

Colossians Part 1: Do you know the mystery?

Week 3: Truly Understanding

Sunday, September 4, 2022

- **We have entered the NT book of Colossians- if you missed last two weeks, I encourage you to go back and listen.**
- **BEFORE we jump in- encourage you to read the entire book- multiple times. It's short, won't take long, and will help give you overall sense of context- larger picture, as we go through it in detail.**
- **LAST WEEK we began the text with Paul's introduction- We will start with this, and then I'm going to read today's text, verses 3-8.**

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.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world— just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. ⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

- **OK! Paul begins the letter proper by giving thanks- thanking God for the...**

✠ A firm foundation

- **...upon which this young church was built. What we see is that an essential part of that foundation was prayer and gratitude itself.**

Colossians 1:3 *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,*

- **One thing you'll discover if you study the NT with an in-depth commentary is that the Greek word order can sometimes be confusing, and even the scholars doing the translation can disagree about how sentences are structured. FOR EXAMPLE- what we just read is from the NIV, and they associate the word "always" with "thank God"... "We always thank God when we pray for you."**
- **But a better translation is what we see in the NASB, where what Paul is ALWAYS doing is PRAYING-**

^{NASB} *We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,*

- **The sense of "We are always praying, and in this prayer we thank God for you."**
- **Now, when Paul says they are always praying, he likely means that prayer is a purposeful and consistent practice- daily, and likely multiple times daily. His prayer is not haphazard- and this practice of regular prayer gives rise to his heart of gratitude for what God is doing.**
- **Too often we think of prayer as just us bringing our list of requests to God. God invites us to do this, but much more, prayer is an intentional Act of pushing aside distractions, and in an attitude of worship and reverence opening our minds and heart to God.**

- *When we do this- pray with a yielded openness to God, the Spirit will work in us so that our prayer itself will be directed by God- and a primary way the Spirit will lead us to sincerely pray will be with GRATITUDE.*
- *Paul goes on and describes why he is so thankful- and it is how he sees in these young believers the presence of three essential ingredients for a healthy church.*

† Faith, Love, and Hope

Colossians 1:4-5a *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you....because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven*

- *FIRST.. Paul is thankful for the churches FAITH in Christ. That's where it begins! These believers had heard the simple truth of the Gospel- what Jesus had accomplished through the Cross, why he had done this, and what it meant for them- and they responded to the gospel with a yielded devotion to God.*
- *But their faith wasn't just about believing in God. KEY THOUGHT- if you look through NT about how Paul talks about faith, we see a picture of both faith IN GOD and a recognition that there are things TRUE ABOUT GOD. Just restate that...*
- *Faith, in Paul's meaning, is both a yielded devotion to God and a yielded belief in what is true about God.*
- *Years ago I was talking to a couple who visited our BC service... they said something like "We believe in God, we just don't believe a lot of things in the Bible"... Now, at least they were honest.*
- *And, honestly, there are some traditional interpretations of scripture I would challenge! But if what we believe about God is not rooted in how God has revealed himself to us- through creation, through Christ, and authoritatively through scripture- then our concept of God is just that- our concept of God, on our terms, easily changeable and easily manipulated.*
- *This is at the heart of this letter- false teachers were challenging the Colossian believers understanding of what was true, trying to diminish who Jesus is, and elevate things they had to do in addition to faith... and Paul responds by saying NOT ONLY is your faith and hope IN Christ, but there are ESSENTIAL TRUTHS WE BELIEVE ABOUT CHRIST- who HE is, what HE has done, and who we are as a result*
- *SO Paul thanks God for the Colossians faith in Christ, and going on, for the LOVE they have for all God's people. The LOVE that was evident within the community of faith.*
- *Church, this simply cannot be overstated. In his commentary, NT Wright asserts that*
- *Love within the community of faith is the sure evidence that faith is genuine and God's Grace is at work.*
- *If you ask the NT, including everything Jesus said in the Gospels, what is THE distinguishing mark- attribute of believers as individuals, and EVEN MORE, as Christ followers who are part of a vital community of faith, the resounding answer is how we LOVE ONE ANOTHER, how this love leads us into a spirit of UNITY and harmony, and in turn, how we express this to the world around us.*

- *Through Colossians we see Paul give great praise to this family of believers, but the thing he marvels at the most- being so young in their faith- is their love.*
- *TODAY, if we ask “WHAT IS IT THAT distinguishes Christians from the world around us?”... lots of answers could be given- from our music, to our church culture, to our politics, to our moral stances. THESE ALL can be important (although in some cases less important than we may think)- but they are all secondary, AT BEST, to THE distinguishing mark of the church as GOD CREATED AND INTENDS... is how we love one another and our community around us. NOW, if we wonder WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE- encourage you to go back and listen to the three week series we did back in July....*
- *NOW- as Paul continues, he says this love that defines the Colossian believers isn't just something they are manufacturing on their own... it has a SOURCE, and that source is HOPE.*

... we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven

- *In the Greek the emphasis is that LOVE SPRINGS UP, ARISES FROM hope... and not just any hope...*
- *In verse 5 we see the source of this Love is the communities **Hope** of resurrection:*
 - *RESURRECTION is THE GREAT HOPE of ALL Christian theology and NT teaching.*
 - *What we initially think of is our FUTURE RESURRECTION- the great hope that these fragile bodies of ours will be MADE NEW- In the NEW LIFE of eternity, we will experience TOTAL RESURRECTION in all of who we are.*
 - *This is just resurrection future.... Our future resurrection is possible because of Jesus's resurrection from the dead.*
 - *BUT EVEN MORE, as Paul will strongly emphasize in Colossians, SPIRITUALLY we have ALREADY been raised with Christ... the NEW LIFE of our future has already begun... as Jesus said in John, we NOW have the Holy Spirit- Christ in us, a new identity, as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*
 - *SO, when Paul says our faith and love spring up from the HOPE stored up for us in heaven, this points to..*
- *the believer's FUTURE resurrection, made possible through Jesus' PAST resurrection, and the reality of our PRESENT resurrection!*
 - *As disciples of Jesus, and as a community of believers, the hope of resurrection exists in all three tenses- it has redeemed our past, brought life into our present, and secured our future.*
 - *THAT IS HOPE! And when we consider how this hope was GIVEN TO US when we didn't deserve it... the miracle of God's loving Grace to us in all of our brokenness... this will be a wellspring within our hearts of faithfulness to God and love for others, from our hearts, just as God loves us.*

– **MOVING ON... Paul says**

.... we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven **Colossians 1:5b** and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel⁶ that has come to you.

✠ Truth you've already heard

- **Ok- this is obvious, but so easy to miss. This true message of the Gospel, which was spreading and growing in a way perhaps never again seen in this history of Christianity.... . this message was something these believers had already heard.**
- **Well, of course it was. But think of the implication- even if Paul wrote Colossians from Rome in AD 62ish, the churches of Asia Minor were around 10 years old. And, as we discovered two weeks ago, a good case can be made Paul wrote Colossians from Ephesus around the year 55ish- making the Colossian church just a few years old, if not younger.**
- **My point is the Gospel message was brand spanking new. It had precious little cultural or even theological development. It was essential, bare bones. Based on our best understanding of when the New Testament books were written, think for a minute what this true Gospel message didn't include:**
 - **Differing doctrines about baptism, communion, and the like. Make a list of virtually every theological issue and controversy dividing and defining Christian history's great spectrum of denominational traditions- these arguments weren't even on the radar.**
 - **The book of Revelation. Nothing remotely approaching the vast millennial based constructs of modern end times theology.**
 - **In the predominately gentile churches of Asia Minor, very little understanding of the Old Testament and how it relates to the New Testament.**
 - **Very little development of a distinct, independent Christian culture, except for the basic (but essential) moral contrast of Spirit led lives. If brought into today's world there would have been no Christian radio stations, professional musicians, concerts, movies, books, publishing industry, leadership conferences, you name it... and only a small portion of the New Testament.**
 - **The church had very little in the way of financial or physical resources. Central, facility based churches with trained professional staff was centuries away.**
 - **The ability to access Christian teaching apart from participation in a small, local church community.**
 - **Crucially, there was virtually zero concept of political influence as a means to advance the Gospel and bring about cultural change.**
- **If you look at the opening lines of 1 Corinthians 15 (written around AD 56), Paul declares the essential and true Gospel message to be the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through which men and women- by faith- may receive forgiveness, new life, and be reconciled to God. That's it. Essential. Nothing extra. Almost primitive.**
- **And yet this primitive and true Gospel transformed the world of it's time.**
- **Friends, the totality of scripture is a gift from God and important beyond our understanding. This is why, here at Trinity, we hold a very high view of scripture and consistently delve into its riches, even (especially?) when it challenges us. Likewise, there**

are many things within today's Christian culture that are wonderful and powerfully used by God.

- That said, it's worth asking if some of the things we consider essential parts of being a Christian- and parts of the Christian message itself- aren't as essential as we think.
- They might even be excess weight burdening down the radical, transforming, counter cultural, attractive, and profoundly simple true message of the Gospel, evidenced by a community of diverse people of hope who genuinely love one another and the world around them.
- **GOING ON...**

Colossians 1:6a *In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world*

† **The whole world**

- **Just a quick note here.** When Paul says "The whole world", he doesn't mean "the whole world" as we would understand it. He is looking at the world he knew, which was the Mediterranean/Greek/Roman world- he is reflecting on the miraculous way this **SIMPLE, ESSENTIAL** gospel was spreading throughout his world in a rapid, widespread, and profoundly effective way.
- People sometimes will look at a single verse, in English, from our 21st century perspective, and say... **THIS IS WHAT IT SAYS! BLACK AND WHITE, RIGHT HERE. THE WHOLE WORLD.**
- **Point- Scripture IS God's truth- and we must read scripture intelligently, contextually, and humbly.** This example here is obvious, but there are times when it's not so obvious, but just as important.
- **OKAY... moving on, Paul completes this thought:**

In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world **Colossians 1:6b** *just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.*

- **What a statement.** I'm not sure I could say I truly understand God's Grace.
- **Paul is being very purposeful here-** right at the outset of the letter he has commended their faith, their love, and their hope... and he shines a spotlight on something they had already heard, but needed to be reminded was of **PARAMOUNT** importance... the fullness and truth of the Grace of God.
- You see, having said they truly understand God's Grace, Paul is now going to remind them- teach them- just what this Grace is.
- We see this teaching in all of Paul's letters, but here in Colossians in a unique and powerful way.
- **Paul is calling these believers-** just as God still calls us today- to be a community of Christ followers who place a high value on...

† **Truly understanding** *the incredible, essential, Life giving message of the Grace of God.*

- **Our passage ends with this:**

Colossians 1:7-8 *You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.*

– ***In 1 Corinthians 13- Paul's majestic description of what LOVE IS... he makes this famous statement... NOW THESE THREE REMAIN... Faith, Hope, and Love, but...***

† **The greatest of these IS LOVE**

- ***Paul commends the Colossians for living out these same three essential things- FAITH, LOVE, and HOPE***
- ***He has changed the order, but his emphasis is the same.***
- ***We see how the Colossians were known to have LOVE for each other, how this LOVE flowed from the great hope of resurrection, and he ends by saying their Love was a result of the Spirits work in their lives.***
- ***Just as this was reported about the Colossians- who lived in a very different time...but in some ways not so different- may this also be said of us.***

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Verse 3 could be better translated “*we thank God as we always pray for you...*” How does consistent and purposeful prayer lead to a spirit of gratitude?
- We asserted that a loving community of faith is evidence of genuine faith and the work of God’s Grace. What does this look like? What are actions and attributes of a genuinely loving community of Christ disciples?
- How does a believer’s hope of resurrection (past, present, future) give rise to a spirit of genuine faith and love?
- Paul asserts the message of the Gospel and God’s Grace these believers had already heard was sufficient to bear fruit throughout the world. What are these core truths, and what are ‘extra’ things in today’s Christian culture that may detract from this essential message?