

True Spirituality

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[0 : 0 0] Well now if you can reach out and find a Bible nearby you, we are just about, we're going to begin a series in the book of Colossians and today we look at the first eight verses and you'll find it a help to follow along in the Bible. I've called the first eight verses true spirituality because the Christians in Colossae were beginning to have doubts about whether they were the real thing. There was a new teaching that had come up not from outside the church but from inside the congregation that made them somehow discontent with Jesus, that taught them they should imagine there's more to Jesus so there's more than Jesus and there's more than the gospel, there's this new way to grow and to flourish in your Christian lives. And they used the language of Jesus and Christianity but they said something like this, if you really want to grow and flourish as a Christian you're going to have to follow our program. We have exciting new experiences of visions and angels, we have exciting new spiritual exercises, some of them come from the Old Testament, some of them have to do with feasts and everyone's favourite, the New Moon Festival here in Colossae.

Sure, sure, sure, sure, keep believing in Jesus but this is the next step if you really want to grow spiritually and have an exciting Christian life because until now you've just been cruising and coasting with the simple gospel, we're going to help you fly to a whole new level. You can hear it, can't you? And I think this has always been an attractive temptation to Christians. I mean, just think about it, are you really content with your Christian life? Does it really make a difference day by day? Do you think you might need a new approach? Sure, you believe the gospel but aren't there times when you feel there's a bit of unreality to your Christian life? Do you feel a bit disillusioned or disappointed with the Christians around about you, not seeing the kinds of things that you would see if they were real believers? What about the church you belong to? I mean, those Christians, they've become a bit of a bore and don't you just want more? Well, when we're feeling like that, the book of Colossians comes to us and says, be wary of people who say, we've got the real thing, we've got the full gospel, we'll turbocharge your spiritual life and you'll never be the same again.

And so some in Colossae were losing confidence in Jesus and in the gospel. And this new teaching, it sounded so attractive and so sensible and so intelligent. And they were thinking to themselves, maybe we could add this new teaching to Jesus Christ and just try these new experiences and exercises that they're talking about so that we can have the full experience of God.

There's got to be more. There's got to be more. And the Apostle Paul, well, he is over 2000 kilometres away in a rotten Roman prison in chains. He's never visited Colossae. But 10 years before, when the Apostle Paul was doing a mission for a couple of years in Ephesus, which is not too far from Colossae, a number of people travelled down from Colossae to Ephesus and wonderfully became Christians.

And one of those people is named Epaphras, who's referred to in this letter and a number of other places. He went back to Colossae to the deeply pagan, diverse, very cosmopolitan city of Colossae.

[3 : 4 7] And he told his pagan friends and family the good news of Jesus Christ and the hope of glory. And many of them became Christians and a church was established in Colossae.

And you know, there were far more churches planted in the early days by Christians who took the gospel back to their homes than by all the apostles put together. And now 10 years later, Epaphras travels the 2000 kilometres from Colossae over to Rome. And he tells Paul what's going on in Colossae. And he encourages him with what's going on. But also he asks his advice about this new teaching. And Paul explains why he is writing. He's so thankful to God for these Colossians and so thankful for the work of God in the Colossians that it takes until chapter two for him to describe why he's writing. So if you have a look at chapter two, verse one, the apostle says this, I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea, even closer to Colossae, and for all who have not seen me face to face. Why? That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance and understanding and knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

And you can hear him hinting very heavily here. It's not outside Christ, it's in Christ. And that means, of course, that the way of fullness and the way of growth is not new exercises and new experiences, but going deeper into Christ. All the experience of blessing and God, all of God is in Jesus Christ, comprehensively in Jesus Christ. Chapter two, verse four, he says, I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments, with arguments that are attractive and sensible and intelligent, he says. For though I'm absent in the body, I'm with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and firmness of faith in Christ. So Paul had never seen the Colossians. He'd never been to Colossae, but it's very interesting that he assumes the Colossian church is under his apostolic authority, as he assumes every true Christian church is under his apostolic authority. When Paul writes these letters, he's not writing as a private citizen, giving his opinions. He knows he's writing with the words of Christ. That's why he says back in verse five of chapter two, I'm with you in spirit. He's with them in spirit through the inspired words of this letter. And this letter, these words written so long ago are justice for us as they were for the

Colossians. And this is exactly where he begins the letter. So if you go back to chapter one, verse one, the first words are Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy, our brother.

He just, he lays it out. He says, I didn't choose to become an apostle. I didn't fill out a job form and have some interviews. I hated Christians. I hated Jesus. I thought he was a fake Messiah. I didn't think he was the true thing. Until that day when the risen Jesus Christ appeared from heaven and literally arrested me on the way to Damascus and dragged me kicking and screaming into his kingdom.

[7 : 34] And in that experience of the risen Jesus, God called Paul to be an apostle, one of a select group of people who would reveal something more of the shape of the gospel of Jesus through their writings.

So like the prophets in the Old Testament are foundational, the apostles in the New Testament are foundational. And as we go through this letter, I hope you'll see every word moves our confidence toward the Lord Jesus and the gospel, giving us a higher, more exalted view of Jesus than anywhere else in the Bible, assuring us that all the full expression of God dwells bodily in Jesus.

And that if you have faith in him, you have come to fullness of life and fullness of glory and fullness of joy in him. And of course, in verse two, he says, who I'm writing to, he says, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God, our Father.

He calls them saints and faithful people, not because they are particularly virtuous, but through faith in Jesus Christ, they have been made holy and blameless before him, just as has everyone who trusts in Christ.

And then he refers to their double citizenship, their double location. They live in Colossae and in Christ. They live in Colossae like normal people with eating and sleeping and families.

[9 : 08] But what's much more important is their spiritual location. They live in Christ. I don't know whether you've thought about this a lot, but this is the apostle's favourite way of referring to Christians.

He never refers to believers as disciples. He never refers to believers as Christians. But in his letters, over 33 times, he refers to us as being in Christ.

If you trust in Christ, you are in Christ. We've entered into the realm and the loving rule of Jesus Christ. We've come into this relationship with him who is all in all.

And Paul keeps saying we're in him. And it is the closest possible relationship where we know his love and we know his power and we know his goodness.

And we belong to him as the source and ruler of our redemption. And all the benefits of his death and resurrection are available to us in him. We enter into Jesus by repentance and faith.

[10 : 17] We continue in that relationship in repentance and faith. And everything we do is in him. Just think about the memory verse in chapter 1, verse 13, 14.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And this, of course, radically affects every part of our lives. Our thinking is no longer according to human precepts. Our thinking is now being controlled and is toward the glory of Jesus Christ.

In Christ, we've died to the elementary spirits, the elemental spirits of this world. And our decisions, our moral decisions, our ethical decisions, our directional decisions, are now come out of the living connection we have from him.

And all of this, I'm saying, is completely incomprehensible to those who don't know Christ. So, Paul is writing from prison to encourage their hearts.

[11 : 24] The Colossians have not been swept away by false teaching like the Galatians were, but they are in danger of a kind of a spiritual one-upmanship of these new teachers.

And so he writes, to deepen their confidence in Christ and to direct them toward true spirituality. And so he tells them what he begins to pray for. And from verses 3 to 8, this is Paul's prayer.

And he makes two points. It's a very thankful prayer. And his two points that he's most thankful for is their real Christian experience and the work of the real Christian gospel among them.

So let's just look at those two things together. Firstly, the real Christian experience, verses 3 to 5. You see, verse 3, we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

We get to listen into the apostles' prayers. And he prays frequently and intensely for them. And when he does, he always gives thanks.

[12 : 28] And it's interesting if you listen into the Paul's prayer language. He doesn't pray generally. He doesn't pray, God, bless the Colossians and all the people over there in the valley.

He says, you are the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I begin with thanks because that's a great place to begin in prayer. And he's especially thankful that they have experienced the true Jesus and the reality of the Holy Spirit.

Now, how does he know this? How does he know they've had the real Christian experience? And the answer is very simple. Their lives are now marked by faith and love and hope.

So how do you know you're in Jesus Christ? How do you know your Christian experience is real? Your life will be marked by faith and love and hope.

The faith here in verse 4 is not just any old faith. It's faith in Christ Jesus. Jesus Christ. Remember a couple of years ago, the sponsors of the Canadian Olympic team developed a slogan, I believe.

[13 : 35] There were a lot of ads, I believe. There was even an anthem, I believe. We were constantly told to believe something. But everything depends on what you believe. Faith depends on the strength of the object.

I mean, I could believe that I'm going to go to the next Olympics and win the 100 metres gold medal in world record time. And you would just think to yourself, that's a really sad belief.

But real Christian experience is faith in Jesus Christ, the Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for our sins to bring us into friendship with God.

It's faith in this Jesus who Paul is writing about, who rose again and now sits at God's right hand, who is coming as judge of the living and the dead. This is the one we have fellowship with now day by day.

And if it's real, this faith, it will always show itself in love. Love for others who are in Christ, our precious brothers and sisters. And love to all who come across our path, whether they deserve it or not.

[14 : 43] Don't you think COVID has made this very strange and difficult? I think COVID has exposed our own spiritual immaturity and our lack of love.

And Paul says, the closer you hold onto Jesus, the more you understand how deeply loved you are. And that reality of love will overflow to other people.

I mean, just take the whole issue of forgiveness. Should I forgive you if you sin against me deliberately? What if I forgive you and you keep doing it? Should I forgive you again?

What if I just find that so difficult? How can I? Like, where do I get the spiritual energy to do this? Well, if you have Colossians open, just turn over to chapter three for a moment.

And in verse 13, speaking about the church, Paul says, you are to bear with one another. And if one has a complaint against another, and there's an assumption that there are going to be lots of complaints against each other, forgiving each other, how?

[15 : 47] As the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. So that the love we have and the ability to forgive comes from the forgiveness and love of Jesus Christ to us.

We don't have this kind of love on our own. This love, which is so attractive to those who don't know Christ. But to know Jesus is to desire and pray for and work for the unity of the body and to forgive one another.

But I think what's most remarkable about these little three here at the beginning of Colossians is faith and love depend on hope.

They arise out of hope. You see the way Paul says it in verses four and five. Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you had for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Here, hope is the cause of faith and love. Hope gives the assurance of the reality of our faith and causes us to love others.

[16 : 57] Because at the heart of the Christian gospel and at the heart of the Christian experience is hope which is stored up in heaven for us.

See, the gospel is good news of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. This is so important to us right now. I've heard from a number of people who feel like COVID has sabotaged their future and it makes the world a very dangerous place.

And we need to hear again the good news of the gospel. God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

And as you look at Jesus Christ and you hear this promise, hope refreshes and strengthens your faith because it's laid up for you in heaven.

It's in heaven. So we don't have the full experience of it yet, but we now taste the assurance of joy and hope. It already exists and it's stored up, put away safely in the hands of Jesus Christ in heaven.

[18 : 02] So this is the first point of thanks that the apostle Paul has, that their Christian experience is real because it's faith in Jesus Christ, it's love toward believers and it's hope which is stored up in heaven for us.

What is the second thing he gives thanks for? Well, secondly, he gives thanks for the real Christian gospel. Notice just two things about what Paul says here in verses five to eight.

First, how does he describe the gospel? In verse five, he calls it the gospel, the great good news. Could you invent better news than this?

You know, win every lottery for the next 20 years and have fame and fortune and whatever you want. You could not invent something as good as this, that when we die, we have life eternal with God kept safe in heaven for us.

It's good news. Secondly, he calls it the word of truth, which means that the gospel is more than just good feelings. It has a content and a shape and it comes to us by preaching and by hearing.

[19 : 12] And then he says, verse six, it is the grace of God in truth. Because when we hear the gospel, we come to see there is no hope for me in this life, that all those things, you know, good taste and elegance and fame, they're all temporary.

But God has put forward his son who's loved us enough to come and die for us. And he's been raised from the dead to give us friendship with God, to put us in Christ and to give us a future that we don't deserve.

That's all grace. It's all grace. And as we go on in Colossians, it's very important to see that it's grace that transforms us. You know, change, real change in our lives doesn't come from moralism.

Moralism is based on the idea that I have to be good or God will get me. I have to be good, sorry, or God will get me. Change doesn't come by strong exercises or big experiences, but it comes from knowing you're absolutely loved in Jesus Christ.

It's by seeing that the death of Jesus and the resurrection were given absolutely freely. It's only by grace we come to faith and it's only by grace you grow in faith and live out your faith.

[20 : 28] That's how he describes the gospel. But the second thing I want you to note, and this is the last thing, is that Paul describes the power of the gospel working now.

Strange because you might think that if the gospel, the heart of the gospel, is the hope laid up for us in heaven, that you'd think the gospel was really only about the future.

Pie in the sky when you die, by and by, a kind of a spiritual security policy. Not so, not so. Look at what the true gospel is doing now in the present.

The word of truth, the gospel, verse 5, verse 6, which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is now bearing fruit and increasing as it does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

Paul says that the greatest power at work in the world today is the gospel. It's not the internet. It's not planet change.

[21 : 33] It's not COVID-19. It's this gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God to save us. It is the power of God to sanctify us and to grow us.

It is the power of God to get us to glory. And it's a living and dynamic message. It takes us from life to death and it begins to remake us from the inside.

This is what Paul means when he says, it has come to you, this gospel. It's like the gospel has moved into your life and taken up permanent residence to stay. It doesn't come and go. It's there for keeps.

And those two beautiful descriptions of what the gospel does now are very important. It bears fruit and it increases. This is the language of God's power in creation as we heard in the first reading when he created man and woman to be his image.

God gave us the power to bear fruit and to increase. But of course we vandalized and we violated the image of God. We've put ourselves in the place of God instead of God.

[22 : 43] And we don't know who we are anymore. And then the gospel comes along to us and it says, God makes you alive in Jesus Christ. And he begins to remake you into the image of Jesus Christ now.

And as we walk with him and as we walk in Jesus Christ, trusting him, the gospel bears fruit in us and increases in us. It grows us more mature in faith and in love and in hope.

It's kind of dangerous language Paul is using. It means that we become a little tree of life with our roots going deeper and deeper into Christ Jesus. And other people around us see the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

So that when we come to chapter three, in the middle of the section on Christian ethics, you know, how to do family. How should fathers be toward children?

What do you do when you have a difficult boss or a difficult employee? What choices do I make about money? What are we supposed to do as a church when we gather? Right in the middle of that section, Paul says this in chapter three, verse 10.

[23 : 56] He says, put on the new self. And that new self is being renewed by God in knowledge after the image of its creator.

So if you take any ethical question or any question we're struggling with, you can start with the question and you can trace it back to what it means for being in Christ.

Or you can begin with what it means to be made in the image of Christ and trace it out in terms of its implications. You can do both. It is our work right now to bear fruit.

But it is Christ Jesus through the gospel who bears fruit within us, both at the same time. This is the true Christian gospel. This is our only hope in life and death.

It's the key to the book of Colossians. It's the key to living for Christ today and tomorrow and for the rest of our lives. That our growth and our increase, they don't come from having all the right answers to life's questions.

[25 : 02] They don't come from adding special experiences or special spiritual exercises to the Lord Jesus Christ. They don't come from moving on from the gospel to something else, but they come from walking in Christ, sinking our roots more deeply in him, filling ourselves with the knowledge of his will, which is where we're going to start next week.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Thank you.