

The Book of Colossians

Four Insights into the Gospel

Colossians 1:1-8

Introduction

During the next few weeks, I want us to take a walk through Paul's Letter to the Colossian church.

Colossae was a city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), situated in the Lycus River valley about 110 miles south-east of Ephesus. It was a prominent city in classical Greek times because of its importance in producing dyed wool and its location on the trade route between Ephesus and the East. It was close to two other cities, Hierapolis and Laodicea, both mentioned in the New Testament. These two cities gradually eclipsed Colossae, and by the time Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians, it was a small and relatively unimportant city. It lasted for a few more years and then was abandoned. Its ruins were discovered in 1835.

Paul did not found the Colossian church, but he had contact with it. Colossae was one of the churches evangelized by Epaphras, a disciple of Paul's (Col.4.12-13). Epaphras had become alarmed about a cult that was developing in the Colossian church, and since Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he went there to consult with him. Paul agreed the situation was serious and decided to write a letter to the Colossians.

Tychicus and Onesimus conveyed the letter to the Colossians while Epaphras stayed in Rome with Paul (Col. 4:7-9). The letter was written at the same time as the Letter to Philemon, sometime around 62 A.D. We don't know the exact nature of this cult or its practices, but it seems to have been a mixture of Jewish and pagan speculation, magic, and astrology.

Paul's letter addresses circumcision, the Sabbath, new moons, and other details of the Jewish calendar, along with the subject of angels, food and drink laws. A person can find these pagan influences among cults even today. Paul tackles these practices in a magnificent passage in Chapter One. He states that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God and is of the essence of God. He says that Christ created everything in the universe, and everything in the universe finds its fulfillment in Christ.

That makes Jesus our only hope of reconciliation since He is our Creator, and in Him, all wisdom and perfection are fulfilled. Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and He is pre-eminent in every way. In Christ, there is no room for humanism or mysticism. Jesus is the revelation of God and the plan for the salvation of humanity. In this letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul proclaims Christ to be the supreme power over the entire universe. In light of Christ's work and position, Paul urges Christians to live godly lives.

The letter to the Colossians consists of two parts. First, there is a doctrinal section, then a section regarding Christian conduct. Paul begins with an introductory section of greeting, thanksgiving, and prayer. Then he states the all-sufficiency of Christ, tackles the features of the cult, and completes the letter with an ethical exhortation and a personal note.

So, let's dive right in and begin by reading the first two verses. "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." (Col 1:1-2 NIV)

The letter is definitely from the Apostle Paul. Paul was also known by his Hebrew name, Saul of Tarsus. He became a disciple of Jesus but was not one of the original twelve. Paul became one of the most influential figures in the Early Church after Christ commissioned him to spread the gospel to the Western world. Before his conversion, Paul went everywhere persecuting the Church and executed many followers of Christ.

According to the Book of Acts, while on a mission to bring Christians back to Jerusalem for trial, Paul met Jesus Christ. While traveling to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him in a great light that blinded him. Three days later, God sent a man named Ananias to pray for Paul and restore his sight. After his conversion, Paul began to preach that Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God.

Paul would go on to write over half of the New Testament. The book of Colossians is one of his writings. Paul writes this letter primarily to strengthen the Colossian Christians to resist these false teachers.

He begins by thanking God for this church and for how it got started. In verse 3, Paul writes, "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—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 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. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit." (Col 1:3-8 NIV)

The Colossians were an example of Christian communities that were springing up all over the Roman Empire. What was the "seed" that caused this growth? Well, Paul and Epaphras were agents, but they were not "seeds." The "seed" is what Paul calls "the gospel" (1:5,6).

The seed of the gospel spreads from person to person. It spread from Paul to Epaphras and from Epaphras to the Colossians. From there, it was spreading to others in the area. So, what is this "gospel"? Paul uses the term 57 times in his

letters. In our culture, the term "gospel" refers to several things. In some ways, it's only vaguely related to Christianity as a style of music, or a certain kind of preaching, or a religious place (gospel tabernacle).

But Paul's gospel exists independently of these things and is fundamentally very different from them. In Ephesians, Paul says that the gospel contains "unfathomable riches." So let's see what "unfathomable riches" Paul's letter to the Colossians provides us with.

I. Announcing the Gospel

First of all, the gospel is a definitive announcement. In verse 5, Paul says the gospel is "the word of truth," or "the message that is true." The gospel is not one of many messages, nor is it a human deduction or speculation; it is *the* message revealed by God that announces *the* truth.

The Greek word means "good message." Gospel was a word used by Roman rulers to describe official announcements. Specifically, a Roman "gospel" was an announcement of an objective or important event and a summons for Roman citizens to align themselves to this event. For example, during Caesar Augustus' reign (9 B.C.), heralds proclaimed the "gospel" of his notable reign as emperor. They summoned all subjects to reckon time from a new calendar based on his birthday.

It's true, Caesar Augustus ended war within the Empire, but he fell far short of setting all things in order politically. The Empire was riddled with racial, socio-economic, and gender divisions. People lamented that true peace was as out of reach as ever (just like today).

It is in this context the early Christian movement announced a much more incredible gospel. This New Testament gospel announced the coming of a much greater Ruler who brought a much greater salvation.

II. Revealing the Gospel

The gospel declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah sent by God. The central theme of the gospel is Jesus. Paul speaks of Jesus five times in the first eight verses. In 2 Thessalonians 1:8, he calls the gospel "the gospel of (concerning) our Lord Jesus Christ."

Specifically, the gospel declares that Jesus *is* the Christ, the Anointed One. The title, Jesus refers to Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish carpenter born around 4 B.C. and crucified by Roman rulers in 33 A.D. Paul calls Him "Jesus Christ" (1:1), "Christ" (1:2), "our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3), "Christ Jesus" (1:4), and "Christ" (1:7).

Jesus Christ is the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament prophets and the rightful Ruler of the whole world. Paul also calls Jesus "Lord," not Caesar or any

human ruler. The gospel declares that Jesus is the Christ, not that he was the Christ. Jesus didn't just die! He rose from the dead and is forever alive. Paul tells the Colossians that Jesus is a living Ruler who is personally accessible even though He was crucified over 35 years earlier.

Paul describes himself as an ambassador of the living Jesus, and Epaphras as a servant of the living Christ. The gospel is not a historical record that preserves the memory of Jesus; it is an invitation to meet Him and be saved by Him.

III. The Grace of the Gospel

The gospel offers the grace of God. What was the great salvation that Jesus brought? Paul calls the gospel in verse 6 "the grace of God in truth," or "the truth about God's grace." "Grace" (*charis*) means "free and undeserved gift" (It is the root of our word "charity"). In Acts 20:24, Paul calls the gospel "the gospel of (concerning) God's grace."

Paul says that Jesus' death on the cross made it possible for God to offer His grace to people like us who deserve His judgment. He explains this further in this letter. But in these opening verses, Paul identifies several aspects of this grace that God offers us through Jesus: He says:

- God's grace offers us true peace (1:2b).
 - Paul begins almost all of his letters with this salutation, and always in this order.
 - This is because receiving God's grace leads to peace with God.

Rom.5:1 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Rom 5:1-2 NKJV)

- God's grace delivers us from His judgment and makes Him our loving Father.
- God's grace also provides inner peace that guards our hearts and mind from anxiety.

Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Php 4:6-7 NKJV)

- God's grace also offers you hope (1:4,5).
 - Because of grace, you no longer do you have to fear the future or your death.
 - The moment you put your faith in Jesus (1:4), God guarantees that you will spend eternity with Him.
 - That's why Paul says this hope is a confident expectation and is "laid up for you in heaven."
 - Paul is simply restating what Jesus said in Jn.3:16 (quote).

God's grace gives us the ability to love others for two reasons. First, the certainty of going to heaven transforms us from takers into givers. Eternity provides us with a basis for spending this life giving and helping people instead of taking from them or protecting ourselves from them.

Secondly, God's Spirit indwells us the moment we put our faith in Jesus (1:8). The Holy Spirit leads us to experience Jesus' love and enables us to share His love with others. Romans 13:10 says, "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." ([Rom 13:10 NIV](#))

We're going to learn much more about the gospel of God's grace in Colossians in the next few weeks. The life Jesus offers us is the life of grace, and the only condition is that you entrust your life to Him as your Savior and Lord.

Conclusion

As we study this letter, we will see that the gospel spreads through people who have been changed by it. In verse 7, Paul says, "You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit." ([Col 1:7-8 NIV](#))

The Colossians learned about the gospel from Epaphras, who had been changed by it. We don't know how Epaphras learned about the gospel. Maybe he met some Christians who had real peace and hope, and they explained the gospel to him. However, when he heard the gospel, he put his faith in Jesus and began to experience this same peace and hope and love.

Then the Colossians experienced the same peace and hope and started telling people they knew. That's how the gospel spread all over the Roman Empire during the first century, and it still spreads this same way today. If you have met Jesus and been changed by His grace, then you are fully qualified to spread this gospel to others!

- You don't need to have lots of biblical knowledge.
- You don't have to be free from all sins and problems.
- You don't have to be able to answer every question or objection.
- Your most powerful asset is your own story, and you are the leading expert of your own story!

So don't worry about what you don't know; share what you do know. Share how Jesus has changed your life whenever you get the opportunity. Just put it out there! Invite them to find out for themselves. Invite them to come here with you to hear about the gospel as we study Colossians.