

Finding your 'self' in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] It's Colossians 1, verse 1 to 14. 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. Amen. Well, I think the cultural air we breathe keeps telling us the message, be true to yourself.

[1 : 5 9] Look within you to know who you are and what you want and what your purpose is, and then be authentic in expressing who you are and seeking what you want. Let me give you two examples of what I mean.

Consider what we're teaching our children in our culture. There's the kids' Pixar movie Turning Red. I don't know if you've seen it. I'm hoping I won't spoil anything.

I don't think I am. I'm not sure if I don't want to give you permission to block your ears during a sermon. But Turning Red, it's about an adolescent girl who's growing up and she turns into a big red panda.

And basically it's about the weight of family expectations on her and the weight of cultural expectations on her. And she's repressing who she is, not free to let the panda out, her true feelings.

She's repressing her happiness. And the whole moral of the story of the movie turns on this girl needing to accept who she is inside, and the good and the bad, and expressing it.

[3 : 1 3] And her parents need to learn to accept it as well. In other words, don't let external expectations define who you are. Look within you to know who you are and be true to yourself.

That's what we're teaching our kids. Or I'll give you another example. Let's look at what should be one of the most self-sacrificing jobs in our country.

Have you noticed what the recruitment advertising is like for the Australian Defence Force? I'll just give you a glimpse from their website. The first thing you read in bold when you open the website is, find your ideal role in the Australian Defence Force.

Do you find that strange? I find that strange. It doesn't say, what can you do for your country? It doesn't say, protect the ones you love.

It doesn't say that. You scroll down further and you get this. Explore all the financial, career and lifestyle benefits of working for the ADF. In the ADF, you'll enjoy a rich and rewarding blend of career and lifestyle opportunities, plus fulfilling, well-paid work, job security and numerous benefits.

[4 : 34] I'm not trying to criticise the ADF. I'm saying, if the marketing team came up with that, that that works, that's a sign of the cultural air we're breathing.

The appeal to the self, to fulfil yourself. I think the issue is kind of like this photo I came across.

Koo, if we could bring up that photo now. I think it's kind of like this, with this lady in this beautiful setting, but holding up a mirror.

I think our culture is telling us to do this. Look within yourself to be happy, to be full. Now, there's something about this image that is actually really cool artistically.

But the message of it is, I don't think it works. It's disregarding external things and looking within us, our own desires and feelings, and that's when we'll find who we are.

[5 : 44] That's when we'll find our purpose, the full life. Let me try it one other way. Imagine we had the Apostle Paul right here and we interviewed him. And it's like, Paul, what do you love about being an Apostle?

And he says, well, it's given me opportunities to travel the world. Like, I've seen some in amazing places. And it's really given me a sense of purpose. I mean, a lot of people and a lot of churches rely on me and what I say.

And yeah, there's some hard bits, like being flogged and put in prison. But overall, I feel I've got an important job that stretches and challenges me intellectually.

The pay isn't that great, but I just couldn't imagine what I would do if I wasn't an Apostle. Now, I hope that kind of answer sounds just ridiculous.

But how far is it from the way we think? I think if that's the cultural air we're breathing, I think it's safe to assume that it's seeped into us individually and as a church to some degree or another.

[6 : 58] I'm going to point to just one indicator of evangelical churches generally that I think this kind of thing, this self-fulfillment thinking has seeped in.

If we consider the reasons people have for changing churches. Now, let me just quickly say there can be good reasons to change churches.

Maybe the Bible is barely being opened and taught over a long period of time. Maybe geographically moving. Maybe it's strategic for the kingdom. There can be good reasons.

Now, I'm not going to go into other reasons people offer. I think there's a deeper symptom that we've absorbed this self-culture. And let me put it to you in a question.

If you were thinking of changing churches, would you see it as your decision and yours alone? Or would you genuinely seek the advice of your brothers and sisters?

[7 : 59] Or seek the advice of your shepherds before making that decision? Do you see it as yours and yours alone?

Or would you see it, would you welcome the advice of others? Because making such a big decision as breaking fellowship with other believers, if you just look within yourself, your own thinking and your own desires, I'm going to suggest to you that's not the Holy Spirit guiding you.

I think that's the social spirit, the spirit of our age guiding you. Now, I'm talking evangelical churches generally.

We're not excluded from that. But we think it's just our decision, our fulfilment. Let me put it more positively. Let me contrast it with a positive example.

If you were having dinner with your family and someone walked in and said, what's going on here? Would you answer, well, it's just something I have to do, being with my family, eating?

[9 : 11] Or maybe you'd say, sometimes I enjoy it, sometimes I benefit from this meal. Or if someone walked in and said, what's going on here? Would you be a bit confused by the question? What do you mean what's going on here?

I'm with my family. This is who I am. This is just what we do. Right now, what we're doing right now, as you look around, if someone said, what's going on here?

Would you be like, oh, it's just something I have to do? Or would you be like, oh, sometimes I benefit from it? Or would you be a bit confused by the question? What do you mean what's going on?

This is who I am. I'm with my family. I'm a bit confused. What are you asking me? Do you see that?

Anyway, let's move on. We're starting a series today in the book of Colossians. And like the woman in the photo, if she would just put the mirror down and see the glory beyond her, that's when she would be filled with joy.

[10 : 21] That's when she would actually find herself. If she saw the glory beyond her and finding her place in that glory. And that's what we're going to do in Colossians.

Colossians is going to help us see that greater thing beyond ourselves, which is Christ. It's going to help us see how all the fullness of God, all the fullness of life is only found in Christ.

The more we know who we are in connection to Christ, the more he will transform how we live in this church.

And it's going to transform every aspect of how we live, from the family to how we approach our work, everything. Fullness is in Christ, and knowing we are in him, that is what will produce the full life that is pleasing to God.

So that's what we've got to look forward to in Colossians. I hope you're looking forward to it like I am. What we're going to do in the sermons and in small groups is we're going to be asking two big umbrella questions to help us go deeper in Colossians.

[11 : 35] So the question is, what fullness is found only in Christ? That's what we're going to be spending the majority of our time on this morning. And then we'll ask, okay, so if fullness is in Christ, what is preventing us individually and as a church from experiencing that fullness to a greater degree?

Today we're going to see verses 1 and 2. Fullness is only found in Christ. We can know who we are in Christ. And then verses 3 to 8, Paul thanks God for the fruit that the gospel is producing.

Fullness is in Christ because Christ is recreating humanity to be characterised by his love. And then in 9 to 14, we've got a prayer.

Paul prays that the believers would experience more of the full life in the life of the Son. So if you haven't already, open your Bibles to Colossians and let's have a look.

What fullness is found only in Christ? Let's not skip over verses 1 and 2. It's not like the start of an email, like, hope you're well, but here's why I'm really writing.

[12 : 55] It's, oh, hopefully we actually mean that introduction. But Paul means this introduction. This is jam-packed, these two verses. In a sense, they contain everything that the letter will go on to say.

They tell us who Jesus is. He is the Christ. He's the promised saviour and ruler of the world. They tell us who we are as Christians. We are holy ones. We are faithful ones in Christ.

They tell us how we come to belong to Christ. It's through the apostolic teaching who told us the gospel, that is the scriptures. They tell us the benefits of being in Christ.

A new family that is closer and stronger than the biological family. With God as our father. With Timothy and Paul and all believers as brothers.

A new family is created. It has the blood of Jesus uniting it. And in this new family, in Christ, we can be assured that we do have now and we always will have God's grace and peace.

[14 : 04] There's a lot in here. I wear lots of identity hats. I'm a man. I'm a husband. I'm a father. I'm a son.

I'm a brother. I'm a brother and son-in-law. I'm a pastor. I'm an Australian. I'm a Liverpool fan. I'm someone and someone. All these identities. But if you strip those things back, which one is at the basis?

Who am I? Or another way of asking is, is there anything that unites all of those identities? And do you see what the answer is in verses 1 and 2?

To the saints and faith or holy ones, faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae. So we have a physical location for the church back then.

It's in Colossae. For us, Newcastle or wherever you live, let's just call it Hunter. We have a physical location, but we have a spiritual location. We are in Christ.

[15 : 09] The spiritual location is what guides us in our physical location. We are in the sun. And this changes everything.

It changes our complete identity. Let me just give you an example from the end of the letter to the Colossians. There's a slave. A slave called, I don't know how to pronounce his name.

I should have looked this up. But one simmuis, I'm going to call him. He's a slave and he ran away from his Christian master, which is a really serious crime in the Roman world.

But at the end of the letter, Paul urges the church, welcome one simmuis as a brother. The gospel changes his identity. He's not a slave.

He's not a criminal. He's a brother. Treat him as a brother. That is who we are. We are in Christ. And that is our fundamental identity.

[16 : 11] It's what unites all our other identities. I am in Christ. I'm a child of the Father because I'm in the Son. You don't need to find who you are within you.

You'll find who you are within Christ. And then in verses 3 to 8, Paul, he hasn't met the Colossians, but he's heard through Epaphras the genuine fruit that the gospel is creating in them.

The faith, the hope, the love. And so he's full of thanks to God for that. And so here we see another huge reason why fullness of life is only found in Christ.

Paul's going to say this more explicitly later, but he gives a really strong hint here that Christ is completing the very purpose for human existence.

It's a big claim. Look at verse 6. The gospel message which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you.

[17 : 22] And that phrase gets picked up again in the prayer in verse 10. The prayer that bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Bearing fruit and increasing, does that remind you of somewhere in the Old Testament? Genesis 1. After God creates mankind, what does he say?

God blessed them and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, increase. Sin has disfigured humanity.

We don't represent the character of God as we're meant to. Who would say that love characterises humanity across cultures, even within a culture? Sin has marred the image of God.

But what Christ has done on the cross recreates people from the inside out and therefore recreates humanity, a new society that is actually characterised by love for God and love for people.

[18 : 27] The gospel is producing this fruit. It is spreading throughout the world, numerically, and it's going deeper in people's lives as we grow in love for God and love for one another.

The gospel is doing that. Christ is fulfilling the very purpose of human existence. Amen. The gospel produces hope.

When we put our confidence in Christ, it produces hope because the gospel says he will complete it. He is going to recreate all things.

Just as he rose from the dead, he is going to raise us with him in glory. He's going to raise everything. So there is a sure hope that he's going to get rid of all sin, all evil, that that community of love for God and love for one another will be here one day.

I don't know if you pause every now and then and just go, that will be my present reality one day. It's coming. That hope.

[19 : 42] Do you see why it produces love? Because if we know the hope in the gospel that Christ will fulfill the purpose of humanity, he will recreate all things, that community of love, we will want to be now what we will be later.

We will want that community expressed in love now. And we are that now. We are already raised with him, Paul says later on. To use the language of this series, that future culture of heaven, it will invade our present culture here because the spirit is already with us.

As we hope for that future culture of love, we will start to act like that. I think we see it in the ordinary things.

It's those unseen prayers that you pray for people in the church and beyond. It's the vacuuming the floors with joy. It's the unseen financial sacrifice.

It's the opening your home and possessions. It's the sharing the concerns of those in your small group, not just filled with your own concerns. It's the extra hour of music practice that no one sees so that we might praise Jesus together.

[21 : 08] It's the taking the deep breath and holding your brother accountable for a clear sin in their life. It's finding the resources in Jesus to offer that forgiveness, to find that new affection for your sister.

It's the glad sacrifice for the sake of the spread of the gospel. That kind of love. That's the fruit of the gospel.

Jesus is remaking us in the image of God to be who we were always meant to be. And so that's why Paul prays for more, verses 9 to 14.

He wants us to experience that fullness of life more and more. Now, I think when we first read this, it can sound a bit overwhelming, like just jam-packed of religious jargon.

But we need to slow down and understand this. This is a description of what the full life looks like. So we need to understand it. Verses 9 and 10, I think, is like a big umbrella prayer.

[22 : 20] And then later on we get four characteristics of what the full life looks like. So the prayer is that the Colossians, that we would be full.

Well, let me just read it. Where's verse 9? That you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. So it's God.

It's God's spirit who's doing the filling here. This language actually picks up Exodus 35. So when God was creating the tabernacle where God would dwell, he doesn't just give commands of how to create it.

He actually fills a certain individual, Bezalel. This is what it says in Exodus 35. He has filled him with the spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, with all craftsmanship.

So one commentator put it like this. Paul is praying that God would fill believers with the spirit in order that they would build their ethical lives skillfully.

[23 : 30] Like, do you want to build your life skillfully? If you do, you need spiritual wisdom and understanding. As you go deeper in your understanding of the gospel, that is when verse 10 happens.

So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him. We need spiritual wisdom and understanding in order to live the full life to please God.

Be filled more with Jesus in understanding the gospel and you'll live more and more like Jesus and that will please the Father. That's what Paul's praying for.

Who is this Father that we're trying to please? Why is that the goal? Who is this Father? I think if we jump to verse 12b and 14. This is the Father who has qualified you.

Just let that sink in. He has qualified you. If you have put your trust in Jesus, to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

[24 : 47] 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 has qualified you. Not because of what you have done, but because you are united to Jesus and his death and resurrection has done it all.

There's two things we share in common in this room, what unites us. We were once all in spiritual darkness, not knowing God, not wanting to. But now the Father, by his grace, has joined us to his Son, and we have full life and forgiveness in him.

That's what unites us. There's zero room for pride. You can't break that unity. It's beyond us.

He's done everything for us. That's your qualification for belonging here in this church, in Jesus. Jesus alone, not Jesus plus anything else.

[25 : 55] That's the kind of Father we want to please. And there's so much grace to us. So what does a life lived worthy of the Lord, pleasing the Father look like?

That's where we get those four characteristics. It looks like bearing fruit. That is every good work. So first reading this, I thought, okay, so doing good will produce good results.

But that's not the grammar of this. It's saying the fruit is the good work. So any good we do in Jesus, that is the fruit.

In Jesus, you can actually do good now. You can have a fruitful life. The second characteristic is increasing.

That is in the knowledge of God. Fruit doesn't come from nowhere. It comes from the increasing in knowing who God is and therefore knowing what he is like and motivated to want to be like him.

[27 : 04] That is what produces the fruit. So increasing in knowing God bears good works. And the third characteristic is being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might.

Just a fair bit of power. For all endurance and patience with joy. When we were in darkness and didn't know God, we could only rely on our own resources, which ran out pretty darn quick.

But we also didn't need to be patient because we were trying to find life here and now. There's no need for patience because we had no hope. And we didn't have internal, external threats on our confidence in Jesus because we didn't know him.

But now, according to his glorious might, we have everything we need to endure and be patient and with joy.

It's not enduring the trials of life, increasingly getting bitter, getting angry at the world. That's not what it is. It's still with joy.

[28 : 14] Out of the gratitude of the grace we've received, out of the hope knowing our future is only bright, out of knowing that our Lord Jesus is present with us in our sufferings, that there is a point to them, trusting there is a point to them for ourselves and for others, that he is empowering us.

We can have joy. We can keep trying to bear fruit. So bearing fruit, increasing in knowing him, enduring with joy, and the fourth, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you for eternal life.

We have always, whatever's going on in your life right now, we always have reason to thank the Father. He has qualified you. Now, I think, I want to give you an example of what this can look like.

These four things. I was listening to Corrie ten Boom, The Hiding Place. Lots of people have already heard of it. If you haven't read it or listened to it, man, it is so encouraging.

I'll just describe a few things that happened. They snuck in a Bible. If you don't know the story, Corrie and her sister, Betty, in Germany in concentration camp at World War II.

[29 : 36] They snuck a Bible in, and in their dormitory, that's probably not the right word for it, they were crammed in like sardines. But they had a Bible snuck in, and they would have little worship services through the light, through the window.

So that Bible was their life. The way they described it was, that was the reality. Sometimes we think, how do you apply this to life?

They didn't see it that way. It was just the Bible was, that was what was sustaining them. And then they go to this new dormitory, and it's infested with fleas.

Like, as bad as it is, you could imagine what the conditions are like, and then they go to sleep with fleas. And then Corrie's sister, Betty, is like, we should thank God.

And we start thanking God for things like, thank you that we're together, at least. And then Betty goes, thank you for the fleas. And Corrie's like, no, no, that's too far.

[30 : 40] I'm not, that can't be right. I'm not thanking for the fleas. But later on, like weeks later, Betsy has this smile on her face, and Corrie asks what's going on.

And what's going on? She found out that the guards would avoid that dormitory because of the fleas. It actually gave them the space to open the Bible and have those worship services together.

The fleas did. Anyway, super encouraging. And then another time, like, Corrie and Betsy are working, and they see a group of sick women being marched off to the gas chambers.

And Betsy is like, oh, how sorry I am for them. How sorry I am for them. And then Corrie realises hours later she wasn't talking about the women.

She was talking about the guards. How sorry I am for them. Who thinks like that? What endurance and joy makes you think of the guards sending off to the gas chambers?

[31 : 53] That is a dark place. I'm not sure any of us will ever experience a darkness like that. But do you see, that is a life pleasing to the Father.

However, these two imprisoned women were a bright light, the image of God, in that great darkness. So let's consider very briefly what prevents us then, individually and as a church family, from experiencing this fullness to a greater degree.

I just want to focus on one thing I think could be preventing us. I've given, in the sermon outlines at the bottom, a bunch of questions you can consider in your own time or a small group.

But this one I want to talk about, it has the potential to be like a blood clot in the heart that just stops the flow to the rest of the body. Here's my question for you.

Do you believe, verse 9, or praise that you, well, our desire should be that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

[33 : 17] Do you believe that that is your greatest need, to be filled with the knowledge of his will, spiritual wisdom and understanding. Paul is saying that the gospel, the word of God, is the source, it's the nourishment that produces a life that pleases the Father.

We cut that nourishment off and the whole life, the whole body suffers for it. I wonder if there's a part of us that is a bit suspicious whether all this gospel talk really is going to help in our week coming up.

Like the lingering guilt and shame that you just can't shake off. Perhaps whatever responsibilities you have, it's just overwhelming you.

You feel like a failure, that you don't have it in you to fulfil what God has given you to do as a parent in your studies, in your work, in ministry. Perhaps there is such misery and hardship in your life, you lack the strength to seek to do good, let alone do it with joy.

Perhaps you feel crippled for what the evil things others have done to you. I want to finish by just showing the transforming power of the gospel in the life of Paul, just very briefly.

[34 : 46] Let's consider Paul's past. He was a persecutor of Christians. He had blood on his hands. And yet he doesn't see himself in terms of his gross sins.

That's not his core identity. When he says there's forgiveness in the Son, he means it. He sees himself as he now is, a holy one in Christ.

His sin doesn't define him. Christ does. And that frees him to serve. Imagine if we saw our sin as dealt with, our identity in Christ.

It would be freeing. The more we can understand that. Well, consider Paul's present. He's writing this letter from prison. And this isn't like our prisons.

The death sentence could come swiftly any day. He is innocent. He's just been proclaiming the gospel. And yet he's unchanged. But he doesn't see himself as a victim.

[35 : 50] He's not full of self-pity turned in on himself because of the injustice, which was a gross injustice. Instead, he makes a radical claim, which we're going to have to unpack in future weeks, in chapter 2, verse 24, 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 a huge claim. He sees himself as filling up the sufferings of Christ. He's not a victim. He's participating in the sufferings of Jesus for the building up of the church.

Imagine if we saw our trials as in Christ. Consider Paul's calling as an apostle. He's in prison.

He doesn't doubt Jesus' lordship over this situation. He's not throwing up his hands saying, how can I be an apostle here in prison? He's not doing that. He's trusting that this is where God wants him right now.

And so he seeks to thrive as an apostle. He's doing what he can. He's struggling in prayer. He's thinking about how to write this letter, and he sends this letter. He's full of concern for the church.

[37 : 07] The task of building the church is beyond him. Like, I don't know if you feel your task as a parent or your task at work is just, it's too much.

You don't have it in you to do it. I'm sure Paul felt the same way. He doesn't have what's in him to do it. But then that's not how he sees it.

In chapter 1, verse 29, in his calling and as apostle, I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Imagine going deep in knowing who we own Christ can actually empower us for what God has called us to do. So I just want to leave us with this challenge.

What are you doing to make sure you're being filled with all spiritual wisdom and understanding? For starters, how will you make the most of our time in Colossians this term?

[38 : 12] Our world says be true to yourself. Look within yourself to find who you are. To find the full life. The fullness isn't within us.

It's within Christ. Let's put the mirror down. Because fullness isn't within us. It's within Christ.

Knowing who we are. Knowing that in him we fulfill the purposes of why we were created. Knowing that in him we can produce good fruit, increase in knowing God.

We can endure with joy. We can be full of thanks. Fullness isn't within us. It's within Christ. That's what we're going to be just soaking in, swimming in, this term in Colossians.

So let me pray now that we would do that. So let's pray. I'm going to use the words of Colossians to pray.

[39 : 15] Father, I pray that as a church family, you would fill us with the knowledge of your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding in the gospel, so that we might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to you, 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, and giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in life.

Father, we thank you for delivering us from the domain of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of your beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Lord, take us deeper into Christ this term as your church. For our good, your glory. Amen.