

The Core

Grace and Peace

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Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father (Col. 1:1-2).

Jesus is Lord. He is King. He is sovereign. We don't make him any of those things. He is all of that. He doesn't need our permission, our vote, our affirmation, or our approval. He's the core, and the call of Colossians is to live with him at the center of our lives. The challenge of our lives is to figure out how to live with a conscious awareness of who Jesus is.

I cannot overemphasize to you how important the centrality or the preeminence of Christ is for our lives, nor can I overemphasize to you how dangerous it is to live in a manner where you try to be preeminent over your own life. The Bible tells us that the desire for preeminence was the cause of Satan's rebellion against God (Isa. 14:12-14). It was the core of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God (Gen. 3:4-7). The prideful desire for preeminence is what caused God to banish Nebuchadnezzar to the fields and eat grass like an ox (Dan. 4:28-37). And it was the sin of a man named Diotrephes who, according to 3 John 9, "likes to put himself first, [and] does not acknowledge our authority."

Paul's pastoral concern in the book of Colossians was for a group of people who were being tempted to deny, in practice, the authority of Christ in their lives. Our aim this morning is to determine how this practical denial of Christ was surfacing in the church and to use their problems as a mirror for our own lives.

Four Church-culture Defining Ideas

In these opening verses we get a sense of what is on Paul's mind and what's important to him. He highlights four foundational concepts—church-culture defining ideas—in these first two verses.

1. The Plan of God

We find in 1:1 that Paul identifies himself as the author of the book, and he calls himself "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." This title was no doubt important because Paul had formerly been Christianity's leading persecutor, and he had personally encountered the risen Christ. He was a Jew by birth, studied under the great teacher Gamaliel, and became a prized Pharisee. With the permission of the chief priests, Paul pursued the Christians who had fled to Damascus. And it was on the way to Damascus that he was personally confronted by Jesus in a vision (Acts 9:1-9).

God came after Paul. Jesus revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus. Here's what God said to Ananias about Paul:

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

The sovereign will of God was at work underneath Paul's life. But that's not just true about him. That's true for every person who becomes a Christian. Just think of it: Why were you born in this moment in human history? Why do you have the particular gifts and instincts that you have? God is behind all of that. Churches and the people in them and (yes) the pastors who serve them are undergirded by the will of a loving and good God.

That event moved Paul (then called Saul) from the most significant threat to Christianity to a believer in Jesus to Christianity's most profound spokesman. More than any other person, Paul was responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire through three missionary journeys and by writing thirteen of the twenty-six books of the New Testament.¹

At the end of Paul's ministry, he was arrested and sent to Rome (Acts 28:16-31). And it is from this imprisonment that he writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, probably between the years of AD 60 and 62.

Take note that there's a connection between Paul's imprisonment and the writing of these inspired letters. It was God's will for Paul to suffer, and he used that hardship in his life to give us the biblical letters we have today.

I trust you know that's true in your life as well. God uses hardship, uncertainty, and pain in order to create spiritual maturity in us. Just because you can't see how God is working doesn't mean that he isn't. I once heard John Piper describe our lives like a beaker with clear liquid and sediment on the bottom. Suffering bumps the beaker and shows us areas in which we need to grow.

But the wonderful thing is that we can trust that the will of God is at work.

2. Ministry with Friends

When you read Paul's letters, it's very clear that his ministry was marked by an orbit of friends and ministry partners. Colossians ends this way in 4:7-18. He mentions Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nympha, and Archippus.

In verse 1, we see Paul mention Timothy. It is interesting to note that Paul identifies him in the salutation because he is not the only one with Paul at the time of his writing. He has eight other men with him (4:7-15). However, Timothy was unique to Paul's ministry in that he had a permanent role. He was Paul's closest and most cherished partner in the ministry. In Philippians 2:20-21 he says about Timothy. "I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ."

¹ John MacArthur. MacArthur Study Bible – Introduction to Romans. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2001. p. 1688.

And so it's Timothy that Paul sends to the church in Ephesus to shepherd that congregation.

It is likely that Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were all sent together by the hand of a man named Tychicus. The book Philemon was also likely sent with Tychicus. This personal letter was written to a wealthy man, named Philemon, who lived in Colossae. He had a runaway slave named Onesimus who had come to faith in Christ under Paul's ministry while in prison (Philemon 11). And Paul was sending Onesimus back to Colossae with Tychicus.

The congregation at Colossae was likely started because of Paul's extensive ministry in the city of Ephesus. However, the work in Colossae was an area that Paul had never visited personally. We find in Colossians 2:1 that Paul says he has a great struggle for those at Laodicea and "for all who have not seen me face to face."

The church probably owed its start to a chief disciple of Paul named Epaphras who came to visit Paul, was arrested, and became a fellow prisoner (Philemon 23). Colossians 1:7 tells us of Epaphras' role with Paul and the church: "as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit."

Paul probably used Ephesus as his evangelistic headquarters,² and men like Epaphras were sent out to plant churches in the area called Asia (modern day Turkey). In fact, you may know of the seven churches in the first chapter of Revelation. Most of these churches were probably planted through this Ephesian outpost.³

Paul, Timothy, Epaphras, and Tychicus were all part of the extended ministry to the church. Each of them played a role in the spiritual shepherding of the people at Colossae.

3. A Changed People

The believers are called "saints," which means that they were holy because of God's work in them. Further, they are called "faithful brothers," meaning that to date they were consistent in their allegiance to Christ. It's a statement that reflects God's work in them and their response.

The city of Colossae was just south of the main road that led from Ephesus to the Euphrates River. Colossae was not a large city like many others in the region. In fact, it was the least influential of all the cities to whom Paul wrote. Its singular claim to fame was the trade of wool, which was often dyed a dark black or red.

Colossae, like most cities in Asia Minor, was a cosmopolitan city consisting of people from all over the world. Jews had been resettled there from Babylon by Antiochus III in the second century BC.⁴ Acts 2:10 tells us that there were people from this region of Asia Minor in Jerusalem and that they heard the

³ F.F. Bruce. The Epistle to the Colossians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984. p. 15.

⁴ Peter O'Brien. The Word Biblical Commentary – Colossians, Philemon. Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982. p. xxvii.

message of Peter at Pentecost. The city contained a strong Jewish contingent and a significant diversity of culture. However, it appears that the church at Colossae was primarily a gathering of Gentile converts.

The city of Colossae was not the most strategic city, nor was it the most influential. The church had been birthed as a derivative of the apostle Paul's ministry, and now that he had heard a report from Epaphras, he wanted to reinforce some critical truths. You see, Epaphras had some good things to say about the church, but he was also clear about some problems within the church. And the problems related to what is often called the Colossian heresy, a multi-faceted belief that was a threat to the gospel and their spiritual lives.

Colossians was written out of Paul's concern that they were being taken captive by some teaching that was not compatible with the gospel that they had received. Paul warns them in 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."

What exactly was the teaching against which Paul was fighting? He never fully identifies the problem, but we do pick up some clues throughout the book:

- The heretical teaching was presented as philosophy of life, an even higher knowledge based upon an ancient tradition, and it claimed to be a revelation from God (2:8).
- There was an emphasis on specific lifestyle standards regarding which foods should be eaten and which holy days should be observed (2:16).
- It focused on humility and the worship of angels (2:18).
- It created a subtle elitism that was, at its core, full of pride (2:18).
- The teaching appeared to be wise, intellectual, and disciplined (2:23).

The problem with the things I just mentioned is that many of them, in the right context, are actually wonderful things. Philosophy is not bad, nor is learning from history or tradition. Who could argue that humility is a bad thing to practice? Or who could say that living a disciplined life is something to be shunned?

Somewhere in your mind you need to mark it down that this is always the problem with false teaching: it is rarely *completely* false. However, it is false enough in certain key ways that it compromises the integrity of truth. My definition of maturity is this: maturity is not just what you know; it is knowing what is important. And that is critical for our study of Colossians.

The Colossian heresy was some blend of Judaism, Christianity, and gnostic philosophy. It was probably presented to the church as an improvement or advancement on the gospel that Epaphras had preached. It sought to merge Christianity with its Jewish roots and Greek philosophy. In practice it produced a religion that looked and sounded like Christianity, but its focus was more and more on discipline, rules, and spiritual experiences. The problem at Colossae was different than the Judaizers at Galatia in that it was far more personal, spiritual, and mystical.

There is one thing that is crystal clear: The focus on Christ shifted. It wasn't that they stopped believing in Christ. It wasn't that they flatly denied him. The Colossians heresy was an outgrowth of what happens when Christ is no longer the core. The heresy detracted from the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. It ultimately treated Christ with contempt, thinking that spiritual experiences or regulations could somehow improve upon him. The simple equation—Christ in you, the hope of glory—would have seemed very juvenile and ignorant.

So, in light of this explanation, consider Colossians 3:1-3:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:1-3).

Paul's solution to this challenge was to re-emphasize the centrality of who Jesus is. The reason is that when you embrace the centrality of Christ, it reinforces your identity ("saint") and it fuels your faithfulness. It reminds me of what Paul says in Colossians 2:6-7:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Col. 2:6-7).

The purpose of this glorious book is to help the Christians in Colossae live faithfully with Jesus at the center.

4. Grace and Peace from God

The greeting of this book concludes like all of Paul's letters. He blesses the recipients with the words "grace and peace." Every one of his pastoral epistles has some variation of this greeting. These two words were not only a common greeting during Paul's day, they also reflected some important biblical truths.

During Advent we talked about the word "peace." The Greek word means tranquility, harmony, and freedom from worry. It's a deep longing of the human heart. The Hebrew word is "shalom," and it is not only the idea of harmony, but also the principle of completeness. It means that God is able to make everything right and complete. He's able to bring order and rest.

When we read the story of the Bible, we see that peace is where everything is headed. It's the plan of God to bring peace on earth through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Revelation tells us about this certain future. But it's not just something that's in our future. It's also something that we can receive and embrace right now.

Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:5-7).

But there's more here. The text also says "grace." This familiar word means the goodwill or the favor of God. It's the empowerment and help that we need. Grace is the divinely supplied fuel that helps Christians live faithfully. This grace is how a person is saved. And it is how believers live. It's what we need, and it is what God provides as our Father.

Over the last year, I've tried to remind us to keep church life simple: We'll gather every seven days to sing, pray, receive God's Word, and love on each other. That's true and will continue. But I'd like to shorten the time horizon even more. God promises to give us the grace that we need for every single day. We are to ask him for "daily bread." And the key to following Jesus well is remembering that God never runs out of grace to give, but we don't have tomorrow's grace today. The key is to live by faith in God's ability to supply the grace that we need today.

Grace and peace from God our Father.

We keep our hearts focused on Jesus at the center as we embrace the grace and peace he provides.

College Park Church

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