

The gospel that changes lives

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[0:00] Let's share in our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence. May! Your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your great glory our supreme! Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well, as you know, Will is taking some well-deserved rest and break for the next few weeks, so I will be leading our services over these five weeks, the rest of August and one Sunday into September. And as you can see, we're going to look together at the book of Colossians.

So to begin with, I thought we would have a short introduction to the book, find out who wrote it, when it was written and where and so on, and a little bit about the city of Colossae. So firstly, Colossae was located in the Lycus River Valley in west-central Asia Minor. It was an important place in its day as it sat on a crossroads of two major trading routes which connected other larger cities like Ephesus and Laodicea. Colossae was well known for its thriving textile industry and in particular they made a dark red dye with the very imaginative name of Colossian dye. Now in AD 60 or 61 there was a terrible earthquake which completely destroyed Colossae, so much so that it was never rebuilt. And now if you travel to that region there's little more than some stones sticking out of the ground to show where it once stood. Anyone been? Anyone been that sort of? Few people know? Me neither.

It's the thought that this is why the city wasn't included in the letters to the churches in Revelation. You remember in chapters 2 and 3 there's letters to seven churches because that was the same part of the world that all the other places were from. Now the Colossian church you may be surprised to learn wasn't started by Paul. In fact as far as we know Paul never went to Colossae. Epaphras who was mentioned in verse 7 of our reading and whose name is going to come up again later in our series is the person who started this church. He'd been in Ephesus when Paul was there and turned to Jesus because of Paul's teaching. And by the time he wrote this letter however Paul was most likely in prison in Rome. One of his other friends called Tychicus brought the letter to Colossae to be read out there and in the surrounding churches. Now of course there's a lot more that could be said about this. One commentary I was reading spent 10 rather large pages arguing whether or not Paul wrote the letter. But we're not going to get into those weeds we'll just go with Paul wrote it.

But there's just one more thing to consider in our introduction that is what are the main themes of the book of Colossians? What things should we be on the lookout for as we read through this book?

[3:19] Now there seems to have been some false teaching which had become prevalent in this church which Paul's letter seeks to address. People are not sure exactly what this heresy was but Paul emphasises the supremacy of Christ as above all creation and the only one in whom redemption can be found.

So it's possible that the false teaching was around allowing external influences what some called the spirit of the age to worm its way into their teaching and attach importance to teachings other than that which they were first taught. Now Paul wants him to know that all they need as followers of Jesus is Jesus. He's sufficient and all spiritual fullness is found in him. So let's then turn to today's passage which I can read out to us earlier. Now I wonder when was the last time you wrote a letter? Maybe you write letters all the time.

I don't mean like a birthday card or anniversary card which we mostly still write by hand but an actual letter. Maybe it was a relative overseas. You remember that thin blue airmail paper you used to get?

If you wrote on both sides you could never read anything that was on it. And I suppose maybe emails killed off letters mostly and social media and messaging apps sealed the end of written letters.

Any still hard holdouts for letter writing here? A few people? Well yeah very good, very good. That's good we're still hanging in there a little bit. But of course we no longer need to impart weeks or months of news when we can share it through social media and messaging apps almost as it happens. Of course in Paul's day it was very different. Not only was the letter the only way to communicate but the format of the letter was also very different from what we would have here. Each letter came with the sender's name and the recipient's name at the beginning and was usually followed by a greeting. So verses one and two. Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy our brother to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ in Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father. And so we also see here that Timothy's mentioned as a fellow teacher and evangelist and his name is going to pop up all over this letter and all over Paul's letters and in the accounts of Paul's life recorded in the book of Acts. Paul underlines his introduction by calling that his calling has come from Christ. In his introduction of himself he names his title as an apostle as one called by the will of God and that sets the foundation for everything that's going to come after. He's not talking as Paul the learned or experienced missionary and evangelist though of course all these things are true. He's talking about one who has been sent by Jesus and given that we've already seen about his emphasis in this letter of the supremacy of Christ this is no surprise. [6 : 35] In verses three to five we see three of Paul's favorite words. We all thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you since we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus of the love you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the words of the truth the gospel. What Paul's describing here is a basic description of a genuine Christian or a summary of what it means to be a Christian. These three qualities are the hallmarks and proper evidence of God at work in the life and soul of any person.

Now I don't know if this show is still going on on TV but there was a show called the Antiques Road Show which some of you might be familiar with. It was very popular in his day because they would all rock up to some stately home and go in the garden and the experts would sit around on tables and people would queue up and bring their heirlooms to see if they were what they were from or whether really whether they were worth anything no matter what they were pretending that's really what they wanted to know probably. And all these experts in furniture or jewelry and so on would sit at their table and either delight or disappoint people who could to see them. Now why did people bring things to see them? These experts knew where to look for evidence, the age and quality and providence of these antiques. Is that old painting you found in your granny's loft a lost masterpiece? Was that necklace owned by a distant royal house? Usually not but every now and then someone got a lovely surprise.

And then they pretended they were going to keep it. The marks were there for those that can see and Paul is saying that the marks of faith, hope and love are there for him to see and hear of via the reports of Epaphras and a marks of people who are truly in Christ. Firstly a person has faith because they were given it when they trusted themselves to Jesus. They didn't have faith which they transferred to Jesus, their own natural tendency to belief did not lead them to this faith. The faith Paul's talking about and which anyone who is a follower of Jesus has comes in its entirety from Jesus. He wants them to understand that it's a work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and a work of grace that leads a person to put their faith in Jesus. He wants them to understand what a wonderful thought that is for us to sit here surrounded by people who have known this work and the spirit of grace at work in their lives.

So when we talk about the church as a family this is the main thing that makes us family. We all have Jesus in our lives in common. Another wonderful thought is that our family is not just here on a Sunday but everywhere around the world. I think this is partly why we are so moved by the plight of Christians in countries all around the world. Followers of Jesus just like us but whose lives and freedoms are at risk from oppressive governments. In the Talking Jesus course we did earlier this year we heard how telling our story can be a powerful tool in sharing our faith. When we're nervous about what we know or more especially what we don't know when that uncertainty makes us hesitate to talk about our faith we have our own story. After all who knows it better and who can dispute with us over the things that we know have happened in our lives.

In telling others about the work of the spirit and grace in our lives we are sharing the gospel and you are your own evangelistic resource. The second of the marks Paul highlights is love or more specifically the love for all the saints.

[10:35] When Paul says saints he means other believers. The word carries the meaning of being holy and set apart consecrated to God and of a shared identity. If Paul was writing us a letter today he might address it to all the saints in Craig Lockhart and when we think of saints we might think of these little icon pictures you sometimes see in cathedrals or museums but in fact it's all of us. So next time you're renewing your passport or your driving license you could put saint instead of Mr or Mrs or doctor or whatever you'd be able to put and that would get you noticed for sure. The love for the saints is building on the unity of faith and grace in the spirit. We were just talking about because of the faith in Jesus is embodied in our love for others. This kind of love is one way of proving that the faith we claim to have is genuine. Faith alone saves but the faith that saves is never alone. Paul is praising the Colossian

Christians because their love seemed to be not only for the people they liked or the people who are like them but for everybody. The love you have for all the saints. Now do we imagine for a moment that they all got on all the time. Seems unlikely. They lived almost 2,000 years ago but human nature and personal relationships were probably somewhat similar to what they are now. We can't and don't get on with everyone we know or meet but this group of new believers took the teaching that we should love one another seriously and they made a choice as we must do. We can resolve to do all we can for the good of others and with time and prayer and the work of God in our lives through the Holy Spirit the love will come.

The third mark that Paul mentions is hope. The spirit giving qualities of faith and love which are now theirs means that these believers have been brought by the power and grace of God into a relationship not only with Jesus but also with his people here on earth and those restored relationships are theirs Paul now says because of the hope laid up for them in heaven. It's possible that by this statement by Paul is also related to the verses of the false teaching that we mentioned earlier and he's making sure that they're not robbed of any of the hope by the teachings which have brought doubt into their midst because a hope that's in heaven is located beyond the reach of anything that might threaten it. No combination of spiritual foes can undermine this hope because it's stored in the safest location of all. It's not always easy for us to get our heads around that because so little in this world around us seems permanent.

When our boys were younger we used to go to lots of castles and like most children they loved climbing all over them and of course they're impressive structures and they fire the imagination but really imagination is what you need because most of them despite being formidable structures with massive walls are ruins now to some degree or another. What we once thought of as impregnable are now shadows of the former glories and we need information boards and drawings and so on to show us what they once looked like. I doubt the original builders ever thought that the grand achievements would become climbing frames for children but nothing that has been given us by God to the Colossian church or to us as fellow recipients of this hope can ever be taken away. The Bible does not counter into anything or any person who can overcome that which God has laid in place. Our hope, their hope, rest under God's hand and there's no better place.

The end of our passage gives us Paul's prayer for these believers. From verses 9 to 14 he reveals three priorities in prayer and we're going to look very briefly at them.

[14:50] Having heard the good news from their fellow Colossian and Epaphras, it's now time to grow. That's verse 9 and 10. So in verse 9 and 10 his prayer is that they 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. The lifelong journey of growing in their faith and being filled with the knowledge of God's will lies before them.

But it's no dry gathering of information Paul's talking about, though of course learning is important, but it must be lived out in a way that bears fruit. That is, that is, that it will influence our lives and on how we relate to others.

Those within our fellowship and those who don't yet know Jesus. Verse 11 makes it clear that God does not abandon us to live our lives as followers alone.

May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance with patience and joy. I was chatting to a teacher in Firhill earlier this year and she had just completed the London Marathon.

Apart from the more unpleasant stories about losing toenails and so on, it was interesting to talk to her about her perseverance. She trained very diligently and felt she was as ready as she could be.

[16 : 21] But then when she was running, her perseverance was put to the test. Runners talk about the wall. When you feel you can't go on, it's then you must grit your teeth and keep going, because more than anything, you want to finish.

Paul prays for endurance and patience for these believers because he knows that the time will come when they're tested and tempted to give up and walk away. But like the marathon runner, they, and we, need perseverance because the prize awaits us, the hope laid up for us in heaven. It's greater than anything we will experience here. The final part of Paul's prayer is thankfulness. 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. I was just walking up Collington Road a wee while ago, heading towards Fir Hill, and I saw a car licence plate, not only the registration number, but also underneath the owner's name with his qualifications written after it. Something BSC, I can't quite remember what it was, something like that. At this time I thought it was a strange thing to put on a licence plate, almost like boasting. But then later on I thought, well, why shouldn't he do that?

[17 : 48] He worked hard to get it, he worked hard to achieve his degree, and if he wants to put it on his licence plate, fair play to him. But if all of us had to qualify to come to church, or if we had to be able to demonstrate that we're good enough to receive God's forgiveness, how would we do?

Would our own efforts get us there? Now that's not a good thought, because I don't know any of us would feel like we would. But the wonderful truth that Paul is sharing in here, is that our qualification doesn't depend on us, on our own goodness or moral worth, but on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus as our substitute.

We are justified by faith in the one who has done it all in our place. He's the one, as verse 14 says, redeemed us, took our place, paid our penalty, so that we would know forgiveness of sins.

The gospel, the good news that these new believers received from their friend, Hippocrates, changed their lives and transformed them. Not through anything they did, but through the work of Jesus.

Not Jesus who was part of their lives, but Jesus who was first in every part of their lives. And as we end this first look at this book, we can make that our prayer, because for them, Jesus is greater than our failures and successes.

[19 : 10] He's greater than any pressure we face, or any power in our lives. He is who has brought us from darkness into his kingdom of light. Let our faith be rooted in him, our hope anchored in him, and our lives centered on him.

Because when Jesus is supreme, everything else finds its proper place. Let's pray together. Thank you, Jesus, for who you are and for all you have done.

Help us to put you first in every area of our lives, and through that become the people you made us to be. Faithful followers and lights in darkness. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.