

Introduction and Colossians 1:1-2

I. Introduction

A. This morning, we are going to start a new book together

1. We finished Micah at the end of last year and spent some time in Psalms and Proverbs
2. So it's time for us to return to the New Testament
3. We did a Gospel, Matthew, at the beginning of last year, so we're going to start studying a New Testament Epistle, and I've chosen Colossians as our next book

B. This morning, we are going to look at the first two verses of Colossians, the address, and then do an overview of the book in preparation for our study

1. So, let's read Colossians 1:1-2 - *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.*
2. Colossians starts out in the same way as all of Paul's letters with Paul introducing himself as the author and then addressing it to a particular church - in this instance, the church at Colossae
3. And then Paul puts a relatively standard greeting, but also a purpose statement for the book, he says - *Grace to you and peace from God our Father*
4. This is how Paul starts all his letters (with minor deviations) and this is Paul's goal in writing Colossians and in all of his writings
5. He wants the Colossians, and everyone, to know the grace and peace of God in full measure - that is, he wants everyone to know and experience the fullness of the gospel, the gospel that has brought the grace of God and given us peace with God
6. This is the goal of all of his letters, but this is, in a special way, the goal of Colossians - Paul will even refer to this goal later in the book, Colossians 1:28 - *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*
7. Paul wants to see every believer mature in Christ; he wants to see them grow in the gospel, knowing the grace and the peace of God, so Paul is going to write to the Colossians about the gospel, he is, through his writing, going to communicate the grace and the peace of God to them

C. So Colossians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Colossae

1. (MAP)
2. So kids, here are your kid's questions for this week
 - a. What book are we in? Colossians
 - b. What is Colossians? A letter to the church at Colossae
 - c. Who wrote Colossians? The apostle Paul
3. Colossians was written sometime around 60 AD, while Paul was imprisoned in Rome
 - a. It may be a little hard to give the exact date for this letter, but we do know it was during Paul's time in prison in Rome because of two statements Paul makes in the letter
 - b. First, in Colossians 4:10, Paul calls Aristarchus his "fellow prisoner" indicating he is in prison while writing
 - c. And in Colossians 4:18, the close of the book, Paul calls the Colossians to "remember his chains"
4. But the history of Colossians is rooted about 5 years earlier in Paul's ministry in Ephesus, sometime around 55 AD
 - a. Paul spent an extended period in Ephesus and had a fruitful ministry there, so, we come to Acts 19:8-10 - *And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*
 - b. As we go through Acts, we don't ever hear of Paul travelling to Colossians and even in his letter to the Colossians, he acknowledges that he has not seen them face-to-face
 - c. But the church in Colossians seems to be an outflowing of Paul's ministry in Ephesus - they are part of all the residents of Asia that heard the Word of the Lord
 - d. As we go through Colossians, it appears that Epaphras, who is mentioned in several of Paul's letters, was from Colossae but had travelled to Ephesus, heard Paul preach and became a Christian
 - e. At some point, Epaphras travelled back to Colossae and planted a church there - a church that Paul had never been to, but was indirectly the fruit of his ministry

5. Some years later, Epaphras returned from Colossae to find Paul and bring a blessing to him from the Colossians, but Epaphras also apparently shared some concerns about the new church
 - a. The Colossians church seemed to be drawing 'wisdom' from their pagan and Jewish neighbors and integrating the wisdom of the world with the church
 - b. So Paul, hearing this in prison, decides to write to the church at Colossae - to encourage them in Christ and to warn them about the danger of their errors
 - c. And, in doing so, Paul writes what I would consider to be the most beautiful of the New Testament letters - a letter dedicated to the exaltation of Jesus Christ

D. Sermon Outline

1. As we start our study of Colossians, I want to look at the book as a whole this morning
2. So, the first thing I want to do is consider the theme and topics of Colossians, trying to weave the concepts of the book together in one unified theme
3. And then, having thought about the message of Colossians, we'll look at a brief outline of Colossians to understand the flow of the book
4. We'll close our time together by reading the book of Colossians together - it is only four short chapters and takes about twelve minutes to read and it was written in order to be read as a letter in the churches, as we can see clearly at the end of the book in Colossians 4:16 - *And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.*
5. So, we'll start by considering the message of Colossians

Overview and Outline of Colossians

Around AD60 there was a significant earthquake in the middle of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, that was centered around a small city in the interior called Colossae. The town was built directly over a slip fault and was destroyed in the earthquake. This was likely only a couple years after Paul wrote a letter to the church at Colossae known today as Colossians. Now Paul probably didn't have any idea that an earthquake was about to destroy the city (at least we don't have any hint that he did), but God knew and He knew that the Colossians would need something stable and steadfast, something not shifting in which they could hope, on which they could build lasting foundations. And this is what Paul's letter to the Colossians is about - the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that stable and unshifting foundation for all believers and the Colossians should be firmly grounded in that, being stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to lose this grounding and to stumble off of the stable foundation. There are many distractions, many 'plausible arguments', many purported wisdoms that seek to entrap Christ's people and cause them to build their hope and foundation in something other than Christ. So Paul, concerned by some things that he has heard, writes to the Colossians warning them that they must remain stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. They must be rooted and built up in Christ and established in their faith, not building on lesser foundations.

Positively identifying what Paul is concerned about is challenging in Colossians, because Paul never directly describes the wrong actions and beliefs - he alludes to them many times, but their exact nature is hard to pin down. Nevertheless, Paul's concern for the Colossians seems to be a dabbling in folk religions or folk beliefs - things that aren't really established religious systems, but little beliefs and actions in which people consciously or semi-consciously seek security, comfort, and hope. The Colossians seemed to be borrowing ideas and concepts from both their Greek and their Jewish neighbors and finding hope and security in these minor syncretic practices - and those who didn't join in were made to feel lesser, like they hadn't understood the wisdom of these things. As Richard Lucas says in his commentary on Colossians:

No, the danger for the enthusiastic young convert comes from error within the churches, teaching that is largely, even emphatically, Christian, but which has been influenced more than it knows by the spirit of the age.

This, I believe, was the situation in the Lycus valley. It was not that these Christians were so fickle and volatile that they were tempted so soon to give a fresh hearing to Jewish or pagan teachers: it was that the whole syncretistic religious environment in which their churches existed threatened the purity of the new faith.

Surely this must always be the case. The churches of Christ can never be immune from the intellectual and spiritual pressures and fashions of their time. While we see this clearly when we look back to earlier generations, it is less easy for us to recognize this frankly in our own times.

Such folk beliefs aren't always even specifically identified as religious (although they may be), but can also be cultural influences, traditions and fads that the culture runs after and become imbibed into the church. In some cultures, this may look like a low level of animism, calling on spirits or angels (or saints or Mary) to protect them (what Paul might call worship of angels). In other cultures, this might look like rigid rule following, making rules about what is right and wrong, or more subtly what is good and bad, what is better and not recommended and finding comfort and security in living inside those rules (what Paul might call questions of food and drink). Or maybe it could look like religious observances, doing things to make God happy and expecting repayment from God (what Paul might call a festival or new moon or Sabbath). All these things might seem to mesh into Christianity just fine, they might seem to be good religion, even devoted religion, especially to those looking on but they aren't rooted in Christ. These things come from worldly philosophy and not from the wisdom of Christ and they don't cause us to see more of Christ, they call us to rest in other things, to seek hope in other things. These things will slowly and eventually take our eyes off Christ, move our hope off of the gospel and cause us to embrace the elemental spirits and teachings of this world. Instead of providing liberty and freedom, they will become a slave master and the one who follows them will be captured to do their will.

To combat this subtle yet deadly danger, Paul doesn't spend a lot of time defining the danger and calling the Colossians away from it - Paul knows that this would be a futile effort, as soon as you condemn one thing, another will simply rise to take its place. Instead, Paul calls the Colossians to see their true hope and joy - the gospel of Jesus Christ. He reminds the Colossians that they heard the gospel and it bore fruit in them as it does everywhere. He reminds them that their hope is

laid up in the gospel and is kept in heaven for them. He calls them to set their eyes and their minds on Jesus and His gospel - to be consumed with the glories of Christ to the point where their minds cannot be filled with the hopes, the fads, the purposes of the world. If they can see how glorious Christ is and understand how all wisdom and knowledge is in Him then they won't be distracted by worldly concerns.

Particularly, Paul wants the Colossians to see that Christ is their wisdom. God is the only wise God, so all wisdom resides in and comes from God. And Jesus is the image of the invisible God, all the fullness of deity dwells in Him, which makes Jesus wisdom incarnate. In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The Colossians need to remember this truth because there are many plausible arguments, many things that might have the appearance of wisdom. If they are looking for wisdom to answer the challenges and difficulties of life and that wisdom isn't coming from Christ and leading to Christ, then it is not wisdom. Real wisdom will always be wrapped up in who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

If Christ is glorious and if He is true wisdom, then the Colossians should be setting their minds on things above, not on things on earth - they should be filling their minds with Christ, not with worldly concerns. And their goal should be to grow in the fruits of the gospel - putting sin to death and living out righteousness. So Paul devotes a large section of His letter to describing what it means to live out Christ's wisdom. To live in Christ's wisdom means dying to the world and our old sinful self and living to Christ in holiness.

And Paul sees this goal being met in a specific way - through the fellowship of believers. As opposed to the folk beliefs that are invading the church, which will always lead to division and haughtiness, Paul desires for the Colossians to be knit together in love, to bear with one another in love, to forgive each other in love, to teach and admonish one another in love and wisdom. Seeking unity in local churches in the gospel helps clear our eyes to see Christ well. Our fellow believers will call us away from worldly philosophies and toward Christ, if we remain stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. So large sections of Paul's letter are devoted to exhortations to live together well - to be full of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And he wants to see relationships in the church lived out well to the glory of Christ. These things will guard us from being captured by worldly wisdom.

And Paul sees this goal being met with a specific attitude - thankfulness. Paul mentions giving thanks and an attitude of thanks seven times in Colossians (more than the rest of his shorter letters to the church combined: none in Galatians, three in Ephesians, and two in Philippians). If the Colossians are overwhelmed with thanksgiving by the wonderful things that God has done for them in Christ, they won't be tempted to run after other things. Thanksgiving for all the good things that God has given will keep them coming back to the source of all good things - Jesus Christ and the gospel.

So, what does this have to do with us? What dangers would Paul call us to look at in our culture? Again, rigidly defining each individual danger would be pointless because another would simply rise to take its place. But we should be very wary of things like cultural traditions - we should carefully evaluate traditions to determine: are these things necessary? Are they rooted in Christ and pointing me toward Christ? Or are they distracting me from Christ and calling me to find hope, security or comfort in something else? Another thing we should be very wary of is cultural fads - the world is going to constantly create things to try to give them hope, security and joy. The world will make rules about what is good and bad and society as a whole will become enamored with them. Again, we should carefully evaluate them - are these simply worldly philosophies, filled with the elemental spirits of the world? Are these things directing me to Christ or distracting me from Christ? Are these things really based in truth or are they shadows and mirrors, a lost culture trying to find relevance and purpose? Am I following these things because they give me security or hope? If anything is giving you security, comfort and hope and that thing is not clearly Jesus Christ, then Paul would say, "your focus is on the wrong thing, and the longer your focus is on the wrong thing the harder it will be for you to see Christ."

So, Paul would say the same thing to us that he would say to the Colossians - fill your minds with Christ. The best way, really the only way to combat these deadly dangers is to be so completely and constantly enamored with Christ that our focus can't be drawn away to other things. Paul wants us to see more and more of Christ's glory and love Him more and more. This is something that the church in every age needs to hear - our sole purpose in life should be to see and to love Jesus more and to help others see and love Jesus more.

A. Introduction and Greetings (1:1-2) *[January 29th]*

Paul starts his letter in his standard way, introducing Himself as an apostle, but unlike some of his other letters to the churches, he adds a secondary author (Timothy) - perhaps some in Colossae knew him as Ephesus was not extremely distant from Colossae. He also addresses the Colossians in his standard way, calling them the saints at Colossae, but again he adds a secondary address, calling them also faithful brothers. It is interesting that both of his secondary statements use the relational word 'brother'. Perhaps Paul is emphasizing the relationships of the gospel that makes Paul, in Christ, the relative of the church at Colossae that he had apparently never visited. Even if Paul never visited Colossae and didn't start the church there, he and the Colossians were still brothers in the faith and Paul rightly loved and cared for them.

B. Thanksgiving and Prayer (1:3-14) *[February 5th]*

Paul's concern in His prayer is that Colossians heard the Gospel, the Gospel changed them and the Gospel needs to keep changing them. The Gospel is their past hope and their future hope and this hope is centered in Jesus Christ.

1. Prayer of Thanksgiving (Thanking God that the Colossians heard, believed and lived out the gospel)
2. Reminder of the Gospel (The gospel was their hope and still is their hope, it is still bearing fruit and increasing)
3. Prayer for Growth in the Gospel (The gospel needs to keep increasing in their lives)

C. The Glories of Christ (1:15-23) *[February 12th]*

If the gospel was and is the Colossians hope, then they need to fix their eyes on the center of the gospel - Jesus Christ. Seeing Him for who He is will be the answer to Paul's prayer - Jesus will be their wisdom and understanding, their strength and endurance. So Paul, in most exalted language, describes how glorious Christ is - starting from creation and moving toward redemption. In all these things, in fact in everything Christ is preeminent! If the Colossians can see that, then they will not fall away from Christ - they will remain stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. In fact, Paul warns them sternly that they must see and they must remain steadfast - they will be presented in glory to Christ if (and only if) they remain stable and steadfast, not captured by other hopes.

1. The glory of who Christ is (The Creator, the Sustainer, the Head, the Firstborn, the Glory of God, and the Savior)
2. The glory of what Christ does (Your Savior, Your Sanctifier, Your Preserver)
3. The grasping of those who see glory (unwavering faith in their glorious Savior)

D. The Advance of the Gospel (1:24-2:5) *[March 19th]*

Paul's goal and desire is to see the Gospel move forward, both geographically and spiritually. He wants to make Christ known and present everyone mature in Christ - which comes through the knowledge of Christ Himself. Therefore Paul is toiling, even struggling toward this end and will accept with joy any suffering that comes in His struggle, knowing that Christ's church is built through suffering - first Christ's and then His servants.

E. Warnings, Dangers to the Gospel (2:6-3:4) *[March 26th and April 2nd]*

If Paul's goal is to see everyone presented mature in Christ, then Paul does not want to see believers carried away by the world. And the world is full of things that may seem to be wisdom: things supported by seemingly arguments, things that appear to be self-denial, things that claim to provide comfort and security through a better path, things that might seem like good religion. But these things aren't rooted in Christ, they are rooted in this world and therefore cannot be true wisdom because all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. They are instead empty deceit, things with no real value, smoke and mirrors, merely shadows that deceive. So Paul calls the Colossians away from such deceit and to turn their eyes to look at Christ. They need to root themselves in Christ, who is the embodiment of the wisdom of God, and their pursuits need to be rooted in what Christ has done for them. If they are filled with Christ, they are filled with all wisdom and knowledge and they need no other worldly wisdom to guide them. If their pursuits aren't pointing them directly at Christ, then their pursuits are leading them away from Christ. Things that the world holds out as wisdom are merely traps to lure the gaze of Christ's people away from Christ. These things will slowly, but inexorably, take them captive and make them slaves. So these things must be steadfastly refused so that they can be steadfast in the gospel and instead the Colossians eyes must be fixed firmly on Christ, transfixed by His glory and resting in His hope - they must seek the things that are above, not things that are rooted in this world.

F. Growing in the Gospel (3:5-4:1) *[April 23rd, April 30th]*

But what does seeking the things of Christ look like? How should the Colossians redirect their efforts? If their eyes are redirected to Christ instead of this world, then their lives should start to look like Christ instead of this world. So, as they keep their eyes on Christ, they should be putting in effort to destroy the power of sin in their lives. And then, taking the clean robes that Christ offers them, they should put them on, clothing themselves in lives of holiness. And holiness will be most clearly seen in community, in living lives of compassion and kindness and forbearance toward fellow believers and devoting themselves to serving each other with the wisdom of Christ. Relationships in the church will also affect and be affected by other Christian relationships - husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters. These relationships also should be transformed by the gospel in order to be a glory to Christ.

1. Mortification of sin - destroying that which is antithetical to Christ
2. Growing in godliness - putting on the image of Christ
3. Christ honoring relationships - living as a servant of Christ

G. Final Exhortations (4:2-6) *[May 21st]*

As Paul finishes his letter, He calls the Colossians back to the basic actions of Christianity. If the Colossians are to keep their eyes fixed on Christ, they should be devoted to prayer - spending intentional time in communion with Christ - and their prayers should be gospel focused. In the same way, they should be careful to use their time well in a way that serves the gospel, not wasting it in pursuit of frivolous things. And their speech as well should be devoted to the gospel, always being seasoned with salt, so that Christ is proclaimed everywhere they go. If their prayers, their time and their words are devoted to the gospel, then their eyes will naturally be looking at Christ all of the time. Their perception of the glory of Christ will drive them to these things and these things will drive their perception of the glories of Christ.

1. Keep praying - especially for the gospel to go forward
2. Use your time well - let it serve the gospel
3. Use your speech well - let it serve the gospel

H. Concluding Remarks (4:7-18) *[May 28th]*

Paul closes his letter with personal greetings. These greetings give a personal and relational touch to the letter - though Paul had never been to Colossae, he truly loved and cared for them. So, he sends a personal messenger (Tychicus - a tie-in to Ephesians) to give his own greetings, greetings from those with him (Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus, Luke, and Demas - an interesting tie-in to II Timothy), and a special greeting from two members of their own church (Epaphras and Onesimus - a special tie-in to Philemon). He also specifically greets and exhorts one of the church leaders (Archippus - compare Philemon) and greets the hostess of one of the house churches in Colossae (Nympha - compare Philemon). And he also wants his letter read in the nearby church at Laodicea, which Paul has mentioned several times in his letter (and raises an interesting question about what happened to Paul's letter to the Laodiceans). For never having visited Colossae, Paul had a lot of interaction with individuals from Colossae and Paul loved and cared for the individuals in these churches that he had never been to and desired their best in Christ.

1. Messengers of encouragement
2. Paul's fellow servants
3. Greetings and exhortations
4. Signature and authority

Purpose Statement: Colossians calls us to see how truly glorious Jesus is and to root all of our hope in Him knowing that He is true wisdom to meet our every need. This will prevent us from instead pursuing the hopes and purposes of this world and being captured by worldly wisdom.