

“Colossians: Looking to Jesus” Colossians 1:1-14. Steve Harden 8/16/20

If you would, turn with me to Colossians 1. We’re starting a new study tonight. We’re going to introduce it in a little bit, tonight we’ll be reading the first fourteen verses.

<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup>To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

<sup>3</sup>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup>because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup>which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup>just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf<sup>8</sup> and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

<sup>9</sup>And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup>so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; <sup>11</sup>being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. <sup>13</sup>He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” This is the word of God.

You know, I’ve never met a Christian, ever, that did not earnestly want to grow in grace, to grow in spiritual maturity, to learn to walk according to His ways as we sang a moment ago, to live a life rich and full and brimming with fruit. And I think the more earnestly we desire that discipleship, that following of Jesus, the more the book of Colossians is for us because I think those of us who long for it the most are the most susceptible to those who would give us wrong answers on how to grow in grace.

Our family homeschooled our kids all the way through. Golly, I think my wife was homeschooling for half her life and she wasn’t homeschooled, right, so it was all on the teaching end of that. But there was a short time that we were involved with an organization with a curriculum that really promised great things and as all parents, we longed for our kids to know Jesus and to walk with Him and avoid all the troubles of not walking with Him and we just longed for them to be Christians and to follow Jesus. Well, this organization promised to produce faith-filled followers of Jesus but after a while we saw that it wasn’t all that we thought it was going to be. It was more of a façade of pharisaical legalism honestly, and an organization that seemed to be and was full of Scripture but misused that Scripture and was, we used to joke, a principal in search of a text. But it’s not about the organization, that’s not why I bring it up, my point is, we were susceptible to getting involved with that because we so earnestly desired for our children to be Christ-followers. That’s what made us susceptible.

The Colossians were facing similar dilemmas in the era of the New Testament. It was before the New Testament had been written. They didn't have everything we have to know how to grow in grace. They knew little about how to practice this gospel life, like our situation, the struggle generally wasn't with blatant error but most often it was that the truth was skewed just that one click, just a little bit wrong, a little bit off. This evening I want to introduce this book of Colossians to you, give you an overview about why it was written, and then show you how Paul would counsel the church and we can see him counseling this way all the way through. So, I want to use just three words to frame our thoughts: the church, the controversy and the counsel.

So first of all, the church. The church of Colossae had very humble beginnings. It all started when this man named Epaphras, somehow, for some reason, was in the city of Ephesus, and it was about 100 miles away from home. We don't know why he was there, but he was there and he heard this message about a Jewish Messiah that gave forgiveness of sins and gave grace to those that would come to Him. The Lord got a hold of his heart and he listened to this message Paul preached in Ephesus and they became fast friends. Well, as will happen, when you hear good news you want to share it! And he thought about his friends and his family back home. He was from this area, this region, known as the Lycus valley. He would soon become the shepherd of Lycus valley. So he went home, sharing the good news along the way. There were three cities in this valley area, there were two large ones and one small one. There was Laodicea, if you remember that from Revelation, there was Hierapolis, two big thriving cities, but then there was another little village that he was from called Colossae. Well the gospel caught hold in those towns. The good news was truly good news to them. People believed in the gospel and wanted to follow Jesus and wanted to implement everything about this new faith, but they didn't know too much and very soon all was not well because you see, they came from very diverse backgrounds.

There were different views about how to practice the faith. There were Jewish believers there and there were also what is known as Hellenistic believers, Greek philosopher believers, okay? The Jews came from Judaism, but the Hellenists came from the Greek religions, the Greek philosophies. They really didn't know how to practice this new faith of theirs and as is often the case, when there is doubt someone is going to step right in and tell you what to do and not all of that was good advice, not all of them were good teachers and so here was Epaphras, he was new to the faith as well, he didn't have what we have to know what to do. So he thought, "What do I need to do? How can I help my little struggling church? Well," he said, "I know who can help me, I know who the church will know and see as an authority. The Apostle Paul can help me." The problem was Paul was in jail in Rome 1,000 miles away. But that wasn't enough to deter Epaphras, for he went to see the Apostle Paul and told him about the problems. The letter to the church at Colossae from the apostle Paul is the letter that he wrote in light of what we've been talking about. It was delivered by Tychicus. Epaphras, when he came home, brought another little letter that we know as Philemon to a man in his church who had a slave who had run away and Paul wanted him to accept him back. So what we have, the book of Colossians, is Paul's letter back to Colossae about the problems that they were facing.

Well what were those problems? What was the controversy that they were facing? There were teachers teaching basically two different lines of thought. It seems that they were very, very convincing. There was the Jewish element and then the Greek philosophy element, the Hellenists. First, the Jewish element. Well the Jews thought if you're really going to be a good

Christian, you better be a Jew. You needed to go back to Judaism. Jesus was a Jew. He was the Jewish Messiah. So, if you really were going to spiritual you needed to go back to the Jewish Law. They were the Judaizers. They said, you need to combat your self-indulgent nature with rules! The emphasis is on discipline. The emphasis, as well, is on ceremonies. You need to have various ceremonies in your life. We find him addressing these Judaizers in the second half of chapter 2. The legalism, the ritualism, the observance of holy days, all point to the Jewish mindset. It's something that Paul fought long and hard all throughout his life and we see the results of that in all his epistles about men and women not having to be Jews to be Christians.

But then there was the philosophical Greek element. Paul called it hollow and deceptive philosophy in verse 8 of chapter 2. It was probably early Gnosticism. Have you heard that word? Gnosticism has its roots in early oriental myths and Greek philosophy. They considered themselves the spiritual elite, the philosophers, the ones full of knowledge, the know-ed ones. It seems that the primary concern of the Gnostics was the origin of the universe and the existence and origins of evil. How did these come to be? See, if the central truth of Gnostics is that matter, things that you can touch and feel, was evil and if matter was evil then there was some pretty large problems that you had to take care of and rationalize out in terms of Christianity. How did a good God create a world that has evil? How did that happen? So to reconcile the goodness of God and the existence of evil they formed a view of the creation of the universe. They reasoned that God created many, many, what they called emanations or little gods. As He continued to create these little gods, the further and further away they got from Him, over time, they got so far away from Him they became antithetical gods and it was these antithetical, evil in nature, little gods that created the universe. The Gnostics felt then that these little gods needed to be appeased and Paul seems to allude to these in both chapters 1 and 2: 1:16, 2:9 and 2:15.

Now, as Gnosticism spread and encountered various religions, they integrated their beliefs into these various religions and in Colossae they tried to integrate Gnosticism with Christianity. We find what happened there is that its influence caused an error in thinking concerning the deity and the humanity of Jesus. We know that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. We know that is true. But that presents problems for the Gnostics. The Gnostics, considering that all matter is evil, had a problem. So some Gnostics denied the humanity of Jesus. They said He wasn't human at all. They are called Docetic Gnostics. They said he only had a phantom body, his body wasn't real, because if it was real, it would be evil! They said it was like what we would think of as a hologram, right? It appeared like He was there, but He wasn't really there. 1 and 2 John if you want to read about it, those are the things that he was dealing with. It only seemed like Jesus had a body. So that's how they skirted the issue about matter being evil and Jesus.

Then there were other Gnostics that denied the deity of Christ. Some denied the humanity, others denied the deity. This branch was Cerinthianism, the guy that proposed it was Cerinthus. He saw Jesus and Christ as separate entities. They were two different beings. He said that Jesus was a human, just like the rest of us, and then when He was baptized this little god, this emanation came upon Him, the spirit as a dove, and then at that point he was Jesus the human and this emanation, this god. He was that way until the cross and then the emanation left Jesus when Jesus said, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" They said, "No, no, no, what he was really saying was 'my power, my power, why has thou forsaken me.'" This little

emanation, this god, had left him so that he died there on the cross. Those are the Cerinthian Gnostics. The Gnosticism in Colossae seems to take two forms as you read through the book. One form took Ascetic approach that said only truly spiritual life was harsh self-denial, it's denying yourself of all good things. The Libertines then would say that since matter is evil and the body is evil, the only really good thing is your soul so it really doesn't matter what your body does as long as your soul is Jesus's. So they lived however they wanted to live. So you had these two extremes existing in the same church.

So now, the counsel, what did Paul say? Well, in my words he would've said, "Wow you guys are messed up," right? Look at how many different things were coming at this little early church of Colossae. You've got the Judaizers, you've got the Gnostics, the Aesthetics and the Libertines, all going on trying to figure out how to follow Jesus. So, what would Paul say? How would Paul address these so polarized positions? As we sang a moment earlier, he said, "Look to Jesus." Just look to Jesus. The theme of the book of Colossians is the supremacy and the sufficiency of Jesus. There is no book in the New Testament that declares a more comprehensive picture of the beauty of Jesus than this one that we are about to study. Someone once said that Colossians is the full-length portrait of Jesus. Now Paul says, and these are Steve's words, right? Paul says, I don't care if you're a Jewish legalist or a Greek Hellenist, an intellectual or a religious person, the one thing that you need to know to grow to full maturity is the full centrality of Jesus, Himself. You must understand Him. He will spend this whole epistle expounding and explaining what it means to keep Christ central to the practice of your faith. It's not secret knowledge, it's not asceticism, it's not ceremony or experience that ultimately will cause you to bear the fruit of the spirit and to follow Him faithfully. It's understanding the truth about Jesus and looking to Him alone.

My friends, again, every true believer longs to grow in the faith, to bear the fruit of the spirit, to have a sweet relationship with Jesus, to abandon their sins that so closely cling to us, and the more we desire to grow, the more tempting are the ideas of those who would add to the gospel of Jesus. There's a lot of voices out there, guys, that would tell you how to do it, that have nothing to do with the gospel. Christianity is all about Jesus. The path to spiritual maturity is to keep him central, supreme and to acknowledge Him as sufficient. He is all we need. It's so easy to get wrapped up in the trappings of Christianity that we lose sight of what is central. The thing that is dominating and towering and primary, Jesus Christ our Savior.

I don't know, did y'all ever watch the old Peanut's cartoons? I love Charlie Brown, maybe I identify too much with Charlie Brown, I don't know. But in one of those clips it has a schoolroom and the teacher calls on him to come work a simple math problem at the chalkboard and he thought, 'Oh boy, this is it, this is my opportunity to impress that little red headed girl,' and so he goes up to the board to solve this little problem and he gets to working, and he's working and he's working, and he puts in different equations and formulas and before long the whole chalkboard is full of numbers and equations and signs. And the teacher lets him go for a little while, and then she says, "Charlie, what are you doing?" And he looks at her and he looks at the chalkboard and he says, "I have no idea."

See, he got lost in working the problem and he over complicated it all just so that he could impress that little red headed girl. But my friends, I think in much the same way we can

get caught up in the trappings of Christianity hoping to impress others or even to impress Jesus with our holiness. We are tempted to make so many other things the main thing. We are tempted to go down the path of rule keeping. You know, if I wear the right clothes, if I do the right things, if I keep all the right rules then I'm going to please God and I'll be a good Christian. Or we go down the path of more knowledge and theology. Well if I can just know more and if I can get all my theological ducks in a row, then I will please Him! Then I will know and be a good Christian! Some of us go down the path of ceremony. Boy, if I can just worship Him in just the right way, with just the right music. If I can say the right things and get it just right, get the liturgy just right, then, oh then I'll be pleasing to Jesus. For others, it's the path of a mystic experience. I need these spiritual experiences and if I have those experiences then I'll be a mature believer. But you see, the problem with all of those, I mean, they all have some truth to them, they're not all blatant error. All of those are important to us. But the problem with all of them is that the focus is on me, not on Jesus! If I do this, if I keep the rules, if I have this experience, if I do this, if I do that it's all about me. The answer is to look away from ourselves and look to our Savior. The key to growing in grace is just to keep your eye on the prize. That's all! The means by which we grow in grace is to see, to reflect and embrace the supremacy and the sufficiency of Jesus. This is the message of the book of Colossians. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, Lord we can get just like Charlie Brown. We can get things all messed up and overcomplicate and overthink and do so many things because we think it's going to please You. Would You forgive us and help us turn our eyes to Jesus and look to Him for our everything? We trust You to do that and I pray that You would keep turning our eyes to Jesus throughout our short study of the book of Colossians. We trust You to do that in the name and for the sake of our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.