other - they have love for God's people. They are doing well and he's proud of them.

Where has this faith a love come from? It's come through the Good News which is just another way of saying the Gospel. And here's where he goes on a bit of a digression because he's talking about them and then he gets excited about the Gospel and all that the Gospel does.

Firstly, he says that the faith and love ...

come from your confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven

The Gospel has given them a new perspective. They realize that God has promised them heaven and eternal life and that has changed their perspective on life here and now. It's not a hope that is uncertain - "I just hope it will work out!". It is a hope that I can be sure will happen. God has promised it and so I can base my life on it. He's going to come back to this idea in chapter 3 where he says shows them what it means to live with this new perspective.

Secondly, he says that we have been given a new foundation in the truth.

*the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace
you learned about the good news from Epaphras*

The truth is their new foundation. There are three verbs that he uses to talk about how they received the truth of the Gospel. They heard the good news - more accurately, they heeded it. They didn't just hear it spoken and then went on their way. When you heed a call, you hear it and you respond positively to it. They responded positively and then they sought to understand it - they studied it so that they grasped it thoroughly. They learned it. This sounds pretty academic, but the word means that they became firmly established in it so that it became their foundation. They heard it and responded; they came to understand it well; and then they became firmly established in it and built their life on it.

Paul then changes the picture from a building metaphor to an agricultural one. He says,

*This same good news that came to you is going out all over the world
it's bearing fruit and increasing everywhere just as it did so among you*

This would be a bit like saying, “The gospel is like that zucchini seed you planted last summer. Remember how it sort of took over your whole garden because it grew so rampantly, and you ended up with so many zucchini that you were dropping them off on your neighbour’s front porch just to get rid of them!” Paul is saying the Gospel was just growing with a life of its own and nothing could stop it and it bore fruit everywhere it went.

You’ll see the note about the New Living which translates this verse as:

It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives just as it changed your life ...

They have interpreted what bearing fruit means - to change lives - and they leave out the bit about growing or increasing. I think that limits it a bit too much because we're going to see that the Gospel didn't just change their lives, it changed their whole culture and their whole community and eventually civilization. The gospel doesn't leave anything the same. This is a positive picture of what the Gospel does and that's why Paul gets so excited about it.

For us, I immediately thought of the things that we believe God wants us to do this year and going forward.

1. Nurturing our new life in Christ - basing it on the gospel and becoming firmly established in Christ
2. Strengthening our lives together - that's the love for each other, that family feel that we want to make stronger
3. Sharing this with others - how can we keep this to ourselves? Actually, the Gospel is just going to multiply, with our without our involvement!

As we looked at these things, we weren't saying that we're not doing these things already. I thank God for this church because I think we're doing well in all of these areas. Like Paul, I just want to encourage you to keep up the good work!

Now, Paul goes on to talk about a couple of people that have played key roles in bringing the good news to them and applying it in their situation. First of all, there is Epaphras. Paul defines who Epaphras is in the context of relationships. He's a *beloved co-worker*. I love that picture. He's not just somebody we work with, we love him. There's a strong relationship of teamwork that Paul values. Then he's Christ's *faithful servant*. Don't you just know that with some people when you when you listen to them and you get to know them? You just see that their great desire is to serve Christ in however he wants them to do that. Later, Paul will say that he was one of them. He was originally from Colossae. We see those relationships with Paul, with Christ, and with each other.

Paul then goes on to talk about what Epaphras has done for them. Epaphras was the one that firmly established them in the good news. He didn't just teach them and run on to the next city. No, he stayed there and made sure that they deeply understood the Good News, the Gospel, so that they could grow in it. He was also a connection with Paul and the wider church. Epaphras was helping Paul on their behalf and he was the one that told Paul of their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for each other. He provided that important connection with the wider church. Finally, if we go to the end of the book, we hear more about Epaphras.

... he is a member of your own fellowship and a servant of Jesus Christ Jesus and he sends you his greetings. He always prays earnestly for you asking God to make you strong and perfect fully confident that you're following the whole will of God. I can

assure you that he prays hard for you and also for the believers in Laodicea and Hierapolis (other cities in that area).

I think here we see that he had a real pastoral heart for the people. he was praying that they would continue to grow as a Christians. We see here somebody who was a real shepherd of the flock, a perfect minister. What a blessing to the church he was!

But Epaphras doesn't think that it's all about him. We read that he's praying earnestly for them because he knows that the Holy Spirit needs to be at work in their lives too. He is the one who tells Paul about:

... the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given them.

Earlier, Paul had said that the love that they have for each other comes from the Gospel, and here that love is said to come from the Holy Spirit. I think we see through that Paul is saying that the Holy Spirit is the one that takes the Gospel and applies it to their lives. It's interesting because this is the only place the Holy Spirit is mentioned by name in Colossians. We get some hints of His work in other parts of the book but He is not mentioned by name.

However, we certainly read more about the work of the Holy Spirit in other places. This morning we read from John 16 where Jesus is introducing the Holy Spirit to the disciples. There He says:

... in fact, it's best for you that I go away because if I don't the Advocate won't come but if I do go away then I will send him to you.

The title "Advocate" is sometimes translated as "Helper" or "Comforter". It's the Greek word "paraclete" and relates to somebody that comes alongside you to walk with you and to help you do what you're trying to do. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us.

Jesus goes on to say:

When he comes, he will convict the world of its sin and of God's righteousness and of the coming judgment ...

The Holy Spirit helps people to see what sin and righteousness are how to find salvation. This happens when you first become a Christian when the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin and your need to repent and seek God's forgiveness. It also happens to us as Christians doesn't it? It's the Holy Spirit that helps us see the areas of life that we need to work on. Later Paul is going to talk about putting off the old self and putting on the new and it's the Holy Spirit that helps us to know what is old and what's new - what we need to change.

Then at the end Jesus says:

When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth.

The Holy Spirit is the one that helps us to know the truth that is the Gospel.

Paul talks about up two helpers - the Holy Spirit and Epaphras and both are needed even today. I think it's really helpful for us to stop and thank God for the people He's brought into our lives who've established and enriched our Christian lives. Who are those people that have been an Epaphras to you? Who has helped you to be firmly established in the Gospel? Who has enriched your spiritual life one way or another? I think we need to take time to say thank you to for God for them.

Epaphras was a wonderful pastor for the church in Colossae. As we look for a new minister, we should be asking God to bring the church an Epaphras as our new minister. That's part of who we need to be looking for - somebody who is a faithful servant of Christ, who wants to help us to become firmly established in the Gospel, who's going to be praying and having that pastoral heart for us. That's what every church needs as a minister.

Finally, I think we need to be asking the Holy Spirit to help us to grow in in our Christian lives and to apply the Gospel to our hearts. We need to acknowledge that even if we're doing well there's always room for growth - always room for more things that we need to learn. We need to be open to the Holy Spirit teaching us. In what areas do I need to be open to the Holy Spirit's work within me?

These Colossians were in a good place. Paul starts out his letter by saying that they are faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. But they had more to learn as we all do. Next week we're going to look at his petitions for the Colossians and we're going to see that Paul sets up a spiral of growth that he prays will bring them into greater understanding and application of the truth. There is a lot of similarity between us and the Colossian church. We are headed in the right direction but we always need to learn more and to develop more. I hope that as we study Colossians, it'll be both an encouragement to us but also a challenge for us to walk with Christ in new ways.