

In his book “Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life”, Charles Swindoll tells a story about the 19th Century agnostic named Thomas Huxley – a man who promoted Darwinism and Humanism in his attacks against Christianity in Europe in the mid 1800’s. One day, Huxley was in Dublin, Ireland and was rushing to catch a train. He climbed aboard one of Dublin’s famous horse-drawn taxis and said to the driver, “Hurry, I’m almost late ... drive fast.”

Well, the driver did exactly what he was told. Off they went at a furious pace. Huxley sat back in his seat and closed his eyes assured that at this quick pace they would surely get to the train station on time.

But after a few minutes had passed, Huxley sensed something was very wrong. He opened his eyes, glanced out the window and realized that they were going in the opposite direction of the train station. Then he began to wonder, “Did I tell the driver where I wanted to go?” Thinking that perhaps he had not given the driver complete directions, Huxley called out to him, “Do you know where you are going?” To which the driver replied, “No, I do not, but I am going there fast!”

This story illustrates the condition of so many people. They’re “going fast” but they really don’t know where they’re going. This morning we are beginning our study through **Colossians** – a study about Jesus who knows the way because He is the way, and because He is the way, we need to follow closely behind Him.

Now, before we dive into this letter, I need to first set it up with some background. This letter was written by the Apostle Paul who was under house arrest in Rome from about 60 to 62 A.D. Paul was in limbo awaiting trial for about two years under the guard of a Roman soldier, and instead of complaining about his hardship and moping around in his confinement, Paul continued to carry out the ministry God had called him to. With the approval of the soldier, Paul was still able to have visitors, and when he had the opportunity, he devoted time to writing letters – to include this very letter to the church in Colossae.

So, what do we know about Colossae? It was located in Asia Minor – in what we now call *Turkey*. It was situated about 100 miles southeast from *Ephesus*, and near Colossae were two other cities named *Laodicea* and *Hierapolis*. At one time, Colossae was on a major trade road between the east and the west – it was a growing and prosperous city – a major center for the wool industry, but at the time of this letter, the main road had been rerouted and Colossae dwindled into a small town – in fact, we wouldn’t know anything about this town in the Bible if it wasn’t for this letter to the church that was there.

Now, how did the Colossian church start? Well, it was the result of Paul's prior ministry in *Ephesus*. For three years, Paul had ministered in *Ephesus*, and apparently a man from Colossae named **Epaphras** was visiting Ephesus where Paul shared the gospel with him. He believed it, he placed his faith in Jesus Christ, and when he returned home to Colossae, he shared what he heard with family and friends. The Gospel spread, the movement grew, and Epaphras started a church possibly in the home of **Philemon** – and if you remember that name, Paul would write him about a runaway slave named *Onesimus* who would help to deliver this very letter to the Colossians.

Anyway, that's what happened – a man, not the Apostle Paul, not a minister, not a Christian worker – a man heard the Gospel and he shared it with others, who in turn shared it with others – they organized, and a church was formed. That's how the Gospel spread throughout the world, someone shared with someone else, and someone else shared with another. That's how we became followers of Jesus Christ – someone actually took the time to share the Gospel with us.

So, why did Paul write a letter to this church – a church he did not start – a church he did not know – a church he hadn't even visited? Well, at the time of this letter, the church in Colossae was about five years old. They were a young and impressionable congregation, and to their credit, they were described as faithful. They seemed to be a healthy and thriving church, but there were false teachers who had made their way into the region, who were offering something for everybody, and they were seeking to wiggle their way into this church.

This young congregation, with people who were sponges for spiritual insight and knowledge about Jesus, who had no Bible because there was no such thing as a Bible yet, were being introduced to all kinds of worldly philosophies and pagan superstitions and man-made religions. This church hadn't fallen yet, but in this melting pot of false teaching, there was a real concern they could lose their bearings, which prompted **Epaphras** to travel some 1000 miles, one way, to visit Paul in Rome and explain his concerns, and what Paul learned from Epaphras inspired this letter to the **Colossians** about knowing and following the true Jesus. In their confusion – not knowing what to believe, Paul sought to center their attention on the truth about Jesus Christ.

That's the background of this letter, and I don't know about you, but just from the background alone, I know this letter is the right letter for us in our day. Like those in Colossae, we too live in a melting pot of all sorts of false teaching.

In our day, many suggest that one belief is just as good as another. They say, “*We’re all going in the same direction, so it really doesn’t matter how you get there as long as you get there.*” It’s frequently said these days, “*You got your truth and I have my truth*” – when the reality is – there’s only one way and one truth, and any other supposed “*way*” or “*truth*” or “*half-truth*” is still a whole lie.

In our day, many want to *cherry pick* from various schools of thought – in their minds taking the best of each, creating their own fusion of religion so ultimately, they can believe what they want to believe and do what they want to do.

And in our day, many claim we need something more than Jesus because apparently, He’s just not enough. We need exhilarating experiences, we need entertaining personalities, we need more diverse *watered-down* doctrines to promote harmony so we can unite with those in other religions, and we need the “*deeper stuff*” to get in touch with our inner selves and with the divine – that’s what we need, but the truth is – we already have exactly what we need – it’s Jesus Christ – and He’s more than enough.

Anyway, as you can see, like the Colossians, we too live in a melting pot of false teaching, and this letter written to that church is just as relevant to us in our day, so with that said, if you have your Bible turn to **Colossians 1**, and we will begin with **verse 1**,

**¹ Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
² To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.**

This is Paul’s customary greeting in his personal letters. In this greeting to the church at Colossae, Paul begins by identifying himself as an **apostle of Jesus Christ** – one chosen and sent out – not by man, not by his own desires, but by the **will of God**. Paul is an apostle – an ambassador of Jesus Christ, and as such, he is one who has God-given authority. His word is an authoritative word, and this was important to establish at the very onset with this congregation who is trying to figure out what to believe about Jesus. Yes, the false teachers are going to make their pitches, they are going to claim they know a better way, but when Paul has something to say, they need to listen and take it to heart.

Paul is an apostle with authority, and he’s not alone. In his greeting, Paul adds that he has some company and it’s **Timothy** – his loyal companion and son in the faith. Paul then describes the recipients of his letter as “**saints**” (and we will come back

to that in a moment), and lastly, he closes his greeting with the words **grace to you and peace** (in that order) **from God our Father**.

Grace, which is God's unmerited favor, comes first – it's foundational, and once you have received God's grace, then you can experience God's peace. You will never experience peace until you have received grace, and I might add that understanding God's grace is a key to following Jesus. God saved you because He loved you. You did not deserve it, and you cannot earn it. You are saved by grace and you are to live by grace, and its grace that gently teaches us and enables us to fall in love with the Master and to follow Him. Listen to what Paul says in **Titus 2** beginning with **verse 11**.

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, ¹⁴ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

Jesus gives us heaven when we deserve hell – that's grace. He grants us forgiveness when we deserve to be forgotten – that's grace. He offers us life when we deserve death – that's grace and in light of that grace, our only reasonable response is to follow Jesus.

Now, as I said earlier, I wanted to come back to that word “**saints**” because that is a word typically not used unless you are Catholic or you live in New Orleans during the football season. Paul called those who are **in Christ** “*saints*” – that's one of his favorite words, and it refers to those who know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. You are a saint, and let me explain that because some of you are thinking – “*I have been called many things, and ‘saint’ isn't one of them.*”

In the Greek, that word for **saints** is *hagios* which means *holy one* and it paints the picture of a person who was once dirty and filthy, who has been washed like brand new, and is now set apart by God as His very own possession. That's a picture of salvation, where by grace, we have been cleansed and made righteous, and we are set apart by God. Christians are *saints* – not because we're good, but because by God's grace we are placed **in Christ**. It's not a performance thing, it's a positional thing – we are saints *in Christ*, and because that's who we are *in Christ*, then simply put – we are to act like who we are.

Okay, let's get to the body of this letter beginning with **verse 3**, where Paul opens with a prayer of thanksgiving which is one long sentence.

³We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

Paul was a great encourager and here he begins his encouragement with affirmation in the form of a prayer of thanksgiving. He gives thanks to God for this church in Colossae, and in his thanksgiving, he mentions he's heard of their **faith in Jesus Christ** – and I want to stop there for a moment.

As we will discover, this letter from Paul focuses on the supremacy of Jesus Christ for the entire Gospel message centers around Him – it has to because He is the Son of God who died for us and rose again. Jesus is the center of the Gospel, and therefore, to attack the Gospel, false teachers must undermine the truth about Jesus who is at the center of it all. But here Paul says to this church – your faith is in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the object of their faith.

There is a story about the famous evangelist George Whitefield, who was witnessing to a man. "What do you believe?" Whitefield asked.

The man replied, "I believe what my church believes."

"And what does your church believe?" asked the evangelist.

"What I believe," replied the man.

Undaunted, Whitefield tried again and asked, "And what do you both believe?"

"Why, we both believe the same thing!" was the man's reply.

You see, it's meaningless to say, "Just believe" because the follow-up question that must then be answered is – "Believe what?" The message of the Gospel is not to *just believe* – it's to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He has to be the object of our faith, and fortunately for those in the church in Colossae, it was obvious their faith was in Jesus Christ, and that begs a question for you and me. "Is our faith in Jesus that obvious to others?"

Now if you noticed, Paul also said he had heard of their **love** for the saints, or we might say, the Colossians demonstrated their faith in Jesus by pouring out their love into others – and let’s not overlook that little word “**all**” which says quite a lot. Their love was poured into all the saints – not just some of the saints, not just the ones they liked, not just the one who were loveable, not just the ones who deserved it, not just the ones who agreed with them – but all the saints.

We know we are following Jesus when we love others the same way God has loved us, and you’re not going to like this, but we don’t get to pick and choose whom we will love as followers of Jesus Christ.

Well next, Paul ties it all together and says they have *faith* and *love* **because of the hope** which is laid up in heaven. Here’s the reason for their faith and their love – it springs forth from their certainty in the promises of God which are safe and secure in heaven – the place where Jesus is. That’s what heaven is all about. It’s not so much about a place as it is about the Person who’s there – it’s where Jesus is who is the center of it all. I like how Charles Swindoll describes this relationship between these three virtues of faith, love, and hope. He says,

“Faith looks back to the anchor of our salvation—Jesus Christ’s person and work. Love looks around, building up the body of Christ through selfless service toward one another by the power of the Spirit. Hope looks ahead to the unalterable promise of God the Father, that He will one day usher us into His presence.”

Their hope was not in this world, and that truth would become painfully evident to the Colossians, for shortly after receiving this letter, the town of Colossae would be completely leveled by an earthquake. Everything would be gone. Some people would stay and rebuild while others would move on – carrying their hope with them. Their hope – our hope is not in this world – it’s in another world which cannot be shaken or taken away.

So, they have faith, and love, and hope – all which we are told originate from the **word of truth** – **the Gospel** which clearly explains that Jesus Christ is God Himself who came to earth in the flesh to dwell among us. He performed miracles and signs and wonders. He spoke words of truth. He identified with us, and yet He did not sin like us. Then according to God’s predetermined plan, Jesus suffered and died on a cross for our sins. He shed His blood for our guilt. He rose from the dead to make us right with God, and as a result, we have new life *in Christ* by trusting in His finished work on our behalf.

When the Colossians heard the Gospel – by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, they were saved, and not only that, they came to realize that the Gospel is life giving and life changing. It bears **fruit**, and it has the power to transform lives.

At an open-air Gospel meeting the preacher asked for testimonies. While this was going on a skeptic was passing by just when the testimony of a saved drunkard was being given. He stopped and listened. The former drunkard was telling how Jesus had wrought a miracle and saved his poor soul. The skeptic scoffingly made a few remarks to those standing near him. He said, “It was nothing more than a dream – religion saving a man in this manner.” No one answered him; but God had His way of dealing with him. Among the listeners was a little girl about ten years old. She had known the misery of a drunkard’s home. She heard the remark of the skeptic and, going up to him, she said: “Please, sir, if it is only a dream, please don’t wake him—that is my daddy!”

That’s what the Gospel does – with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel transforms the lives of people, and as for you and me – our job is to simply share it – to share what we know and then let the Spirit use what we have shared do its work. And if the church in Colossae had any doubts about the power of that process, all they had to do was look at their own beginning.

Paul said, you **learned** the Gospel from one man – from **Epaphras** – just one man who shared what he had heard, and now Paul is writing to an entire congregation – a congregation who would plant other churches in the nearby cities. Go figure, but God in His infinite wisdom, in the power of the Holy Spirit, has chosen to use people through which the Gospel is to be shared and spread **all over the world**.

When Oliver Cromwell ruled England, the nation experienced a crisis when they ran out of silver and could not mint any coins. Cromwell sent his soldiers to the Cathedral to see if any silver was available. They reported back that the only silver was in the statues of the saints, to which Cromwell replied, “Melt down the saints and get them back into circulation.”

Like Epaphras, we need to be in circulation, sharing what we know about Jesus Christ. Share what you know and then leave the results to God.

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