

The Letter to the Colossians, Part 1: Do You Know The Mystery?

Week 1: Do you know the mystery?

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✠ My story, your story?

- **TODAY we begin our journey into the NT book of Colossians... Paul's letter to the young community of faith in the City of Colossae, writing some 2000 years ago. COVER A LOT TODAY- goal is to whet your interest, stir your appetite for what promises to be a rich meal. SO STRAP IN....**
- **Going to begin by going back just around 45-50 years, to story of earlier days of my faith. Want to tell this story to help me set up a contrast- you'll see where I'll go with that- but also, because my story may be very similar to your story.**
- **I grew up in a Southern Baptist church in central Texas. Even though the phrase has become hopelessly politically compromised, the early context of my faith is what you would call 'Conservative Evangelical'. In some way, this is likely the context many of you grew up in, and are in to this day.**
- **What used to mean- was your church held high view of scripture, proclaimed centrality of Christ, and took seriously the NT calling to be a witness to the Gospel message in our world. LOTS more that went along with evangelical culture, but that was the core of it.**
- **When I remember and consider growing up in a Southern Baptist Church, there were a few KEY TENETS that really defined what we believed and how we lived (at least said we were supposed to live).**
- **BIBLE. INSPIRED, INERRANT scripture. God's clear, objective truth containing no error or contradictions.**
- **More specifically, Bible contained TRUTH FOR LIFE. Truth for what we believed, and how we were to live.**
- **COULD TAKE any question about theology, ethics, morality, and for that matter history, and if look close enough and understood scripture correctly, the answer was there.... AND THIS IS KEY... the answer is something you could know for CERTAIN.**
- **When it came to our doctrine: You could know for CERTAIN, because scripture plainly taught it, the correct understanding about: Forgiveness, Salvation, the end times, hell, Baptism and Communion...**
- **Of course we understood there were denominations that understood these differently, but they were WRONG- because our understanding was clearly, unquestionably, what bible teaches.**
- **ALSO GO TO ethics and morality. We could know for certain, because scripture plainly taught it, that...**
  - **Obedient Christians did not drink or dance.**
  - **If you didn't regularly tithe- 10% pre-tax offering to the church, you were disobedient to God.**
  - **Divorce was functionally unforgiveable. If you were divorced, you could no longer serve in any position of ministry leadership. Ever.**
  - **Ministry leadership, especially pastoral leadership and the concept of deacons, was wholly restricted to men. For women to function in these roles was to be in active disobedience to God and scripture.**
  - **MANY MORE EXAMPLES....**

- *These were ethical and moral understandings we held to be clear, black and white, and unquestionably the certain teaching of scripture.*
- *We could proclaim this certainty because scripture was primarily seen as a book of DOCTRINE. God's instruction book for life, and we are both CALLED and COMMANDED to live in obedience to this truth.*
- *We failed all the time, but as Christians, we were to DO OUR BEST to LIVE FOR JESUS.*
- *We had sayings, slogans- cliché's that went along with this understanding:*
  - *WWJD*
  - *Your life is God's gift to you, what you do with it is*
  - *Cross: Jesus did this for you, what will you do...*
  - *We are just sinners saved by grace*
  - *Stands out most- alter call rededication. Unsaid joke- but very accurate description of this way of thinking- "God is good, I am bad, try harder."*
- *THEN, after life of doing your best, slogging out the frustration of making the Christian life work, you would die and go to heaven. OR, if we are honest, the more important thing is we didn't go to hell.*
- *RECAP.... I became christian when I heard Gospel, understood to some basic degree, made a personal choice to put faith in Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and entered into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, ensuring I would go to heaven when I died.*
- *IN THE MEANTIME, in life right now... We had the Bible as a manual for spiritual doctrine, and moral and ethical truth for how we live. Things we could know for certain. Our job was to live in obedience to teaching of God's word.*
- *In this approach to Christian life, emphasis on:*
  - *Not sinning. Sin avoidance. SIN.*
  - *Moral performance- easy to focus on others...*
  - *Identity was drawn from what we did for Jesus- resulting in pride or shame*
  - *PERSONAL relationship with Jesus. CHURCH WAS IMPORTANT- but center of my Christian life was MY LIFE- the SELF- highly individualistic.*
- *HEAR ME! I am deeply thankful for my upbringing. MUCH of what I just described is rooted in scripture, and some of it is very good. BUT AS I MOVED INTO MY MID-LATE TWENTIES, hounded by thought that...*

#### ✠ **Something was missing...**

- *I mean, the bible teaches us how to live, commands us to be obedient, but what was missing was the POWER TO BE OBEDIENT. The motivation and SOUCE of this New Life we are supposed to live.*
- *To cut to the chase, the SOMETHING that was missing was the HOLY SPIRIT. Both the Biblical truth AND the present dynamic, living reality of our union with Jesus Christ and the Grace of God.*
- *When I say HOLY SPIRIT, we're talking about nothing less than the literal, living, presence of Christ- the Love of Christ- the FULLNESS of Christ, WITH us, IN us, and THROUGH US- as our source of IDENTITY AND LIFE, RIGHT NOW.*
- *First time I heard Galatians 2:20- that I remember- was after I graduated from College, in a song at a church choir competition in Charleston S.C.*

- **NOW, you've probably heard, even memorized Galatians 2:20- but I would guess few of you can call to mind COLOSSIANS 3:1-4. IT IS ESSENTIAL!**
- **STEP FURTHER- Because the Holy Spirit is the presence of Christ in us- the great work and purpose of the Holy Spirit isn't just to lead us into moral obedience according to our understanding of what moral obedience looks like- but MUCH MORE- The HS is at work in us- ALWAYS- for CHRIST- in all of his nature, character, love, and purpose- to be FULLY FORMED IN US- not just as a model to imitate, but us the very essence of WHO WE ARE.**
- **AND MY FRIENDS- something it took me a LONG TIME to grasp- is that this miracle of LIFE IN CHRIST- Christ AS OUR LIFE- is a MYSTERY. THE MYSTERY.**

### ✠ The Mystery

- **This mystery is a miracle that never contradicts God's truth, but it is FAR bigger than mere doctrine. It is a mystery as big as the eternal, unfettered, and unlimited LOVE OF GOD. In Colossians 2....**

**Col 2:2** *My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,*

- **Did you catch that- Paul desires that these believers may KNOW- FULL UNDERSTANDING- of THE MYSTERY... Because this MYSTERY is something that also, IN CHRIST, has been REVEALED.**

**Colossians 1:27** *To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

- **The glorious riches of the mystery that CHRIST IS IN YOU- and that this truth is the HOPE of God's Glory... THIS IS THE MESSAGE OF....**

### ✠ Paul's letter to the Colossians...

- **In his commentary on this book, NT WRIGHT describes Colossians- while on of Paul's shorter letters, as perhaps the most exciting. In his letter to a very young community of believers, Paul "shares their sense of wonder as he encourages them to explore the treasures of the gospel- and to order their lives accordingly."**
- **Wright goes on to describe Colossians not as mere collection of doctrines and principles, but as a "FLOWER... growing from a small bud to a large bud and then gradually opening up to reveal, layer upon layer, the petals and beauty that had all along been hidden inside."**
- **So what I want to do now is give just a little background information about this incredible text- identify it's key themes- and set the stage for the journey we will begin next week.**

### ✠ Colossians: setting the stage

- **The author:** **PAUL!** Yes, but some biblical scholars over years have challenged Paul's authorship of the letter, for a variety of reasons. This could be a study in and of itself, and if Paul didn't write it, this doesn't necessarily detract from its message. **HOWEVER**, there is strong evidence put forth by some of the leading theologians of our time making a clear – **BUT HUMBLE-** case Paul was indeed the author.
- **When and where Colossians was written:** Paul makes it clear he wrote Colossians while imprisoned. But when and where? When I did my wrap up on overall story of ACTS, I said that Colossians, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon, was written around AD 62 while Paul was under house arrest in ROME. This is the prevailing opinion.

- **HOWEVER, strong argument can also be made Paul was briefly imprisoned while in Ephesus, around AD 50-52, even though Luke makes no mention in Acts.**
- **There are a few hints in 1st and 2nd Cor. Paul may have been imprisoned during his extended time in Ephesus, and several other factors bolster argument.**
- **SO, I am changing course- placing Paul in Ephesus, around AD 52, when writes Colossians. HOWEVER, we can't be certain of this, and the only reason it is important has to do with the letters AUDIENCE.**
- **The audience:** Original audience, quite clearly, was the small but growing community of believers in Colossae. We'll talk about this town more next week, but just a few things now. Church was primarily made up of former pagans who would have worshiped the Roman/Greek pantheon. Also very likely had Jewish converts- there was a small but significant Jewish community in Colossae, as there was throughout most of Asia minor. **CONNECTED** to dating of the letter- is that this church was **YOUNG**.
- **Not just brand new believers, but the entire gospel message was completely new and novel in Colossae and the surrounding region. This will become very important as we move into the letter.**
- **The purpose and occasion:** Historic/ predominant view is Paul wrote Colossians to combat a specific danger within this young community of faith. False teachers were infiltrating the church, introducing and pushing questionable doctrines and practices, which importantly, **DEMOTED CHRIST** from His position of pre-imminence. This has been described by some as **CHRIST PLUS**. It's great you believe in Jesus, but to really be right with God you also must believe- or more specifically **DO**- these extra things.
- **What these extra things WERE is up for debate, and the text does give us some detail. FEW THEORIES**
  - **Very early form of Gnosticism. Unlikely.**
  - **Blend of Judiasm with the pagan/mystery religions known in Asia Minor. Major view, will discuss this more.**
  - **Another view argued by NT WRIGHT is that the threat against the church was Judaism itself- idea that these ex-pagans, very young in their faith, were being taught that having followed Jesus- the Jewish messiah, they needed to complete the process and become fully Jewish- meaning circumcision, the adoption of the Mosaic Law, and IMPORTANTLY, the adoption of the notion that your relationship with God was bound up in the nationalistic identity of the Jews- an equating of being right with God with being part of the nation of Israel. Version of this distortion alive and well in Christianity today- we will talk about that later.**

✠ **Colossians: central themes- Just touch on these!**

- **'Essentialness' of the community of faith-**
- **Sounds obvious, but Paul didn't write to a collection of individuals, he wrote to a CHURCH. Community.**

**Colossians 1:1-2** *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.*

- **In his closing, chapter four, we see that Paul intended for the letter to be read aloud in the church gathering- heard, processed, and understood as a community.**

**Colossians 4:16** After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

- **Point we will explore is that essential to wrestling with, understanding, and applying this letter in our life is DOING SO as an active, participating, relational part of a local community of faith.**
- **Inaugurated eschatology- Seminary word, I know!**
- **Eschatology, general sense, refers to study of end times, how scripture points to this. Something that is INAUGURATED has fully come to pass- is in place.**
- **Simply put, in Colossians Paul describes how the hope- and spiritual reality- of what will fully come to pass in ‘the end’, has actually already happened and is already here, IN CHRIST.**
- **In 1<sup>st</sup> Thess 4, famous statement- “At trumpet call of God the dead in Christ will rise first”.. In Colossians, Paul proclaims that in Christ we ALREADY have been raised to eternal life.**

**Colossians 3:1** Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

- **You may be familiar with the concept of “Already/Not Yet”... In Col, emphasis is on what is ALREADY true.**
- **As believers, hope is not in event (2<sup>nd</sup> coming)- our hope is in a person, and he is already here!**
- **The believers identity and freedom in Christ-**
- **Our identity- the most important thing about us- is not based on what we DO, but who we ARE as New Creations in Christ.**

**Colossians 2:6-7, 9-10** So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, <sup>10</sup>and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. (3:3-4) ... your life is hidden (inseparable from) Christ and God... for Christ IS YOUR LIFE.

- **Failure of religious and moral regulations-**
- **... to have any power to change a heart, no power to bring transformation into our lives.**

**Colossians 2:20-23** Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: <sup>21</sup>“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? <sup>22</sup>These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. <sup>23</sup>Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

- **Rule based (legalistic) sin management has never worked, and it never will.**
- **Someone may say “Are you saying it doesn’t matter how you live? NO! Far from it. Colossians shows us that the ONLY way to actually experience transformation in our nature and character is to recognize that we now, IN CHRIST, have a...**

- **The new self- Rather than a focus on religious rules, Paul directs our focus to our NEW IDENTITY.**

**Colossians 3:9-10** Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices <sup>10</sup>and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

– **Next... in Colossians we see churches call to live...**

- **For the sake of the gospel-**

– **We are witnesses to hope/truth of Jesus Christ for humanity. A PRIMARY lens through which we see the world is the question “are my actions, my words, my countenance, opening a door or closing a door for people to see and understand the hope of Christ?”**

**Colossians 4:5-6** *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. <sup>6</sup> Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (BE WINSOME!)*

– **And then, THE GREAT THEME of Colossians...**

- **The pre-imminence of Christ-**

– **More than other book in NT, Colossians proclaims absolute divinity, majesty, and supremacy of Jesus. Seminary word is “Christology”- how we understand who Jesus is, role in God’s plan. Colossians proclaims highest Christology in all of scripture.**

**Colossians 1:15-20** *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 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 and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

– **I started by saying I wanted to paint a contrast- a contrast between the very common, but incomplete picture of Christian faith, and the miracle of FULLNESS IN CHRIST we will see in Colossians... So, some things to consider as we begin this journey**

✝ **The miraculous contrast!**

**An incomplete picture      The fullness of Christ**

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**Certainty of doctrine      The riches of the mystery of Christ**

– **This calls us to be HUMBLE... our faith is not in doctrine, our faith is in the person of Jesus.**

**Personal faith      The community of faith**

– **Experience of faith in Christ centered on myself... faith in Christ primarily experienced in community, relationships with other believers. LOVING, LIVING, BREATHING BODY OF CHRIST that is the church.**

**National faith identity      Faith identity tied to the church**

– **Concept of Christian identity anchored to being an American, specifically politically conservative American... OR, identity anchored in being part of God’s church, community of faith, and the winsome presence of Christ in our culture.**

**Sin awareness      Christ awareness**

– **In our desire to be obedient, is our focus primarily on avoiding sin, or on the presence of Christ.**

**Religious/moral rules      Power of the new-self and new-identity**

**We will be with Jesus when we die and go to heaven VS...**

**We have already been raised and we are in union with Jesus right now!**

**What will be...      What already is**

*Christ died for us... Christ lives in us* **HOPE OF GLORY**

- *20 years ago I came upon a verse that changed the trajectory of my life.... If you are still caught in trying to live the Christian life with an incomplete gospel, this statement- and the incredible letter to the Colossians, stands as an invitation into a bigger world, a freer life, a new identity, and a glorious mystery.*
- **SO MY QUESTION IS, as we prepare to begin this journey... IS DO YOU KNOW THE MYSTERY?**

**† Do you know the Mystery?**

*FOR, To US God has chosen to make known among the people in our lives, our community, and the world around us- the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*