

## **To the Saints in Christ at Colossae**

Intro and Col. 1:1-2

All 66 books of the Bible fit together to present one unified message of salvation. At the same time, every book of the Bible has something unique to add to our understanding of the Gospel.

We can expect Colossians to interlock with Paul's other letters, and the rest of the Bible. And we can expect Colossians to present its own unique angle to the Gospel that we love.

Until studying for this new series, I knew a good bit about Colossians. But I don't think grasped the relevance of the issues facing the saints in that city to us today.

To begin with, I did not realize that Colossae was a small town of relative insignificance. Compared with other cities to whom Paul wrote letters, like Rome or Corinth or Ephesus, Colossae was not a thriving Metropolis. In many ways, it was not all that different from Morganton. It was a market town that you would pass through on your way to the larger surrounding cities.

It was not too far from the resort town of Hieropolis, where hot springs were used for their supposed healing powers. And even nearer was the larger and wealthier city of Laodicea, known to us from the book of Revelation as the city that John warns of being lukewarm.

Colossae is also a small town quietly situated next to some beautiful mountains. Sound familiar?

J.B. Lightfoot claimed that “Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed.” Moo, 26.

It is nice to know that the famous apostle who debated with scholars in Athens and who spent years in places like Ephesus and Corinth, cared enough about the church in Colossae to write them a letter.

It was also somewhat of a surprise to me that Paul did not plant the Colossian Church. The Church was founded by one of Paul’s assistants named Epaphras, most likely while Paul was ministering a hundred miles away in Ephesus.

**Colossians 1:7-8** <sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup> and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Ephesus was the hub. But as people came to know Christ and the Church was strengthened, other laborers were sent out into the surrounding region. Epaphras landed in the little town of Colossae. And a small community of believers began to grow up there.

Paul had not met most of the saints of this congregation. He was only aware of the congregation through the reports of others.

As Paul writes this letter, he is in prison. Because Paul was in prison on various occasions, it is difficult to be certain which imprisonment. Our best guess is that he was writing from Rome in the year 60 AD. Although, some commentators have made a case for an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus. Whichever is correct, the fact is that Paul is writing to a church that grew up without him while he is in chains.

Visiting a prisoner could get you into trouble. In the book of Philemon, written at the same time as Colossians, Epaphras has become a prisoner with Paul.

**Philemon 1:23** <sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,

But why did Epaphras visit Paul in the first place? He was looking for counsel to deal with some wrong thinking that was beginning to develop among the Colossians.

Since Epaphras cannot return, Paul writes this letter to address those problems.

In the book of Colossians, we have the answer to problems. But what we don't have is a clear statement of the problems themselves.

I have known about what is called the "Colossian Heresy" since seminary. But since scholars have not been able to formulate a complete picture of this heresy, I have not given it as much attention as I should have.

I am going to take some time today to introduce this Colossian heresy. We may not know all that we would like to know about it, but we know enough to rightly apply the medicine of the book to our current ailments.

At the heart of the heresy was the desire for a more intense spiritual experience.

Make no mistake, Christianity makes some rather bold promises.

Jesus declared:

**John 10:10** <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Abundant life sounds pretty good!

The Colossians had believed this basic Gospel message.

But after almost a decade after their conversion, the Colossians' lives did not feel so abundant.

They were disappointed. They were hoping for more in their Christian experience.

As soon as I realized that this was the essence of the problem, I was stopped in my tracks. I realized that this is an issue that affects every believer of every age. But it is one that particularly affects us today.

Americans are inundated with promises of powerful fulfillment. Sex, drugs, music, entertainment, gadgets, you name it. We are taught to crave, even demand, more and more fulfilling experiences. And if something does not deliver, we move on to something else, or we look for the "new and improved" model.

These messages affect our expectations of our religion as well.

We want a religion that will deliver a powerfully fulfilling spiritual experience. We want to be elevated into glorious visions of God that overwhelm our soul.

And, we want a religion that conquers the evil within us.

And the religion we are given does not seem to deliver. At least, not as quickly or powerfully as we had hoped.

And this is the basic point of connection with the book of Genesis. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob lived and died clinging to a hope that did not fully deliver in this life. And yet, they remained steadfast in their hope.

The Colossians were told that this hope would be fulfilled through faith in Jesus Christ. And so, they believed in Him. But it did not take long for them to begin doubting that a simple faith in Jesus was enough. It certainly did not fix all the problems of their life. Nor did their experience of God fulfill all their expectations.

Thankfully, the Colossians did not abandon their faith in Jesus. But they were being tempted to add on to that faith.

And adding on to Christ is subtraction by addition. And herein lies the subtle way that the heresy that began to form in their hearts.

It is healthy to want to experience more of Christ. But that yearning must be tempered with an acceptance of a present, imperfect experience of God. And our yearning must not lead us away from Christ as we wait for greater fullness of Gospel hopes.

Douglass Moo writes:

“... the false teachers were apparently suggesting that Christians needed to go ‘beyond’ the gospel that Epaphras had taught the Colossians in order to experience spiritual ‘fullness’.” Moo, 67.

Their hunger for more began to drive them to believe that ordinary faith in Christ was not enough.

Rather than chasing rabbit trails, Paul doubles down. He declares in some of the most emphatic statements in all of Scripture the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

An ordinary faith in Jesus Christ now, will result in the fulfillment of every hope in glory.

The fullness of our hopes will not be achieved in this life. Not until we see Jesus in glory will the hope become full reality.

Paul wants the Colossians to keep hoping.

And he wants them to fix all their hopes in Christ alone.

Three times in the first chapter Paul mentions this hope.

Paul is thankful for the Colossians faith in Christ and love that they have for one another. The Colossians faith and love are grounded in their hope. Look at verse 5.

“because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” – v. 5

Since the hope is kept in heaven, it is secure. Their present lives may not have achieved this hope. But their present struggle has not destroyed this hope either.

Look down further in v. 23. Paul gives his true concern. He does not want them...

“ shifting from the hope of the Gospel” – v. 23

He does not want them moving away from their first hope in the Gospel.

And in verse 27, Paul fixes this hope in Christ alone. He says, “Christ in you is the hope of glory.”

The Colossians were beginning to think that because they did not already experience all that they wanted, that there must be something more.

Their discontentment led them to add elements to their religion.

These new elements had the effect, intended or not, of reducing the sufficiency of Jesus Christ in their hearts.

And it is never good to make less of Jesus.

The additions to the faith were varied. And we will only touch on them now. In the coming weeks we will dig deeper into each of them.



The Colossian heresy seemed to include elements of Judaism mixed with elements of Greek mysticism.

The heresy promised a fuller spiritual experience, for those who would agree to various conditions.

We see some of those conditions laid out in chapter 2.

**Colossians 2:16-21** <sup>16</sup> Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of

food and drink,

Only if you followed this specific diet, would you prepare yourself for more fullness in your relationship with God. The reason you are not experiencing more of God is because you have not adopted this specific diet.

A second condition had to do with the observance of holy days and seasons.

or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

In this they combined Jewish legalism with some Greek mysticism.

It was commonly believed that unseen forces existed in the world. And these forces were somehow joined to the planets and stars. These cosmic forces were believed to affect the destinies of men and women.

Therefore, it was believed that some days were more sacred than others. If you observed various rituals on these days, it was more probable that you would have a fuller experience of God, or a better life in this world.

Paul does not deny the existence of these “cosmic forces”. What he does deny is that observing these days will achieve the hoped-for abundance.

A third condition had to do with treating yourself harshly.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism

In his battle against sin, Paul will not hesitate to discipline himself. Jesus teaches us to take sin seriously when he says that if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off.

But Jesus did not expect people to literally cut off their hands.

We know that the hand does not cause us to sin. Sin come from the heart.

But the Colossians were beginning to think that in one way or another that if they treated their body harshly, they could achieve greater victory over their sin.

And, they began to believe that harsh restrictions on the body could also prepare oneself for greater spiritual ecstasy.

Paul says that when you start going down this road, you are leaving Christ.

**Colossians 2:23** <sup>23</sup> These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Another condition had to do with one's reverence for spiritual beings.

and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions,

Fuller explanation of this will have to wait, but the gist is the belief that if one wanted travel through the heavens to gain a fuller experience of God, they would be led through these levels by angels.

The sparks of this sort of thinking may have originated all the way back in Genesis with the vision of Jacob's ladder.

Remember, the angels were ascending and descending between heaven and earth.

An even greater development of extra-biblical thinking is seen in the apocryphal book of I Enoch. In this collection of visions, the man travels upward on a heavenly journey, assisted by angels to a fuller experience of God.

There is good reason why the Book of Enoch was not included in the Canon of Scripture. But it was very popular during Paul's day.

The Colossians may not have been explicitly worshipping angels, but they were depending upon them for deeper spiritual experience. Paul warns them against this thinking.

In verse 20, and again in chapter 2, verse 8, Paul refers to the "elemental spirits of the world". There is disagreement as to what Paul means by this, but I think it is safe to say that Paul is again referring to the basic unseen forces that affect our lives in this world.

"...this movement taught that the Colossian Christians were subject to a variety of spiritual forces that needed to be placated through veneration, asceticism and the observance of special holy days." (Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible, 1926)

One of the questions of their day, and ours as well, is whether the Gospel really has the power to overcome the problems we face. Addictions, gender confusion, mental illness, depression, hostile governments, powerful forces of evil... the list goes on. Does our simple faith in Jesus Christ really have the power to give us true hope of victory?

Like us today, the Colossians considered themselves to be a small fish in a big pond.

They wrestled deeply with the idea that something more was needed to face the big problems facing them.

We might sum all of this up as a scattered attempt to find something that they could do that would guarantee greater "fullness" in their experience in this life.

"The Colossian heresy evidently encouraged the claim that the fullness of God could be appreciated only by mystical experiences for which ascetic preparation was necessary." FF Bruce 26.

"... the false teachers were claiming to offer a "fullness" of spiritual experience that could not be found through Christ alone." Moo, 51.

"Paul also implies that the main deficiency that the false teachers found in Christ was his inability to provide ultimate spiritual fulfillment." Moo, 59.

How about you?

Are you frustrated with the forces of evil surrounding you and influencing you daily?

Are you frustrated with your faith?

Do you want something more?

Do you wonder if Jesus was just blowing smoke when he said that he came so that men might have life, and have it in abundance?

Paul's answer is found in Colossians 1:19.

**Colossians 1:19** <sup>19</sup> For in him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

The current experience of the Colossians may be less than what they desired. But Paul does not want them to look anywhere else.

Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the answer. Continuing to walk with Christ in this troubled and imperfect life, being fixed fully on the grace to be received in the end.

As we study the book of Colossians, we are going to see some of the most amazing statements about the person of Jesus Christ. It is helpful to see that Paul makes these statements to address the doubts and fears of the Colossians.

How encouraging that we have a book of the Bible dedicated to encouraging an enduring faith in the lives of a small church off the beaten path. God is not indifferent to your struggles. He is well aware of the powerful forces that stand opposed to you.

He knows that you often feel like you are floundering in the waves of life. Those waves seem so ominous. And yet, Jesus is not threatened by them. He is Lord over them all.

And as we will see, it is the normal and ordinary, yet supernatural and unconquerable, grace and peace that flow from Jesus that we need.

## **Colossians 1:1-2**

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

<sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace  
from God our Father.

Paul begins each of his letters with this greeting/blessing “Grace to you and Peace”.

It is so common that it is easy to pass these words by as relatively meaningless.

The grace that Christ gives seems so ordinary, so normal, that it is easy to think that it is no match for the powerful forces of evil opposing you.

But this is precisely Paul's point. The ordinary grace that flows from our extraordinary Christ is sufficient to sustain you through this life and carry you to your eternal hope.

The grace that we have flows to us from the One in whom the fullness of God dwells.

Because Jesus is the fullness of God, we can expect from him fullness of grace.

What does Paul mean by grace?

The Puritan writer, John Davenant, divides grace into three separate categories. Each category helps us to gain a fuller understanding of the beauty of grace.

1. The grace of acceptance (Aquinas – acceptance)

This is the fountain head of the other two forms of grace.

This is the grace of God's divine favor towards the man He has accepted in Christ. (Justification)

This is the grace of knowing that God is no longer your enemy. He is for you. All that He does, because of the perfection of Jesus Christ, is for your good.

There is nothing that you can add to the finished work of Jesus Christ.



God's favor is never earned by anything that we do. It's only source is Jesus.

When God looks at us, He sees the perfection of Jesus and His perfect work on the cross.

No observance of holy days... no harshness to yourself... no trust in angels... will gain you more favor from God.

Our acceptance in Christ is full and cannot be improved.

## 2. The grace of the gifts of God that produce sanctification in us. (New Heart/Holy Spirit)

All those who are in Christ have been given a new heart.

All those who are in Christ now have been given the Holy Spirit as a permanent resident.

All those who are in Christ have been adopted as God's children and now have access to Him as their loving Father.

All those who are in Christ have been transferred out of the kingdom of darkness and given citizenship into His Kingdom of light.

These are gifts of grace that belong to every believer. They are yours by birthright. You do not receive more of them by anything that you might do.

In these first two categories we can see that grace is already the possession of the Colossians. So, when Paul gives his greeting/ blessing, he is not praying for more accepting grace or hoping

for additional spiritual graces. He is simply declaring the truth of grace that is already theirs.

But there is a third category of grace as well.

3. The grace of the ongoing supplying of assistance and strength without which no Christian would be able to do anything of value or to persevere in his faith.

This is the grace of daily help in every trial. Paul's greeting/ blessing in this sense is a sort of prayer. Every day we need help from God. Even with the already bestowed graces, we are not able to stand alone against the forces opposed to us.

God has designed it this way. He wants our weaknesses to drive us to Him for regular and ongoing aid.

But once you understand the first two categories of grace, you begin to see that the prayer for grace is more than a prayer.

How is it possible that the God who has bestowed "accepting grace" and the "gifts of grace" will fail to give daily supply of grace as well.

Even though this assisting grace is not perfect in this life, it is sufficient to carry us all the way to the end.

And that is why the blessing of grace and peace go hand in hand.

Just as grace can be divided into three categories, so too can peace.

1. Internal, spiritual peace with God, flowing from our acceptance.

God is no longer our enemy.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

**Romans 5:1** Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This peace cannot be improved upon. It is based upon the righteousness of Christ alone and the sufficiency of his bearing in Himself on the cross all the Judgment of God that we deserved.

You cannot do anything to merit this peace. It can only be received by faith alone in Christ alone.

2. Brotherly peace; unity among the brothers.

Unity and love between the members of Christ's body.

This peace is certainly not experienced in its fullness now. But it is ours in Christ as we remain connected to the Head.

Jesus does speak as if this peace has already been given.

**John 17:22** <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,

And this in His flesh that he has already made peace between brothers.

**Ephesians 2:14** <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility

Only as we cling to Christ will we know the peace among brothers.

### 3. Peace of Life – wellness in life; wholeness.

This sort of peace is what is promised in the Gospel. It is the abundant life of which Jesus spoke.

And the Apostle John even hoped for this sort of peace for Christians.

**3 John 1:2** <sup>2</sup> Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.

But the hope for the experience of this peace in its fullness is not for this life.

In this life, we experience this peace only in part. And it is mixed with trials.

Only in the resurrection... in the New Heavens and New Earth, together with all the saints who went before us, will we experience the fullness of this hope.

Turn to I Peter 1. He too points his readers patiently wait for life in its full abundance.

**1 Peter 1:3-7** <sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, as was necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the tested genuineness of your faith- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is not riding from one powerful, mountain-top experience to the next.

The Christian life is one of struggle against sin.

It is continuing in the ordinary means of grace: The Word of God, Prayer, and the Sacraments.

It is continuing to believe that Jesus is sufficient and will, in His time, provide perfect fullness of knowing and loving God.

This is the life that Paul encourages the Colossians to be content with.

Contentment with less than perfection is not easy. It is a great gift that only God can truly give.

I find it encouraging that Paul is not teaching the Colossians anything that God has not also called him to apply to his life.

God had given Paul one of the most amazing spiritual experiences that anyone has ever known. It was so powerful that Paul was in danger of becoming arrogant because of it. But instead of giving Paul such repeated experiences, God gave him a thorn in his flesh.

We do not know exactly what this thorn was. It may have been a physical ailment, or even connected with the spiritual struggle. But rather than remove the thorn, God called Paul to live with the thorn.

Listen to how Paul writes to the Corinthians about this:

**2 Corinthians 12:1-10** I must go on boasting. (About his Apostleship) Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I

will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man was caught up into paradise- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows- <sup>4</sup> and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. <sup>5</sup> On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup> So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Will you be content with Christ?

Will you be OK with your weaknesses?

Will you seek contentment and even joy, in the midst of daily struggles?

Will you not think less of Jesus because He does not give you everything you desire right now?

Will you trust that there is no power in this world of any sort, physical or spiritual, that is outside of Jesus' reign and dominion?

Will you believe that you are united to the highest authority in the Universe?

And that the Father of your Lord and Savior is also your loving Father?

Is the pronouncement "Grace to you and peace, from God our Father" enough?