

COLOSSIANS: THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

Part 1: “Meet the Colossians”

Colossians 1:1-14

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, April 13, 2021 (Easter Season)

Scripture Reading

“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. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just 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. And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:1–14, ESV).

Introduction

Today, we are beginning a new sermon series in which we will walk through the New Testament book of Colossians.

Colossians is one of the New Testament epistles. It’s a book of the Bible written in the form of a letter from a leader of the early church to a church in a particular city or region. There are even some epistles that are written to individuals (e.g., 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 2-3 John). But Colossians is an epistle from the Apostle Paul (and his disciple Timothy) to the community of Christians in the town of Colossae.

Now, unlike the prophetic or poetic literature in the Bible, letters are usually fairly straight-forward. But there are still some challenges when it comes to reading a letter. For example, if you were to find a random letter written by someone you’ve never met to a person you have never met, it’s likely that there would be some aspects of that letter that you would struggle to understand. Even more whenever that letter was written in a

different language, a different culture, and in a different century, there might be even more challenges. You might be able to pick up on some of what is being said, but you wouldn't see the whole picture.

In the New Testament, there is often a *reason* why the letter needed to be written. The letters of the apostles weren't just abstract theological sermons or treatises. They were often responses to a specific situation or challenge.

Now in order to figure out what that situation might be, you might have to dig a little deeper and look for clues. But once you find that that broader picture of the context, the letter begins to suddenly make sense in ways that it could not before.

For that reason, today, we are not only going to be examining this first passage in the book of Colossians. We will also look at the broader context as to why this book was written. We're going to *"Meet the Colossians."*

For the rest of our time today, I'll organize our discussion under three headings: *1.) The Church-plant at Colossae, 2.) The Problem in Colossae, and 3.) The Prayer for Colossae.*

Exposition

1. The Church Plant at Colossae

Our text begins with a greeting: *"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"* (Colossians 1:1–2, ESV).

The primary author of Colossians is Paul. Once known as Saul of Tarsus, Paul was at one time a pharisaical Jew and a persecutor of Christians. But Paul has a vision of Jesus Christ that changes his life forever (Acts 9:1-31). God saves Paul by grace and calls him to be an emissary of that same grace.

Once a cultural chauvinist who despised people from a non-Jewish background, Paul becomes the apostle to the gentile nations. That word "apostle" simply means he is a "sent one." He has been sent "by the will of God" to preach the gospel so that people from formerly pagan nations can now become part of the people of God through faith in Jesus.

There is another book of the New Testament named Acts that tells us the story of how Paul and his missionary team travel throughout Asia Minor and Europe, preaching the gospel and planting new churches. One very important church that Paul plants is the church in the city of Ephesus (Acts 19). Ephesus was the big, metropolitan hub of western Asian Minor (which is the nation of Turkey today). Paul stays in Ephesus and ministers a full two years.

During that time, a multicultural church composed of believing Jews and gentiles is born and grows rapidly. In fact, Paul's ministry is apparently so effective that it disrupts the economy of the city of Ephesus, which had a thriving idol-making industry.

But more than just having an impact on the city, Paul's ministry to Ephesus seems to have a regional impact. Acts 19 tells us, *"This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks"* (Acts 19:10, ESV).

Now how did this happen? Acts does not tell us that Paul traveled around planting churches in Asia Minor at this time. Instead, it appears that the church of Ephesus became a church-planting hub, where future pastors were trained and sent to plant churches in communities around Ephesus.

One of those church-planters who was trained and sent by Paul in Ephesus was a man named Epaphras, who is mentioned in our reading today from Colossians 1: *"[the gospel] which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf"* (Col 1:6–7).

At some point during Paul's time Ephesus, Epaphras learned from Paul, was sent by Paul, and planted a church in the town of Colossae, which was about 125 miles inland from Ephesus (that's about the distance from Amarillo to Lubbock) [[1Map Location of Colossae](#)]. By the grace of God, through the ministry of Epaphras, a church is born.

Now, a lot has changed in the way we do church from the time of Paul to the way we do church now. There are differences between the languages, cultures, and historical settings of Asia Minor in the first century and West Texas in the twenty-first century.

But, nevertheless, one of the fascinating things I find about this is one thing that hasn't changed – and that is the way we plant churches.

In 2011, I was beginning to discern that the Lord was calling me to plant a church, and I felt called to Amarillo. I ended up hearing about a round-table discussion hosted in Lubbock by a church planting organization named Acts 29. I went there and met Pastor Dusty Thompson of Redeemer Lubbock. Also, in attendance were leaders like Jeremy Buck and Josh Reeves and Jordan Elder. Less than a year after that meeting, new churches were planted (or, in our case, replanted) in Pampa, Round Rock, and Amarillo. In the last ten years, that same group of leaders have collaborated to train, fund, and send leaders and teams to plant new churches in places like Abilene, Brady, Midland, El Paso, Wichita Falls, and Borger. More than twenty churches have been planted in that time! At this very moment, our church is hosting J.R. Favela as a church-planting resident as he and his wife Megan prepare to plant a church in East Amarillo.

Research has shown that the planting of new churches has been and continues to be the most effective evangelistic strategy that the church possesses. And I want you to

understand this, not only because we see it in today's text, but because I want you to see that the mission of God is central to what it means to be the church.

The church was never meant to be a place that caters to the consumerist preferences of Christians. The church is designed to be a family of missionaries that unite together to advance the kingdom of God in the earth by declaring and displaying the gospel!

That's why we must never be satisfied with merely going through the motions of church. Our agenda is not to provide spiritual entertainment. Our agenda is to make disciples that make disciples; to create Gospel Communities that multiply Gospel Communities; to plant churches that plant churches.

That means that all Christians are called to participate in that mission in some form or fashion. We do this by serving places like Redeemer Kids, the Welcome Team, or our worship ministry. We do this by connecting in Gospel Communities and, for some of you, even leading Gospel Communities. We do this by pursuing training through things like our Equip Classes or the Perspectives Class. We do this by giving generously so that the gospel can go forth.

We've been invited to participate in the most important movement in history. You have a place in this mission, and a role to play in this story.

2. The Problem in Colossae

At the time this letter is written, Paul has been imprisoned for his ministry. He may be imprisoned in Rome or perhaps even Ephesus. But wherever he is, Epaphras has come to visit him. In part, I'm sure Epaphras wants to encourage Paul in his imprisonment. However, Epaphras has also come to Paul because he needs help and counsel from his former mentor.

We can tell from some of the things Paul mentions later in the letter that the church at Colossae is beginning to be overwhelmed by the pressures of the culture around it. Apparently, there is some ideology (or perhaps multiple ideologies) that are attempting to co-opt the faith of the Colossian Christians. In biblical studies, this problem is referred to as "*The Colossian Heresy.*"

We don't know the exact nature of the Colossian heresy. The Colossian heresy could have been an early form of a religion later known as Gnosticism, which was kind of like a conspiracy-theory religion built on secret knowledge (think Scientology plus a pyramid scheme). The Colossian heresy could have been a fusion between pagan magical practices and Jewish mysticism. A fusion is like when two genres of food come together (like ordering jalapeño fried rice at a Thai restaurant); but in Colossae, this might have happened with false religions. Or the Colossian heresy could refer to several worldviews that were simultaneously trying to lead the Colossian Christians away from faithfulness to Jesus.

With that said, the modern version of the Colossian heresy is any cultural force that seeks to distort or co-opt the Christian faith for its own purpose. And there are many such forces at play in our culture. For the sake of time, I will only discuss a few of those forces at work today.

The first is the combination of *materialism and consumerism*. Materialism is the belief that reality is made of up of matter only and that there is no such thing as a spiritual element to reality. Consumerism is a way of life wherein we find value and worth in what we can buy and acquire. You can sense the influence of materialism and consumerism whenever we functionally forget spiritual health and all thoughts of eternity and, instead, live in such a way that that here and now is all that there is. You can see how materialism and consumerism seek to co-opt Christianity by seeing Jesus, not as a focus of worship, but as a stepping stone to get material wealth and health.

Another force a play in our culture is *political extremism*. Political extremism is devotion to a political team that is virtually indistinguishable from religious devotion in terms of faith, sacrifice, and passion. It sees political power as the highest and ultimate good. The mentality is, "If my team wins, we usher a New Heavens and a New Earth. If we lose, we bring about the end of the world." You can see the influence of political extremism on Christians wherever there is a temptation to harness the power of the church as a utility to bring about a version of the kingdom of man instead of advancing the kingdom of God.

Another major force is that of *cultural progressivism*, particularly as it relates to the sexual revolution. We do live in an increasingly secular age, but in that age, instead of seeing an absence of orthodoxy, we are seeing the emergence of a new type of secular orthodoxy as it relates to sexual morality and our understanding of gender. In this moment, there is great pressure to follow the Spirit of the Age rather than the Spirit of God. The church must get inline, revise its ethics, and submit to the authority of culture or else face the disapproval of the gatekeepers of polite society and social power.

In all of these examples, there exists a very real pressure to fundamentally change the church and the Christian gospel into what the forces of culture want Christianity to be.

You might be tempted to say, "Yeah, Yeah, I already know all of that. But those are the world's problems, not ours." But I want to humbly submit these are very live issues for us too.

Do you remember the old bit that comedian Jeff Foxworthy used to do called "You might be a redneck if?" I have a similar bit called "You might be a Colossian heretic if" based on these cultural ideologies we just discussed.

So, if your thought-life and energy are primarily are devoted to buying a bigger house, a nicer car, and living a more comfortable and outwardly impressive life, but you rarely think about your spiritual health or the reality of eternity, you might be a Colossian heretic.

If you have spent numerous conversations advocating and persuading for your political team, but you are not willing to share Christian faith, then you might be a Colossian heretic.

If you will willingly submit yourself to the authority of what culture deems as right and true and just, but you ignore, minimize, or flat-out deny any teaching of Scripture that confronts our culture, then you might be a Colossian heretic.

Maybe we are all more prone to the same temptations as the Colossians than we might realize.

3. The Prayer for Colossae

In response to Epaphras's report about this problem, Paul chooses to write a letter to the Colossian church. The name of that letter is the book of Colossians. Colossians isn't just a random book, filled with random doctrine. The entire book of Colossians is a response to the Colossian heresy.

As he does in several of his letters, Paul begins with prayer. And there are two parts to this prayer: thanksgiving and petition.

It is significant that Paul begins with thanksgiving. He has never met the Christians of Colossae. But he loves them. In a way, they are his spiritual grandchildren.

It's true they are struggling. But he does not shame or belittle them. It is, after all, an entire congregation of new converts. Instead, he thanks God and rejoices in the evidences of grace that he senses in the life of this church.

So, he says, *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven"* (Col 1:3–5a).

He thanks God for their faith in Jesus, their love for one another, and their hope in eternity. The Colossians do not have a perfect faith, but they do have saving faith, and that is enough reason for thanksgiving. After all, it is not the quality of our faith that saves us, but the object of our faith that saves us. He thanks God that they have a faithful pastor like Epaphras who faithfully teaches the word to the Colossians and loves them.

Paul does not forsake the church for its imperfections. And neither should we. To forsake the church is not a sign of free-thinking or authenticity. To forsake the church is simply to fall prey to one of our culture's great forces and ideologies – individualism. Despite its imperfection, it is God's chosen means of declaring and displaying the gospel to the world.

But Paul also makes some requests to the Lord on behalf of the Christians in Colossae: *"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,*

so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:9–12).

Paul prays for the Colossians’ wisdom and knowledge so that they might walk in a manner worthy of Jesus. This is one of the many reminders in the Bible that theology and life go together.

Paul prays that God would give the Colossian Christians strength so that they can endure with joy. Our goal is not perfection. Our goal is perseverance. We will stumble, but we are called to stumble together toward Jesus.

He prays that they would overflow in gratitude because of what Jesus has done for them. Gratitude is the fountain of the Christian life. Gratitude flows from knowing the glory of Jesus and what he has accomplished for us. That why Paul grounds his prayer, not with a request, but with a declaration of what Jesus has accomplished: *“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13–14).*

Once, the Colossians were pagans, under the deception of false religions and false gods. Now they have been delivered and forgiven by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul wants to remind the Colossian of how extraordinary God’s salvation in Christ truly is.

Conclusion

Paul is saying, “I understand your problems and your temptations. I know the world is pressing hard on your heart and vying for your allegiance. I know the forces around you would want to co-opt your Christian faith for their own purposes. But what I want to show you that Jesus is superior to anything that world could promise to give you.”

Colossians is a book that is all about Jesus. It is the mountain top of Christology in all of sacred Scripture. Paul wants the Colossians to know that despite pressures and powers of the surrounding world, our hope lies in the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ.

In our own age, when so many cultural forces are vying for our attention and allegiance, I pray that in studying this book our eyes would be opened to see the glory of Jesus too.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we grow in wisdom and knowledge, that we might walk in a manner worthy of Jesus and pleasing to him. May we be strengthened by his Holy Spirit that we may endure with joy. May we understand what Christ has accomplished for us so that our hearts and lives would overflow with gratitude. AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Colossians 1:1-14. Summarize some of the big ideas in this text in your own words.
2. The book of Colossians is a letter from the Apostle Paul to a newly founded church in the town of Colossae (Col 1:1-2). Who is Paul, and what is the significance of his being an “apostle”?
3. The church of Colossae seems to have been planted by Epaphras during Paul’s time in Ephesus (Col 1:7; cf. Acts 19). How does the gospel continue to advance through the world through church planting today? Why is it important to always remember that the church is a part of the broader mission of God in the world?
4. As we will see in the coming weeks, this letter was written because the church seems to be struggling with being influenced by outside forces and cultural pressures that seek to compromise the gospel. What are the forces, pressures, and ideologies that try to co-op or compromise the church today in our culture?
5. Look at Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1:3-14. How might Paul’s words help you to pray for your church? Spend time thanking God and praying for your church, according to some of the concepts and themes found in these verses.