

Colossians | Colossians 1:1-8

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon, I'm Dan Bielman, I'm the pastor of worship and spiritual formation. Welcome to Advent, if you've never been here before. Just to orient you to a few things particular to our church, it's the season of Easter.

So the church calendar, in the church calendar, Easter lasts for 50 days, not just for one Sunday. And in the Easter season, we do a couple of things differently than other seasons. We wear this, with the colors white and gold, prominent. We ring bells whenever we sing hallelujah, because we had just gone 40 days without saying hallelujah.

Today in particular, we're going to start a series on the book of Colossians. It's a great book to be in, in the season of Easter, because it has a lot to do with the resurrection, and living a resurrection life, and being alive.

Now, just to back up, Colossians is in the Bible. The Bible is a collection of 66 books. Colossians falls in the New Testament, which is the last 27 books.

[1 : 07] The New Testament is God's revelation of himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Now, the Bible has lots of different genres, being more or less a library. It has histories and poetry.

It has songs. It has eyewitness accounts. It has letters. And this is what we find with Colossians. Colossians is a letter written by a man named Paul to a church in a town called Colossa.

And we're going to be looking at the introduction of this letter. And we're going to find Paul writing about the gospel. So we'll talk about the gospel. We're going to hear about faith, truth, no, faith, hope, and love, which he writes about in this introduction.

And he writes about in other parts of his letters. Before we do that, we're just going to get the background to this letter, what's going on in this city. Before we do that, let's pray.

Father, we would obey your son, Jesus, who told Thomas not to disbelieve, but to believe.

[2 : 21] So help our belief. Help our unbelief. You can reveal yourself very clearly through your word. You promised to do so. So do that here tonight.

For all of us, we would see you. And upon seeing you, we would worship you and honor you and give our lives to you.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So as I said, this is a letter written to a church in a town called Colossa. Now, to get to Colossa, you could start on the coast in Ephesus, a major city on the west coast of Asia Minor, which today is modern-day Turkey.

Now, if you travel east from Ephesus, say in the year 53 AD, you find yourself on a major military and commercial road. Now, you take this about 100 miles and you come to a major city called Laodicea.

It's large because it lies at a very important intersection, this road that you're on and this road that runs north and south. When you travel 15 miles further to the east, you come to where this intersection used to be before they had rerouted this north-south highway.

[3 : 38] And this town isn't as significant as it once was. You know this because it has all the old gas stations that are abandoned with the mechanical meters on the gas pumps.

And it has one of those town signs that these small towns tend to have, you know, like, welcome to Colossa, little church with colossal charm. A little town with colossal charm.

You know what I'm talking about. Of all the towns with churches that Paul wrote to, this is the smallest town and least significant. But it has a church.

Because a man from Colossa named Epaphras heard Paul teach in that big city, Ephesus, that I mentioned earlier. And he brought Paul's message to his hometown of Colossa.

As we read in verse 7, Paul didn't found this church. He knew about it. And he loved it. People responded to the message spoken by Epaphras.

[4 : 40] And they began gathering together to worship in the home of a wealthy man named Philemon. And if you're familiar with the Bible, you may recognize that name because Paul also writes him a letter.

Why did Paul write this letter to the church in Colossa? Well, Epaphras visited Paul while Paul was in prison and let Paul know some of the things that the church was dealing with.

So Paul wrote a letter to the church to be read out loud in their worship gathering. And Paul's not writing primarily as a theologian, although this letter has some amazing theology in it.

Paul's writing as a pastor to address specific pastoral concerns, things going on in the church. Well, what things are going on? Well, have you ever read *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain? In the beginning of *The Prince and the Pauper*, we meet a young beggar boy named Tom, and he finds himself outside of the gates of the royal palace. He begins to be mistreated by the royal guard.

[5 : 45] Well, the young Prince Edward, the son of Henry VIII, from his window sees Tom being mistreated, yells down, rebukes the guard, and has the boy sent up to his chambers.

They talk a bit, and Edward asks Tom, the beggar boy, what his life is like. And Tom starts talking about how he enjoys going to Punch and Judy shows, racing up and down the streets, not wearing shoes, swimming in the canal with his friends whenever he wants, playing in the mud.

And Prince Edward says, oh, privy, say no more. This is glorious. And so they exchange outfits.

And soon Prince Edward finds himself on the outside of the palace. But he can't get back in because no one believes that he is the Prince of Wales. Now, had Edward been warned, he probably wouldn't have attempted this exchange.

And this is what Paul is doing. He's warning the church at Colossa. They had received the gospel, which is described as riches laid up in heaven for them.

[7 : 15] But they were willing to forego their crown, to wallow in the mud. There were folk religions in this area, both Jewish and pagan.

And it seemed the church had begun to adopt some of the beliefs and practices of these religions. And Paul is warning them, do not trade your riches for those rags. Do not trade your riches for those rags.

Well, what are these riches? Very simply, it's the gospel. The church had heard and received and believed in the gospel. So we should talk about what the gospel is.

When Epaphras heard Paul speak in Ephesus, Epaphras was listening not primarily to a teacher, but to an apostle. That's how Paul identifies himself in verse 1.

It's an important distinction. The word apostle means messenger or one sent forth. The apostles were sent to herald the gospel, which means good news.

[8 : 18] The Greek word is evangelion, and this was not an uncommon word in Greek at the time. It had been around a long time. When the Athenians defeated the Persians at the Battle of Marathon, a messenger, you know the story, was sent 26 miles to declare evangelion to the city of Athens.

We won. Against all odds, we defeated the Persians. Good news. Evangelion. And the word would be used later to announce a new ruler or regime.

And we have an inscription today that reads this way. It says, Since providence has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things.

And since he, Caesar, by his appearance, surpassing all previous benefactors and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings, the beginning of the evangelion for the world.

Evangelion. So when Paul uses the word gospel, he means something very specific. He means an announcement, a proclamation, whose importance lies in the truth of its content, in the veracity of the event being heralded.

[9 : 49] This gospel is about a king as well. It's about the Christ. Christ is a royal title. It's God's anointed king.

Paul uses this four times already in the introduction in verses 2, 3, 4, and 8. The gospel reports the death, burial, and resurrection of this king.

We say it every week, right? In the Eucharist, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. This makes Christianity unique among all religions because its central claim is falsifiable.

Jesus lived, died, and rose again. It either happened or it didn't. The central claim of Christianity is not based on private revelations or a set of teachings from which you can take or leave certain things.

Now, the fact that a religion, based on a falsifiable claim, made it out of the first century at all, should give us a good deal of confidence that the event really took place.

[11:00] There were many witnesses to this event. They are mentioned by name all throughout the first five books of the New Testament. To learn a little more about that, if you weren't here last Sunday, go back and listen to Tommy's sermon on Easter Sunday.

You can find it online. So what did his life, death, and resurrection accomplish? Well, God did through Jesus what nothing else could do.

No wisdom, no philosophy, not the law. God sent his own son in the likeness of man to achieve reconciliation.

Jesus dealt with our rebellion on the cross, taking upon himself both our sin and the punishment it deserves. And through the resurrection, having already conquered sin, Jesus conquers death and brings true life to those who belong to him.

Through his resurrection, he not only makes secure his people forever, but he makes possible the renewal of the whole world. Paul describes this renewal in verses 5 and 6.

[12:14] Do you hear the language of renewal and new creation?

Borrowing language from the book of Genesis, chapter 1, the very beginning. 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 and truth.

So we've looked at the background, and we've talked about the gospel. What does the gospel bring about? What happened in the church of Colossae as a result of the gospel? And what can we expect to happen in our day?

Well, there are three things. Faith, hope, and love. We find Paul often using this triad elsewhere, right? If you've ever been to a Christian wedding, you've probably heard a reading from 1 Corinthians 13.

And how does that reading at a wedding normally end? With this. And now these three remain, faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. This is the theme that Paul often comes to in his letters.

[13:23] And we find it here in the book of Colossians. We find these in verses 3 through 5. It says this. Can we get these on the screen?

That would be helpful. Soon just not taking my word for it. Verse 3 starts this way. 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.

Let's look at each of these. First is faith in verse 4. Yeah. Faith describes one's posture before God. It includes not just personal trust and commitment, but also the belief that the claims of the gospel are true. Now for many, this happens in climactic fashion.

They haven't grown up in the church and are confronted with the claims of Christianity, of Jesus' death and resurrection, and they decide this really is true. And therefore it changes everything for me.

[14:32] The way I live, the way I work, what I live for, who I live for. Now our congregation has many people like this who made this decision for the first time as adults.

And I hope you'll be able to hear several of their stories over the next few months up on this chancel. I also know there's many folks who haven't been fully convinced that the claims of the Bible are true.

Now if that describes you, we're glad you're here, and I think you'll find Advent to be a safe place to wrestle with truth, to wrestle with these claims, to wrestle with your doubt, and to express your doubt.

If, however, you come to the place where you do finally believe the claims of the gospel, that you believe Jesus was who he said he is, and you believe that the Bible claims, if you believe the claims of the Bible, that he did the things that he really did, then please come talk to me, or to Josh, or to Tommy, or to your core group leader, if you belong to a core group.

And we'd love to talk to you about what that means, and next steps, about what it means to follow Jesus. What does faith mean for those who have already decided to follow Jesus?

[15:56] Faith begs the question, is Jesus enough? Is Jesus enough? Is the work that Jesus did for me enough?

Or have I decided to add something to it? This is the question Paul is posing to the church in Colossae. It seems that there are certain people from within the church who are encouraging members of the church to adopt some of the beliefs and practices from the folk religions that are surrounding them.

And this includes trying to find ultimate fulfillment through other things besides Jesus. Jesus plus extreme asceticism. Jesus plus Judaism.

Jesus plus the worship of angels and spirits. people in this culture are feeling the cross pressure of competing religions and worldviews.

They're experiencing a fundamental feature of Hellenistic culture that some have called Weltangst. It's a German word. That's anxiety about the world and one's place in it.

[17:10] For a person at this time, the universe looked vast and intricate, beyond human comprehension or control. The human condition was characterized by personal and material insecurity.

And life was spent on a fruitless search for meaning that ends with death and oblivion. This is not sounding too dissimilar to our day. Now, would Jesus be enough?

Would Jesus be enough for them when they're enduring this cross pressure? Or are there other powers that I must get access to to appease, to worship, to manipulate in order to secure protection in this life and the next?

There's obvious differences between our age and that age, but some remarkable similarities too, I think. I think every one of us feels the need to add to what Jesus has done.

What he's done for us on the cross. I mean, I know I do. Is Jesus enough for me? Well, why do I obsess about what other people think about me?

[18:19] The Father has lashed upon me his infinite love and his favor. So why am I so hung up about what other people might think of me?

Why does that determine how I feel and what I think and how I behave? God has made me, he's made available to me like rest and inner peace.

So I don't have to be in control. But why do I feel the need to control the people around me and lash out at maybe members of my family when they're not behaving exactly the way I want them to?

Why do I worry? Why do I worry? I think I'm trying to add to what Jesus has done for me. Now this is kind of a new thing for me.

It's been going on a few months. I really, every day, I think about nuclear war. Think about nuclear Armageddon. It's not that I worry about it.

[19:26] Maybe I'm just getting old. It's not that I worry about it, but it just crosses my mind. Every day, there's like two men on this earth currently that have the power to at any time press a button and literally wipe out 150 million people at any time.

That crosses my mind. It's so pleasant. But I mean, I have to, I have to tell God, no, no, no, you're enough for me. Who you claim to be, that is enough.

For by you, King Jesus, all things were created. In heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through you and for you.

And you are before all things. And in you, all things hold together. And you are the head of the body, the church. You are the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything you might be preeminent.

The Lord's in control. Is it not enough for him to declare that, for me to put my trust in that? Why do I have to add worry to that? So like, what, what do you add?

[20:46] What do you add to what Jesus has done for you? What have you borrowed, perhaps, from the surrounding culture in order to feel more secure or more in control?

Have you added what our culture believes about success? And you've put that first in your life at the expense of your connection to God and to other people.

Have you added the sexual ethics of our culture? Believing that sex is to be used at any time with anybody for the means of your own personal fulfillment or pleasure.

Have you added outrage? Are you addicted to the feeling of being right, that your cause is just, instead of calmly resting in God's declaration that he has made you righteous and you can't add to that?

The good news of the gospel is that we are united to Christ and through his death we can die to all of those things, all of those things that we want to add and we can live a new life.

[21 : 57] One author put it this way, daily Christian living is daily Christian dying. Dying to our trivial comforts, soul shrinking conveniences, arrogant preferences, and self-centered entitlements.

Living for something much larger than what makes us comfortable and safe. faith. So that's faith. If faith describes our posture before God, one of belief and submission, of finding Jesus to be enough, then love describes our posture before one another.

Paul refers to the Colossians in verse 2 as saints and brothers and he commends their love for all the saints. Their love wasn't restricted to those with whom they had a natural affinity.

And had you walked into this meeting, this gathering of Christians at the house of Philemon, you would notice something very unusual. These people call themselves brothers.

But they are very different people. As a matter of fact, you have Philemon, who's a rich man, and you have his slave, Onesimus, and they call each other brothers. brothers, you probably would have been at first scandalized by it, but not for long.

[23 : 23] I don't think for long. Now, you would notice the cohesive community and you would be quickly drawn into it. It would be offering you a different community than the one that surrounds you.

This community is characterized by humility, compassion, and forgiveness. but the culture that surrounds you is a realm of honor challenges where mercy and pity are to be frowned upon, even immoral.

And because of this, Christianity quickly thrived in the cities of Asia Minor. And it offers a similar gift to our culture. I mean, our culture is becoming increasingly antagonistic, atomized, socially fractured, and genuine love expressed through generous hospitality would be just as attractive in our day.

But we don't show hospitality to be attractive. We do it because we've been shown hospitality ourselves. When we were strangers, it was extended to us.

The prince of limitless plenty exchanged his robes for our rags and he became a pauper that we might enjoy membership in God's royal household.

[24 : 46] We've looked at faith, we've looked at love, let's quickly look at hope. When the Bible talks about hope, it's not talking about wishful thinking, but it's referring to confidence in the thing that is hoped for.

And we've already referred to it. Christ's resurrection has inaugurated an age in which things are being made new. And it is guaranteed that one day everything in this world will be set to rights.

just as a frigate keeps a crewman always gazing at the horizon. So we, I don't know if it's a crewman, I'm not a sailor, I don't know these nautical words, somewhere up top there's a guy.

And just as he's up there looking at the horizon, like we too as Christians live lives with one eye on the prize, the new heavens and the new earth.

And this posture is what informs our daily living and our vocations, living lives of missionary faithfulness. And T. Wright, the author and theologian, describes it this way.

[25 : 48] The point of the resurrection is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die. What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it.

What you do in the present by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself will last into God's future.

These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable until the day when we leave it behind altogether, as the hymn mistakenly puts it.

They are part of what we may call building God's kingdom. Okay. We'll be looking at these themes a lot over the next few months as we explore this rich letter together.

The gospel, the resurrection, and the Holy Spirit enabling us to live new lives in the power of Jesus' resurrection. Would his life and his death and his resurrection be enough for us?

[27 : 12] Not just as individuals, but as a community, as a family experiencing together faith, love, and hope. in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, would your son Jesus be enough? Would he be enough?
Would you give us wisdom to see all the things that we try to add to what your son Jesus has done for us? Would you enable us to rest? Rest from striving, rest from worry, rest from fear?
Would you be enough for us? As we confess our sins shortly, would you bring to mind those things? Would you strip them away?
And help us to walk further and further, deeper and deeper into this new life that we have with you. We pray in your son's name. Amen. Amen.