

AN INTRODUCTION TO COLOSSIANS & THANKSGIVING FOR GOSPEL'S WORK

BIBLE: Colossians 1:1-8

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

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,^[c] who is a faithful minister of Christ on our^[d] behalf, **8** and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

Today we start our new sermon series! Up until the end of February (with a break for advent) we will be looking at Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. It was a letter penned by Paul for particular people at a particular time in a particular place with particular issues within a particular context.

Show Pic 1 Here's a slide that I hope helps. Colossae is situated in what is now modern-day Turkey. 100 miles east of Ephesus and Izmir which was called Smyrna in Paul's day.

There are two pictures of Paul, the first is one of the earliest pictures we have of him – discovered in a cave in Ephesus. The second shows Paul writing his letters when he was in prison. Colossians may have been written whilst he was in prison in Ephesus or (I think more likely) when he was in prison under house arrest in Rome waiting to see Emperor Nero. In the New Testament book of Acts (25:1-12) we are told that Paul as a Roman citizen exercised his right to have his case heard in person with Caesar. Nero ruled from 54 A.D. to 68 A.D. which helps us with the dating of the letter.

Show Pic 2 Here's a zoom in on Colossae which is located in the Lycus Valley with the river Lycus running downstream from Colossae between the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Laodicea was on the same side of the river as Colossae - 10 miles away. Hierapolis is 6 miles north of Laodicea on the northern side of the river and valley. Hierapolis was a centre for trade and famous for its spas. Laodicea was a political and financial hub for the area. Colossae had been their equal but by Paul's day Laodicea and Hierapolis were the main towns.

Show Pic 3 If you were to visit Colossae now this is what you would see – hillside with some rubble. Around A.D. 60 there was a severe earthquake which levelled the town. Unlike Laodicea and Hierapolis, Colossae wasn't rebuilt. This event also helps us with the dating of the letter. It may also explain why the church in Colossae doesn't feature in the book Revelation with the letter section to the local churches.

That's a little bit of background. Now, you might be thinking ok, if the letter is written for particular people at a particular time in a particular place with particular issues within a particular context and given 2000 years and 2500 miles separates us from Paul and the recipients, is the letter relevant to us?

The claim of the Bible and Christianity and Christians down the centuries is "Yes!". This letter is relevant because it contains timely and timeless truths about God/Jesus and us humans and our relationship with Him and each other. Whilst separated by 2000 years and 2500 miles, it turns out we share a remarkable amount in common with the people of Colossae. We'll find out more about that throughout the series.

More than relevant, the claim of the Bible, Christianity and Christians down the centuries is that Scripture and this letter is authoritative because as well as it being penned by Paul and being Paul's word, it is also inspired by God and God's word.

Now you might be wondering how can this be? How can Paul and God be the authors of Colossians? How does that work? How can that be true? Well, it works in a similar way to us being able to say that Sir Christopher Wren was responsible for St Paul's Cathedral in London even though he didn't lift a brick.

God didn't 'possess' Paul and take him over like a puppet, or over-ride his faculties, humanity or personality or program him like a robot or computer. God the Holy Spirit worked with and in and through the very human Paul in a special way. In chapter 1 verse 1 Paul makes the huge claim of being an Apostle with special God-given authority. What are we to make of that?

Here it's worth saying a bit about the term apostle. The Bible is clear that all who follow Jesus are apostolic – that literally means God-sent witnesses into the world, commissioned by God to share and be the good news of Jesus. All Christians are what you could describe as small 'a' apostle. But Paul is claiming to be a capital 'A' Apostle – a uniquely called eyewitness to the risen Jesus, with unique God-given authority.

The Orthodox Church has always held to this Apostolic tradition and teaching. The church fathers in their wisdom and in order to counter all kinds of heresies affirmed four marks/attributes of the church in the Nicene Creed. They did so with this line...*We believe in one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic church.*

Much could be said on this. But it's just this last attribute I want us to consider for a moment. Declaring the church to be *apostolic* was the strongest way the early church could say...*The Apostles' teaching counts, the apostles' teaching matters. What they say, what Apostle Paul says is foundational, vital and divinely inspired teaching and stands for all time. The Apostles' instructions, Paul's instructions are God's good instructions to us.*

There is of course a challenge in accepting the Bible and apostolic teaching as authoritative. Partly this is do with our human nature and our dislike of *anyone* exercising authority over us. We see this in the reactions of children when a parent says, "No" to them. Maybe you are familiar with the scenario....*what do you mean no! mum, dad you're not the boss of me!* You and I were of course never like that! You and I are far too grown up and mature to tantrum or huff and puff when we are told, "No" or told off because we are in the wrong! We are all far too mature to have these tantrums (on the outside)! We've learnt to have them on the...inside!

Now maybe you're thinking, *OK Dan I might be able to accept Jesus' instruction and yield to his authority because Jesus is Jesus. But I'm not sure I can or want to accept Apostle Paul's because he seems to be patriarchal and anti-women and judgemental and a harsh task master.*

Let me respond briefly...

Firstly, Paul is not Jesus, not perfect and not claiming to be even when claiming to be a capital 'A' Apostleship. Paul readily admits this writing to his friend Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:15 ¹⁵ **Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.**

Secondly, when Paul is labelled as a misogynist, authoritarian type who exercises the wrong kind of patriarchal power, is this a fair reading of Paul? And on what do we base that conclusion? What if Paul is not the person you think he is or have been told he is? Maybe he's not saying what you think he is saying? Will you keep an open mind about Paul? Will you give him a chance? Will you let the biblical text and his words and actions inform you and shape your opinion rather than other people's second-hand opinions? When weighing up things or people it's always best going to the source and dealing first hand.

What the text says is really interesting!

For example, in verse 2 of today's Bible reading, Paul in addressing the church in Colossae uses the Greek word *adelphoi*. It's a term that means "siblings in a family". It can be translated as brothers and is often translated as brothers in bibles, but it means more than brothers. In your Bible you may notice that there is an asterix which tells you this. So, Paul is deliberately saying *greetings to all the brothers and sisters* in Colossae. We might miss the significance of this in our culture and modern reading, but it would have not been missed in the male dominated ancient Middle Eastern culture and world.

And at the end of the letter in Chapter 4 when Paul's doing a kind of shout out of praise and thanks to people, he gives a shout out to church leader Nympha.

4¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. This is the same Paul who we are told in Romans Chapter 16 entrusts the letter to the Romans (a treasure trove of rich and complex theology) to Phoebe! In a world and at a time where it was customary that the one delivering the letter would read it out aloud on behalf of the author and then take question and clarify any points, Paul entrusts Romans to Phoebe! Interesting isn't it! It turns out that Paul has a high view of women because?...Jesus does! Maybe you're even thinking now *Hold on a minute this doesn't fit with my picture of Paul! Or my view of God!*

This leads me to point out that the Paul who writes Colossians is the same Paul who wrote the sublime passage of love in the letter to the Corinthians chapter 13 (often read at weddings). When considering whether Paul can be trusted and whether his words were divinely inspired, this passage on love, widely regarded as the one of the greatest pieces of writing on love ever, should help us to see Paul's heart and motivation and focus and foundation – Jesus and Jesus' love.

13 ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails...¹³ **And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.** What we find in the introduction and throughout the letter are the themes of faith, hope and love. Faith and hope in Jesus and Jesus' saving, transforming and stronger than death love - that Paul has experienced and so too have many people in Colossae.

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.

This leads us on to the Gospel...**the true message of the Gospel that has come to you.** Because what if we've not just got it wrong about Paul, what if we've got it wrong about God? What if we've got it wrong about who God is and what He is like and what He has done and what He promises? That was Paul's story which is worth reminding ourselves of.

Paul formerly known as Saul was once one of the leading Jesus and Christianity sceptics and opponents. He thought the idea of God becoming human and dying and then rising from the dead was preposterous, blasphemous and dangerous. No one in the ancient Greco-Roman world or Jewish world (which he belonged to) thought that a God would stoop that low. The thought that someone or even the promised Messiah and Saviour could physically rise from the dead was outrageous and incredulous because? dead people don't rise from the dead! People in the ancient world knew that just as well as we do.

Paul was so convinced of this he was going around arresting Christians, even approving of their deaths. Until the risen Jesus showed up and met with him on the road to Damascus. Paul's was the original Damascus experience. Meeting with Jesus leaves you changed.

Paul went from being one of the leading anti-Christians to Jesus followers! Paul became convinced that Jesus rose from the dead and that Jesus' bodily and literal resurrection ushered in a new dawn and changed everything.

The book of Acts in the New Testament documents Paul's journeys sharing the good news of Jesus.

That this Jesus...

...was the one the Hebrew Scriptures pointed to.

...was the fulfilment of the Old Testament

...was the God himself come to save us

...was the true and rightful King – the king of life, king of love, literally divine.

...was the Lord – Lord and Master over every realm and sphere of life including the natural and spiritual realms and that at the name of Jesus every knee must bow including Rome and the Emperor

...rose from the dead and offers forgiveness and friendship with God to anyone who would come.

This got Paul into so much trouble with the religious establishment and the Roman establishment

Can you imagine...the Roman world with all its might where people said and were forced to say, *"Caesar is Lord!"* Paul going around saying... *"Nah. Jesus is!"*

Can you imagine...the polytheistic religious world where so many gods were worshipped and people worked hard to try to keep them happy so they and the town or city would receive blessing and protection rather than their displeasure and punishment, Paul going around saying... *"They're all false gods – Jesus is the real and only One! He is the way, the truth and life."*

Can you imagine....in the Jewish monotheistic world Paul going around saying *well actually, God is 3in1 and 1in3 - Father, Spirit and Son. Jesus is actually God himself, God in person!*

Can you imagine...in the religious world where, keeping the commandments and obeying the rules was the thing that made you 'right with God', Paul saying *"Nope, no amount of good works can save us. Nope, we cannot save ourselves. Being better than average, being better than 'them' won't cut it. We all absolutely and desperately need a Saviour who saves by grace. That applies to those who think themselves as the 'best of the best/chosen ones' and those who see themselves as the worst of the worst need no chance ones."*

Paul with the good news of Jesus was unsettling everyone! Every realm and sphere of life (the physical and the spiritual) was being disturbed and overturned by this radical message and reality of Jesus and his love. Whilst some rejected the good news and Jesus, many said yes! That included people in Colossae.

What's interesting about this letter and the church is that Paul never went to Colossae. The one who brought the good news of Jesus to the people in Colossae seems to be **Epaphras**. What Epaphras has done is gone to see Paul whilst he's in prison.

This letter to the church was given to Epaphras to take back and share with God's people in Colossae. In chapter 4 verse 16 we are told that the letter was to be shared with the neighbouring church in Laodicea. We're also told in Chapter 4 verse 13 that Epaphras is working hard for the Gospel in Hierapolis. There is some great Gospel teamwork going on here.

Paul's response to hearing about what God is doing in the lives of people in Colossae and surrounding (people that he's never met) is a bit like a harvest thanksgiving prayer. The agricultural language is fascinating! The Gospel, the good news of Jesus is taking root and bearing fruit in people's lives and communities and growing globally. Let's read verses 3-8 again as we close. And then we'll pray for gospel growth in us and in the world.

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,^[c] who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

PRAY: Father, help us to be shaped and formed by your word. Thank you for your timeless and timely truths. Sorry for when I and we think we know better than you.

Holy Spirit, help the gospel, the good news of Jesus to be planted and take root in us. Help us to have roots that go deep in you so that we can weather dry and dusty and wintery and stormy seasons of life. Help us to trust in you even when it's really hard. Help us to take in all the good things we need to grow and flourish.

Root out the bitter roots of hatred, envy, entitlement and any sense that 'we' are better than 'them'. We pray for our Jewish neighbours and those in Manchester. We pray for all who have lost loved ones through violence and are being violently targeted for racial or ideological or economic reasons. Humble the proud and lift up the downtrodden. We pray for strong peace.

Lord, pour in your love and grace and mercy. Grow in us faith, hope and love. Help us to grow and flourish and bear fruit to be a blessing to our family, friends, community and world. That the light of Christ may be seen in and through us - cracked and broken vessels that we may be.

Lord Jesus, we want to meet with you through this letter and series. We want to meet with you day to day. Come, Lord Jesus, bless us with your presence. Thank you that you meet us as we are. Thank you love us enough to change us too. Come, Holy Spirit, fill us afresh we pray. Thank you for the faith, hope and love present in these dear people gathered and online – more we pray.

Thank you that the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus continues to take root and bear fruit all around the world. Thank you that you are changing lives close to home and all round the world and bringing people into your family. More of that too we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.