

AM Colossians 1 Saints and Faithful Brothers

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn now to the Word of God, and our reading is from Colossians chapter 1.

Over the coming months, I hope to be preaching here roughly every six weeks or so, and my plan is to look at the letter of Paul to the Colossians.

We're going to look today just at the first two verses, but I'll read the whole chapter. 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.

[1 : 29] 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. May you be 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. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rules or authorities, all things were created through him and for him.

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

[4 : 10] And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven. And of which I, Paul, became a minister. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known. The mystery, hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works within me.

May God speak to us through that glorious chapter of scripture. Well let's turn now to Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, and verses 1 and 2.

To 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. One of the effects of modern technology is that people no longer write so many letters.

[6 : 53] We have other ways of communicating now. We have phones and emails and WhatsApp and other social media. And it's much more convenient.

And yet I think we've lost something in the process. Modern communications tend to be very brief and to the point. And they're very easily lost.

In New Testament times, letters were still the main method of communication. There were no phones, no emails, no WhatsApp.

And when people wrote letters, they thought carefully about what they were saying. And I'm very glad of that.

Somehow the collected emails of Paul wouldn't be quite the same. This particular letter is one of the four prison epistles.

[8 : 02] Written by Paul from Rome about AD 62. The others being Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. They're all wonderful letters that lift us up to heaven.

It seems that Epaphras, probably the minister at Colossae, had visited Paul in Rome.

A journey of about a thousand miles. And he'd brought him news of the church. Good news that the church was going on well.

But also worrying news about the spread of false doctrine. And Paul is responding to that. Colossae was a city about a hundred miles east of Ephesus.

In what is today Turkey. It's one of three cities in the Lycus Valley. In the Roman province of Asia.

[9 : 14] The others being Hierapolis and Laodicea. Churches are mentioned in all of those three cities in the New Testament.

But not in the book of Acts. We've no record of how any of those churches were started. But it does seem likely that they were started when Paul was in Ephesus.

We're told in Acts 19 that all the residents of Asia heard the gospel. Obviously not the whole continent that we call Asia today.

But the Roman province of Asia. Which included Colossae. Paul admits at the beginning of chapter 2.

That he didn't know these believers personally. But he had them in his heart. And he writes a truly wonderful letter to them.

[10 : 18] There is an old saying. Two men looked out from prison bars. The one saw mud. The other stars.

Paul from his prison in Rome certainly saw stars. He lifts them up in this letter into the heavenly places.

He shows them the glory of Christ. And of his salvation. And he urges them to live in the light of that glory. The central theme is in chapter 2 and verse 10.

You have been filled in him. In the authorised version. You are complete in him. You have everything you need spiritually.

In Christ. And that will be our theme over the coming months. Today though we're just going to look at those opening greetings.

[11 : 21] In verses 1 and 2. And we're going to see there particularly. How he describes the church. Paul follows the usual convention in ancient letters.

X to Y greetings. But he fills that out with spiritual significance. Relating it all.

To Christ. Interestingly modern emails follow a similar convention. To, from, subject.

But you only get a short line to fill up on each of those. Paul needs a bit more than just a few words. So we're going to look at the sender.

The recipients. And the blessings that he desires for them. So first then the sender. Who is writing this letter?

[12 : 28] Paul. An apostle of Christ Jesus. By the will of God. And Timothy. Our brother. We know all about Paul from the book of Acts.

Former Pharisee. At one time he thought it his duty to destroy the church. A kind of spiritual genocide. Then he was suddenly dramatically converted on the road to Damascus.

And he became almost at once a preacher of the gospel. He'd spent a year teaching in the church at Antioch.

And then he'd been sent out on the first of three missionary journeys. The first had taken him through Cyprus. And into what is now southern Turkey.

Second took him to Ephesus. And then across to Greece. And the third was a round trip that took him back to Jerusalem. Where he'd been arrested following a riot.

[13 : 34] And subsequently sent to prison in Rome. Now you and I. Writing this letter.

We might have been content just to give our name. But Paul adds his title. Paul. An apostle of Christ Jesus.

And he adds his divine calling. By the will of God. He does that to give authority to his letter.

These are not just the private thoughts of Paul. These are the inspired thoughts of an apostle. The word apostle means one who is sent.

And the sender of this letter was himself sent. By Christ Jesus. And the message that he bears. Is a divine message.

[14 : 39] He also adds Timothy. Our brother. Timothy had been his assistant for many years. And he was evidently with him now in Rome. But he's more than an assistant.

He calls him our brother. My brother and your brother. Whether Timothy was active in the writing of this letter.

We don't know. I rather like to think of Paul discussing the letter with him. But either way. It was inspired by the spirit.

And the whole letter. Is the word of God. Secondly we have the recipients. Who it was written to.

To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ. At Colossae. Again. We might have been content just to write to the church.

[15 : 38] But Paul fills it out with spiritual significance. And he gives us this wonderful double description of the church.

First he calls them saints. Paul uses this word frequently. You noticed it perhaps in our reading.

It comes several times in this chapter. You find it in other letters of Paul as well. Romans 1.7 for example. To all those in Rome. Who are loved by God.

And called to be saints. Romans 8.27. The spirit intercedes for the saints. Romans 12.13. Contribute to the needs of the saints.

And so on through Romans. You find it in Corinthians as well. 1 Corinthians 1.2. To the church of God that is in Corinth. Called to be saints. 2 Corinthians.

[16 : 35] Similarly to the church of God that is at Corinth. With all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia. And so on. We could quote many such verses.

Paul wasn't the first to use that word. Goes back to the Old Testament. You will find the more you study the writings of Paul.

That all of his thinking is rooted in the Old Testament. Psalm 30 for example. Sing praises to the Lord. O you his saints.

Psalm 31. Love the Lord. O you his saints. Psalm 34. Psalm 34 which we sang. Fear the Lord. You his saints. Psalm 116.

Relevant today. Particularly perhaps as we've heard of Graham's death. Precious in the sight of the Lord. Is the death of his saints.

[17 : 35] The death of his saints. The death of his saints. And so on. Many such references. The word in Greek. Hagioi. Simply means holy ones.

Christians are holy in a triple sense. Firstly we're holy in the original Old Testament sense.

Of being set apart. Set apart for God. And set apart by God. We are the elect of God.

Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. We are redeemed of God. Bought with the precious blood of Christ. On both counts.

We belong. To God. You are not your own. You were bought with a price. Secondly we are.

[18 : 38] Holy in the sight of God. Because our sins have been. Cleansed. He has made us holy.

In his sight. Hard for us to grasp that. Because we know we're sinners. But when the Lord looks upon his people. He doesn't see our sins.

At least he won't see them on the day of judgment. Of course he knows about them. But what he sees is Christ. We are in Christ. And Christ is holy.

But we're holy also in a third sense. The practical sense. That we have actually turned from our sins.

And begun to live godly lives. That is the very purpose for which we have been set apart. In the Old Testament it says.

[19 : 36] Psalm 4. The Lord has set apart the godly. For himself. Titus 2.14. Christ gave himself for us.

To redeem us from all lawlessness. And to purify for himself. A people. For his own possession. Who are zealous. For good works.

For good works. For good works. For good works. For good works. We are triply holy. Now you may find it hard to think of yourself as holy.

I do. We know. We know. We know. The sin that is within us. And yet the seeds of holiness are in us as well. And it should be our prayer to be more and more holy.

Robert Murray McShane's famous prayer should be ours. Lord make me as holy as a redeemed sinner can be. Now it's quite clear that Paul uses this word saints of all the Christians in Colossae.

[20 : 46] We mustn't imagine the saints and the faithful brothers as two separate groups of people. As if the saints were a kind of race apart.

Better than the rest of us. Would be unthinkable today wouldn't it? Let's suppose that these rows down the sides here were reserved for the saints. They're empty of course because there aren't any.

But all the rest have to sit up in the ordinary seats in the front. No. It isn't like that. And never has been. And never should be.

Saints. Saints. Faithful brothers. They are the same people. The notion of a saint as a kind of super Christian.

Saint Peter. Saint Francis. And so on. Was completely alien to Paul. Nowhere in the New Testament is anyone called Saint so and so.

[21 : 47] And I think Paul would be surprised to say the least. To find in some Bibles that this is described as the epistle of Saint Paul to the Colossians.

Who he would say? Saint Paul. Who's he? How did this special use of the word saint come about?

Well as early as the second century it seems that martyrs in particular were regarded as rather special.

And various superstitions grew up around them. People preserved their bones. They worshipped at their tombs. And after a while they began to pray to them.

There's no scriptural warrant for that at all. But it happened. Then the Roman Catholic Church got involved.

[22 : 48] And a formal process was eventually set up. A very lengthy process by which people are first beatified. They're declared venerable.

Then they're declared blessed. And then at last they are canonized as saints. There are thousands of recognized saints.

The most recent man to be created a saint is Giovanni Scalabrini. Who apparently was an Italian bishop who died in 1905.

It's taken over a hundred years to get through the process to declare him a saint. All of this is far from the New Testament. In the New Testament ordinary Christians are all called saints.

In New Testament terms you and I. If we are Christians we are saints. And we are expected to live up to that title.

[23 : 54] But Paul also has a second way of describing them. Faithful brothers in Christ. I need hardly tell you that the word brothers includes sisters.

There's a helpful footnote in my Bible that says that the Greek word adelphoi simply means siblings in the same family. Brothers and sisters.

In these sensitive times we have to say that, don't we? Again, this is a common word in the New Testament. More common than saints.

Occurs some 99 times in Paul's letters and often elsewhere. Perhaps there's some personal resonance for Paul.

Remember when Paul was converted. Blind and confused. He is fasting and praying in a house in Damascus.

[24 : 53] And then Ananias appears at the door. And what are his first words? Brother Saul. The Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me.

Brother Saul. Imagine how Saul felt about that. I came here to have this man arrested. And now he calls me brother.

What kind of faith is this? That turns mortal enemies into brothers. Truth is that everyone who trusts in Christ is born again into the family of God.

And therefore we are brothers and sisters. Now I'm aware that here in this congregation, three of you are actual brothers.

And more than half of the congregation is related in some way to each other. I've never had the luxury of having believing brothers and sisters in the flesh.

[26 : 08] But I would guess that it's a great blessing. Remember though that the whole congregation is one family. I hope I won't give offence by saying this.

But there is a danger when most of the church are related to each other. And it happens in quite a few churches. There is a danger that it becomes a family church.

And others outside of that family group feel slightly awkward. Don't let that happen.

Remember always that we are all brothers and sisters. If we are Christians. All part of the family. Now this is a very wonderful relationship isn't it?

To be brothers and sisters. We love our family don't we? Come what may. And so we should. And likewise we should love the church. The whole church.

[27 : 21] Come what may. Jesus commanded us to love one another. You can rely on the family can't you? In times of trouble.

And so you should. Your family cares about you. And if need be they will care for you. And so it should be in the church. Proverbs 17.17 A friend loves at all times.

And a brother is born for adversity. These brothers and sisters around you in this congregation. They were born. Especially to help you.

In your time of trouble. What an amazing thought that was. But notice that this relationship only exists in Christ.

We're not brothers and sisters simply because we go to the same church. Or simply because we share the same beliefs. We are brothers and sisters because we are united in Christ.

[28 : 28] Christ is central in verse 2. As he was in verse 1. Paul was an apostle of Christ. Christians are brothers in Christ.

God is our father. Christ is our elder brother. And we all are brethren. Inseparably bound together. Father in Christ. And we're expected to be faithful.

Faithful to God first of all as his children. Trusting in Christ. Obeying his word. Loyal to the cause of God. Even if it means suffering. But faithful also to one another.

Supporting one another. Whatever difficulties might arise. There was no mere theory in first century Colossae. Real difficulties did arise.

There'd been a riot in nearby Ephesus. And Christians were hated. As brothers. They must stand up for each other. Paul was in prison.

[29 : 35] But he was their brother. So they must stand up for him. Today when you see your brother or sister in Christ in need.

Or lonely. Or sad. Do you rush to help them? That's what it means. To be a faithful brother. Paul adds at the end.

At Colossae. Can we see ourselves. As the saints and faithful brothers. At Dumfries. Finally the blessing he desires for them.

Grace to you and peace. From God the Father. It's not immediately obvious. But he is combining here. The common greetings. Of the Greeks and the Jews.

Greeks would say. Charis. Grace. Jews would say. Shalom. Peace. But as always. Paul adds a spiritual element.

[30 : 32] By adding. From God the Father. Now you might say. Where is Christ here? Why doesn't he make Christ central again? Well of course.

These blessings come down to us. Through Christ. And in some manuscripts. It does add. God. And the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace of course.

Is the free favor of God. Coming down from heaven. Out of the love of God. Poured out richly. Upon undeserving sinners. It's grace that has saved us.

And grace that will fill us. With all the fullness of God. Peace is that inward calm. That we have. That comes from being right with God.

And from knowing that everything. Is in God's hands. Both come to us. Through Christ. Thus in John 1.16.

[31 : 30] From his fullness. We have all received. Grace upon grace. For the law came through Moses. Grace and truth. Came through Jesus Christ.

John 14.27. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives. Do I give to you. These are the blessings.

That Paul wants them to have. In abundance. Now all of this is addressed to the Colossians. But of course.

We can apply it to ourselves. Provided we are Christians. Christians. If you honestly can't see yourself. As one of God's holy ones.

As part of God's family. Then you need to do something about that. And you know what to do. Christ is the door.

[32 : 27] By him. You can enter in. But if we are Christians. Then we can apply this to ourselves. And to the church. If Paul had been writing to us.

He need only change one word. Put Dumfries. In place of Colossae. We are the saints. And faithful brethren. In Dumfries.

Alongside other believers. In the town. And there are millions of others too. All around the world. And we should think of ourselves.

In these exalted terms. If we think of ourselves. Just as a struggling little congregation. Trying hard to keep going.

Worried about numbers. Worried about finding a minister. It would be easy for us. To become downhearted. But lift up your eyes.

[33 : 27] And see who you really are. God's holy family. That changes everything. Doesn't it?

It's interesting. That no statistics. Are ever given. For these churches. That Paul writes to. Were there a hundred believers.

In Colossae. Or only twenty. We don't know. And it doesn't matter. The point is. That they were God's people.

Paul cared about them. More importantly. God cared about them. That's what really matters. And he cares about us. Here in Dumfries.

And Paul's prayer for them. Must be our prayer for ourselves. Grace. And peace. What more could we wish for? May the Lord help us.

[34 : 29] To see who we are. And may he fill us. With all the fullness of God. Amen.