

Today we begin a new effort, a new teaching, a new adventure together. After completing the long, deep, educational hike through Hebrews and then taking on some topical issues over the Summer, today we are beginning a new long-term study through the New Testament book of [slide] Colossians.

Colossians is maybe a less familiar NT read than say, Romans or 1st Corinthians or Galatians. But it contains some bits that are likely very familiar: [slide] Christ in you, the Hope of glory [1:27], [slide] See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception [2:8], [slide] Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, [3:17], [slide] Let your speech always be with grace, *as though* seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person. [4:5-6], [slide] Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. [3:16]

And, of course the glorious Hymn to Jesus in verses 15-20 of [slide] ch1: He is the image of the invisible God, by Him all things were created...he is before all things and in him all things hold together, head of the body, firstborn from the dead For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross;

We've got big ideas in this dense, short, personal letter. And it is a letter. I wrote a couple of letters this week- emails actually- one to daughter Rachel and one to son Logan. Rachel is in doing a quarter abroad on the Brazilian Island of Florinopolis. She scheduled a 1-credit surfing class and on the first day she hurt her ankle and significantly tore some ligaments. Logan has a new living situation and is having some frustrating challenges at work.

In both cases **there was an occasion for writing he letter.** There was a problem or issue I wanted to check on, address and offer help if necessary. [slide]

Letters are, by nature, occasional and that is the case for every letter in the NT. When Paul or Peter or John is writing to someone it's about a real situation, happening in the present, that is important and needs addressing by someone who cares about the other and has some wisdom to offer about the concern at hand.

Every letter Paul sent to a congregation was sent with concern, thankfulness, passion, Joy, sometimes frustration, and always with love **as a pastor.** *He was not writing as a theologian or a biblical scholar.* He DID think his written teachings were worth being shared between congregations [4:16].

But he did not think: "**Hey lookit me I'm writing the Bible!**" His concerns were practical and in the moment and Paul was doing his best [empowered by the Holy Spirit and various associates] to apply the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the new situations that were cropping up in his world- whether it was Corinthian factions, Galatian Judaizing, or a crisis of philosophy in Colossae.

It's only later that the usefulness of these writings, their insight and power to change lives lead followers of Jesus to mark them as more than great works of teaching but also works inspired by God's Holy Spirit working through the heart and mind of ordinary humans like **Paul or John or James**.

So before we actually dip our toes into the text we'll take today to set the scene.

First: let's talk about **Colossae**: In the 5th century BC **Xenophon of Athens** described Colossae as "a populous city, wealthy and of considerable magnitude." [slide] Greek geographer and historian, **Strabo**, writes that the city drew great revenue from its flocks and the wool that came from them. [slide]

From the 6th through the 4th centuries BC Colossae was the center of a very prosperous wool and textile industry in the area. This was enhanced by its position on a major trade route. It was located in the fertile valley of the Lycus River in the Asian province called Phrygia [currently modern Turkey].

But by the time of our this letter, Laodicea –10 miles away- had taken the title of thriving metropolis. Hieraopolis -15 miles away- became popular with its hot spring mineral baths and catering to spiritual tourists [Phryian Mystery cult]. Over time Colossians moved to these other cities leaving Colossae an unimpressive little town in Paul's day.

An Earthquake- @60-62AD- buried most of the city. When we get to the 8th century Colossae was completely abandoned. [slide] Currently it's just a big mound of earth that's treated like a quarry. [travel diaries since the 18th century mention pillars and inscriptions, part of a theater and a necropolis but all of it has been carried off or buried and forgotten.] And sadly there have been no excavations of Colossae so no we have no specific archaeological evidence to instruct us on it's nature or existence. [A team from Flinders University of S. Australia has been pursuing the dig site since 2001].

Because of the lack of archaeological evidence, the specific **religious activity** of Colossae is uncertain, we have to assume its religious practices were similar to the rest of the area [slide]: worshipping the **classical Greek Gods** [Hades, Zeus] and joining **mystery religions** with their secret wisdom and initiations, and, of course the ever-present **cult of Caesar worship** with statues and images of Caesar virtually everywhere you look and a never-ending set of annual feasts and festivals all in honor of Caesar, the son of god, and savior of the world and the worlds great Lord. And, of course, there was a **significant Jewish community** in the area- some forcefully transplanted by pagan rulers and others escaping persecution in Rome by moving to the Lycus valley.

Paul himself never visited the tiny burg of Colossae. Epaphrus- who was apparently a Gentile and for whom Colossae was evidently home- was the evangelist and church planter not only in Colossae but also in Laodicea and Hieraopolis. [slide] Paul describes him as: , 7...our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf... **And in 4:12**

Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, ... always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. **13** ...he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Paul couldn't visit at the time because he was in prison. The letter to **Philemon** makes it sound as if Epaphrus was in prison with Paul- at some point. But honestly it's uncertain as to whether Paul is being literal or figurative in calling Epaphrus a "fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus." Just don't know. **[slide]**

In any case Colossians is a letter Paul wrote from prison after hearing about the Colossian church from Epaphrus. The other "Prison Epistles" are **Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians**. All four of these may have been written from the same prison around the same time. When we studied Philippians I chose to assume Rome because of certain references about "Caesar's household" and the "palace guard."

But the truth is we can't be sure.

Paul was in prison in other places too, one of which may have been **Ephesus**. And these letters may have been written from there. This is appealing because the assumed traveling back and forth from Colossae to Ephesus for Epaphrus and Onesimus is A LOT shorter and easier than traveling **to Rome**. Still we can only guess at which prison. This, of course affects the date of the letter's writing: **[slide]** If from Ephesus then likely between 52 & 55 but if from Rome then possibly 60-62. [earthquake?]

While the ancient church accepted **Paul's authorship**, **[slide]** it's important for you to know that **modern scholarly opinion** is not agreed on whether Colossians was written by Paul or by a devoted associate of his- a pseudigrapher. Those who argue against Paul offer a number of observations.

First: the language of the letter is very different from other unquestioned letters of Paul [1Cor or Galatians]. There are @34 words used in Colossians that are used nowhere else in the NT, and there are some significant differences in the **writing style**.

Wall and Wright both agree that **Timothy's acting as scribe** likely accounts for some of that. **Wall firmly suggests** that all of us adapt the tone and style of our writing to various occasions- *why can't Paul do the same?*

And he also points to the work of another scholar [Canon] who's noted that the sections that "sound least like Paul," are sections where he is understood to be **quoting liturgy or moral code composed by and for the Colossian church** [1:15-20 or 3:18-4:1]. Remember Paul has never met these folks and quoting their own liturgy back to them is an excellent way [and a typical method of his] for Paul to tell them what he thinks they need to know in language they will fully understand.

Finally some scholars think the **theological themes** of Colossians don't match up with other "authentically Paul" letters. Wall's comment on this is "...the attempt to determine the boundaries of Paul's theological formation is a highly dubious enterprise." It is dubious because it assumes that one's theological understanding will be static. But that's not so, our understanding of God grows and expands with new learning and experiences of God and on the mission field and along the way we find new language to talk about it all. Paul didn't write in a vacuum. And as the church was developing so was Paul- so do we all. Wright- though he says it differently- is in agreement with this.

Thus Wright sums up: "There is therefore no need to reject the Pauline authorship of Colossians,..."

And so maybe in the early 50s of the first century **[slide]** Paul is in prison in the Roman Garrison at Ephesus. Still the gospel is going forward into Asia Minor as Epaphrus begins to evangelize the Lycus River valley in particular his hometown of Colossae. And the people respond. A gathering that will become a church begins to grow. But after a while there's a problem that appears too big for Epaphrus- a crisis in Colossae- so he goes to find Paul for some help with the issue and Paul responds with a letter- which also, conveniently, provides him a chance to deal with the "Onesimus issue as well.

So what is "at issue?" **What's the crisis?** **[slide]** The big issue is teachings coming from somewhere that do not fit with the Gospel. Some of the clues suggest Jews wanting the Christians to follow all the law. **Col. 2:16** Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — Other clues sound more like Pagan influences: visions, the worship of angels, asceticism: **2:20** ...why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, **21** "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" **And Col. 2:8** See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men,

Interestingly enough both Wall and Wright conclude that the problem is best explained as a purely Jewish issue. Perhaps new Gentile believers understood that to be Christian meant, in some way to be Jewish- so they go seeking instruction from local Rabbi's or Jewish Christians in the area. The instruction they get is about the Law and following it which is why so much of Colossians is about the sufficiency of Jesus Christ with Paul saying "Walk in Christ" "...keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated..." and don't let yourself be judged about festivals or Sabbath days and don't let yourself be taken captive by empty philosophy.

It's interesting to note both **Philo and Josephus** —both Jews writing history for Rome- refer to Judaism as a "philosophy" to their pagan readers. [Even the reference to angel worship could fit here: Remember Hebrews 1 & 2?]

So one big message of Colossians you should be listening for is **[slide]** **Jesus is sufficient.** His death, resurrection, ascension and the sending of the Spirit inaugurated the new covenant and the coming Kingdom- starting a process that cannot be stopped. You don't need any spiritual add-ons: law or visions or deprivations. The Good News- the gospel- of Jesus Christ is fully sufficient.

Ch 1 mentions **the gospel [slide]** and continues: **6** which 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;

What an incredible picture of the Gospel!! *As if the Good News of Jesus Christ is some sort of delightfully invasive and truly unstoppable plant that has been introduced- or better yet unleashed on the Garden rows of the world.* **[slide]** [Picture it as lupines or avalanche lilies, or strawberries]

This Gospel plant is “constantly bearing fruit.” It's taken God's command to **be fruitful and multiply** to heart and as it bears fruit *it increases and increases all over the world and the world is being changed.* Though we can't always see it.

Remember the parable from Mark's Gospel. **Mark 4:26** And He was saying, “The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; **27** and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows — how, he himself does not know. **28** “The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head.

We don't know how this kingdom plant grows and increases, but we know it does!

And according to the scripture, it not only increases in the world but it increases in you. **[slide]** **6b** ...even as *it has been doing* in you also since the day you heard *of it* and understood the grace of God in truth; According to this scripture the moment you heard the good news about Jesus and you grasped it- you had your **holy Ah-HA! Experience-** from that moment on it was **[slide]** constantly bearing fruit and increasing in you

And God chooses to invite you to participate in both parts of this growth. The ever-increasing growth of the Gospel in the world is assisted whenever **[slide]** you talk about the Good news of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. When you express it, the gospel goes out with the power of the Spirit- regardless of your communication ability or knowledge. [The power of the gospel is not dependent on you.]

And you are responsible to tend to the growth of the Gospel within yourself; tending it with prayer and scripture reading and fellowship and service in Jesus' name. But God is right there with you. Remember in Phil 1 Paul is confident of this: ... he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

And what's the proof that the gospel plant is growing and increasing among us and within us? Well it's the fruit that it bears. And that fruit **[slide]** is Agape-Love. We

see it twice in Paul's opening thanksgiving: "the love which you have for all the saints," and Epaphrus testimony about their "love in the Spirit."

This agape-love doesn't mean they all walk around with warm feelings for one another 24/7. They may feel so sometimes and not at others.

BUT their behaviors are changing from lust, anger, lies- all the things that destroy people and communities and they are being replaced with kindness, gentleness, forgiveness and all this **within a group with major differences in race background and culture.** This fruit, this no-matter-what sort of Love is the true sign of God at work.

And Paul is glad to see it.

The Colossians were a little church in a little town struggling through some important issues. Paul, who has never met them- except through Epaphrus- is writing to help them understand the importance of Jesus Christ. **[slide]** And to teach them how they can be **"in Christ" and "in Colossae."**

Perhaps as we study the same we can learn how to better be in Christ in Port Townsend. Let it be so Lord Jesus.