

Women's Bible Study – Fall/Winter 2018
Colossians & Philemon: Because of Christ
9/12/18 – Svea Merry



The message of these books is so powerful that I cannot wait to spend the next weeks studying this with you. I'll tell you what this message is in a moment, but first I just have to say that it is something simple and yet so powerful and encouraging. It's both something my head has known and my heart has felt for years, and yet, there has been great joy in rediscovering it again in these past months, and I know that it will continue to impact me as we explore it together over the next several weeks.

The message of Colossians, is this: Everything is because of Christ. That's it. When you go home later, and someone asks what you heard at Bible study, tell them that Colossians is the book that teaches us that everything is because of Christ. And not coincidentally, that is why the title of our study this fall is Because of Christ!

Now what does that mean practically speaking? We'll spend the next several weeks exploring that. And we're going to have the luxury this semester of going deep into what this means. If you looked at Colossians already, you likely noticed there are only 4 chapters. So unlike other studies when we've had to fly through several chapters at a time to get through a whole book, this fall we'll have time to focus just on a section of a chapter each week and really pull out the meat of all that's in these Scriptures.

My hope is that by the time we finish this study, particularly if you're faithful with the new study workbook, you will know this book incredibly well and will have had every opportunity to let the truths inside take root in your heart and not only help you to know Christ better, but to become more like him. After all, that's what this is all about right? Bible studies aren't supposed to be a book club. The point isn't just to read to the assigned pages and then get together with other people to discuss it. Bible study is meant to change us. Through God's Word, we come to know Him more completely and apply what we learn to our lives.

Recently I was reading online about the aftermath of hurricane Lane, the one that hit Hawaii last month. Look at this. I was curious why these trees survive while signs and other strong-looking structures were blown over, and as you already know or would expect, it's because of their roots. I learned that palm trees send out a vast number of roots that work to secure a large amount of soil around the root ball. This creates a super large, heavy anchor giving the tree a bottom-heavy base that keeps it grounded in the face of extreme storms. This should be encouraging to all of us who feel a bit bottom-heavy at times right?! But from what I read, it's not that palm trees have the right kind of roots to survive a storm. The key is that they have to be rooted in the right kind of ground. If they are planted in the wrong kind of soil, it doesn't work. Here's a picture from last year's Florida hurricane. This palm was rooted in the wrong soil and was blown over by the storm.

Ladies, let me ask you, what are you rooted in? Are you rooted in soil that will hold you like an anchor? If your roots are in your marriage or children, what could happen if your husband or kids were taken from you in a car accident? If your roots are wrapped up in your work or hobbies, what if you lose your job or simply no longer find them fulfilling? And how about those things we turn to at the end of a bad day like a carton of Ben & Jerry's while watching Fixer Upper on Netflix. How long does that satisfy and does it ever fix anything for us?

What we're going to see this fall is that everything falls into place when we are rooted in Christ. Our faith, our work, our relationships. They work because of Christ. We will grow strong, healthy roots in Christ when we come to see ourselves as He sees us, when we see Him for who He truly is, and when He is our motivation for doing what we do. This is what Colossians is all about, about living because of Christ.

Colossians 2:6-7, which many consider to be the theme verses of this whole book say, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." This is what we're driving towards this fall. We want to be women who have received Christ as our Lord and Savior, and then because of that, live lives rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith we've been taught and overflowing with thankfulness.

Sound good? Ok, so let's explore this great book a bit. The first thing you need to know about Colossians is that it's a letter. Now, if you were out going for a walk and noticed, lying on your driveway, an envelope with a letter inside, you'd pick it up, right? But before you read that letter, what's the first thing you'd do? You'd look to see who it's addressed to and who it's from. These things tell us if it's for us to read and gives us an idea of what to expect to inside. Same thing with the letters in the Bible.

So, we find out from the very first verse that this particular letter was written by Paul along with his young partner in the faith, Timothy. Now, Paul, as you may remember, was not one of the original apostles or disciples of Jesus. In fact, immediately after Jesus's life on earth, Paul, whose Jewish name was Saul, was a prominent Pharisee who wanted to stamp out the early Christian church. He was responsible for the deaths of several Christians and a driving force behind the persecution of others until God stopped him in his tracks one day and changed his life radically. Christ Himself appeared to Saul and assigned him to share the gospel, particularly with the Gentiles. (And in case it's never been explained to you, a Gentile is simply anyone who isn't Jewish.)

From that time on, after meeting Christ, Paul faithfully spent the rest of his days spreading the gospel. He made three great journeys over the course of his life, traveling to many cities far across the Roman Empire. Interestingly, though, he never actually went to Colossae, the town where the Colossians were from. So that's an interesting fact for us to keep in mind while we're reading this letter, because Paul is writing to people he'd never met before.

So how did Paul know about this group of Christians in Colossae, and why is he writing to them? Well, on Paul's third missionary journey, he spent three years evangelizing in

Ephesus, and while he was there, he brought a man named Epaphras to faith in Christ, and it was Epaphras who took the gospel to Colossae. Several years later, though, after the church had become established, they were struggling to keep their faith in Christ pure and were beginning to let other spiritual and religious influences seep in, and Epaphras wanted Paul's help in dealing with this. Epaphras went to see Paul and told him all about the Colossians and Paul did what we know him for. He wrote a letter, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Now, another interesting thing to note about this is that Paul wrote this letter while he was chained up in Rome, in prison for spreading the gospel. Many of Paul's letters were written while he was in prison, maybe for this highly driven man, that was how God got him to sit still so he could write these letters which continue to bless us even today.

Verse one also credits Timothy for this letter. It is likely that Paul, in his chains, dictated what he wanted to say, and Timothy was the one who physically wrote it down. Paul's situation in prison made him dependent on other people to care for him. Roman prisons didn't function like ours where prisoners' basic necessities are met. Instead, prisoners depended on family and friends to bring them food and provide for their daily needs. Paul's young partner Timothy served in this role for him, as did others we'll see mentioned at the end of this book, including Mark and Luke, the authors of the gospels bearing their names.

BOOK OVERVIEW

Well, let's look now at the structure of this book. Since we're taking such small slices each week, we'll have plenty of time to get into the details, but today I want to give you with the big picture, the overall structure of how this letter flows so that you'll have a framework for each week's study.

Colossians divides very cleanly into 4 parts, and you'll see these four parts on your outline. First Paul will lay a foundation, then he will address their problem, then he gives the solution, and finally, he ends with some practical applications. If you're someone who likes to write in your Bible, later on, you may like to pencil in this framework somewhere so you always know where Paul is in the flow of his letter.

So as we get ready to explore the four parts of this book, I want you to consider something: If you were writing a letter to a group of people you've never met before, intending to redirect them back to a solid faith based on Christ, how would you start? If I told you all to grab a piece of paper right now and asked you to write a letter to the young-in-the-faith Christians in Guinea, West Africa where our church ministers through the Compassion Evangelical Hospital and I wanted you to instruct them on holding fast to the truths of the gospel, how would you start that letter and what kind of tone would you take with them?

THE FOUNDATION (1:1–2:5)

Well let's see what Paul does. After the typical greetings, complete with Paul's customary "grace and peace to you," he begins by telling how he and Timothy thank God for them when they pray for them because of their beautiful faith, hope, and love. He expresses joy in how they know the truth of the gospel and in verse 9 begins praying this beautiful

prayer for them. It's a prayer that seeks to fill them with even greater knowledge of God so that through that, they will be compelled to live fruitful lives pleasing to God, pleasing not because they've achieved some kind of personal standard but because of who they are because of Christ. I summarize this section as Paul reinforcing who we are in Christ. It's like before Paul wants to address any change in how they're living out their faith, he's bringing them back to the very core of their own identity as people of God. He reminds them of who we are in Christ. Isn't that a beautiful way to start, especially in connecting with unfamiliar people.

Then, next in this foundational section, having addressed who these believers are, Paul shines a big, bright spotlight on Christ Himself, describing who Christ is. Remember, this whole letter focuses on everything being because of Christ, so it makes sense that right away we're going to get a great picture of what he means by this. Now, unlike the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which focus on the biographical events of the life of Jesus Christ, here what we see is more the significance of what his life meant.

This section of Colossians is often pointed to as some of the best Christology in the whole Bible; Christology is just a fancy word for describing what we know about Christ. This section is believed to have been a poem or possibly a hymn used in the early church to teach people about the greatness of Christ, and has some of the most powerful verses about him in all of Scripture such as "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (1:15), and "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (1:19-20) I'm really looking forward to this section.

And I really admire Paul's skill in crafting these two sections together in this foundation. After all, it isn't really just enough for us to be secure in who we are, we have to know what we're secure in, right? What our roots are growing in?

A couple of weeks ago when school started and we had that first cool, fall-like day, I went to get my sweaters down from the top shelf of my closet. And unbeknownst to me, one of the sweaters had gotten snagged on the metal shelf divider I have up there, and as I pulled the sweater down, it ripped about a 2-inch hole in it. For a second I wondered if I could take the ends of the yarn and somehow tie them back together, but when I tugged at the broken yarn, it began to unravel. And the more I tried to work with it, the more it unraveled.

And that's why it's important that we know who Christ is, not so that our sweaters don't unravel, but that so we don't. Look at my favorite verse from all of chapter 1: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (1:17)

Friends, Christ is what makes us who we are and He is what holds us together. Without him, we will eventually unravel like an old, ripped sweater. I can testify to this in my life. Not his magical sweater protection plan, but that when our roots are deep into him, we are safe from unraveling because of Christ.

15 years ago when my first husband was dying of cancer, everything in life threatened to unravel me, it was Christ who held me together. Not because I was a perfect Christian or that I had a perfect faith, I really didn't. But I felt Christ with me. He took care of me through the strength and peace I felt from the Holy Spirit, and also through the love and generosity of His people. And what I experienced of this Christ who held me together made me want to know Him even more. That's what compelled me to go to seminary, and to want to share Him with others. It is why I am standing up here teaching Women's Bible Study right now. You see, knowing Christ for who He truly is and finding security in what He has done for us changes how we live and makes us want to share what we've experienced with others.

That's why it makes perfect sense that the third part of Paul's foundational section is exactly that. He will tell us why Christ is compelling. Paul speaks of how he rejoices in his sufferings for their sake, because the mission that he and Timothy and the other evangelists focused on proclaiming this most excellent Christ, warning and teaching them wisdom, so that they may present everyone mature in Christ.

And again with this lovely tone that he has taken with these people, he tells them again what a burden he feels for them and for their neighbors in the nearby city of Laodicea, and for all the other Christians he hasn't gotten to meet face-to-face, wanting to encourage them, and unlike my unraveled sweater, wants to see them knitted together in love to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding the knowledge of God in Christ. Rather than telling you about them, I'm practically just reading the verses from this section, which is all I really want to do, because the Scriptures convey all of this so much more perfectly than I ever could.

In fact, while I'm caught up in the beauty of the Bible, let me encourage you to read through Colossians all in one sitting several times throughout the fall. Maybe once every week even. It's only 4 chapters long, and will probably only take you 10-15 minutes. By doing so, you'll see the flow of Paul's thinking so much better than when you only read it in small chunks.

THE PROBLEM (2:6–2:17)

Ok, with that beautiful foundation laid, let's turn to the next section, the problem that Paul addresses. Now here's the interesting thing. Though we know that the main thrust of the problem was that the Colossians were integrating spiritual practices from other cultural and religious influences into their Christianity, Paul doesn't really come out and describe their problem in clear terms.

The great thing about that is it makes this letter so much more applicable to the rest of us! If Paul had spoken really specifically to a group of 50 Early Church Christians who lived in Asia Minor in 62AD, this letter might not be as helpful to women living in Rochester, MN in 2018.

But in order to understand this book, we still need to have an understanding of what kind of a problem Paul is trying to correct. So I'll summarize it as this: the problem is in pursuing any kind of spiritual or religious practice which doesn't celebrate Christ as our Lord and Savior.

The Colossian Christians lived in a culture influenced by a lot of different spiritual practices. Some scholars believe that the Colossians' problem was that those who came from a Jewish background wanted to incorporate former Jewish practices into their Christianity, missing the point that many of those practices pointed to our need for Christ, but now that Christ had come, they were obsolete. Other scholars suggest that they were more wrapped up in the cultural philosophies of their day, such as Gnosticism, which suggested that certain practices revealed to you a secret knowledge about salvation giving you a superior spirituality.

Paul doesn't define the problem concisely, but he warns certain things such as becoming dogmatic about eating or abstaining from certain foods with religious connotations, or about participating in religious festivals or celebrations (2:16). He also warns about asceticism and worshipping angels (2:18). These are all practices prevalent in the religious culture of their day. But again, the specific details are less important than Paul's point that what's of value is Christ. Nothing more, nothing less. Pursuing anything other than Christ is a big problem.

Paul will point out that Christ already forgave all our debts, every one of our sins nailed to the cross when he died. So, we have no reason to feel like we have to continue to do penance or earn his favor. It's a settled matter. We have no reason to either live in a legalistic way, or to feel scrutinized by others. Trying to build ourselves into a spiritual superstar does nothing of value for us. It simply cheapens what Christ already did for us, and when we really understand all that Christ has done, cheapening that should be the last thing we want to do.

I am looking forward to the discussions we'll have when we get to this section, because this is not a problem isolated to the Colossians. This is still very relevant for us today. Maybe some of you came from a background that said in order to be a good Christian, you have to do certain things, or maybe you were raised to believe that real Christians do not smoke, or dance, or watch movies. Do you know someone who prays to their guardian angel, or have you ever feared that you haven't done enough good in this world to warrant God's favor? Paul is going to help us sort through these issues. He's going to help us see that all of these issues fall into perspective when we understand that what Christ did was sufficient for all we need, and then how we live flows from that.

This is not to say that God doesn't value our efforts to please Him spiritually or to be good stewards of our lives or that He doesn't delight in our good works. Perhaps this picture will help to illustrate. This is my first husband, Jon, and our then 2-year old son, Jonathan, back in 2003. As you can probably tell from Jon's hairstyle, he was in the midst of chemo treatments at the time, but that doesn't really have anything to do with this story. We had just moved into a new house and still didn't have things like towel bars or toilet paper holders. So, in this picture, Jon and little Jonathan were pounding in some dry wall anchors to put up these needed accessories. Little Jonathan loved this! He thought it was amazing to get to use his little plastic toy hammer and for the first time ever, actually be allowed to hit the wall. He was so proud of that toilet paper holder when it was mounted, and would point to it and say, "I built that!" In fact, his ideas of what he did swelled over time and he occasionally told people that he helped to build our house. Now, in a literal

way, he contributed to finishing our house, but it wouldn't be accurate to say that our house was built by 2-year old Jonathan.

And we're going to see in Colossians that Christ's work and our work is much like that. Christ is the one who saved us. He's the one who built the house. Whatever we do with our little toy hammers will never be enough to do the work of saving ourselves and restoring us to how God created us to be. But I delighted in little Jonathan's efforts to use what he had to make our home beautiful, and God too delights in the good works we do. But we didn't build the house, Christ already did that. We live in a way that pleases God with the tools He's given us to use in the way He wants us to use them, because of what He already done for us.

THE SOLUTION (3:1–3:17)

So what is the solution to the problem? Well, that's the point of Paul's third section of Colossians. His solution is this: focus on Christ and live accordingly. If we focus on Christ, everything else falls into place. Rather than becoming fixated with trying to sort through every little detail of the things around us to try to evaluate them all, he says simply, "Set your minds on things that are above, where Christ is." If your life is about pursuing God and His will, you won't get tangled up in the cultural or spiritual ways of the world, you'll be set on what's true.

In explaining how to do this, he tells us to clothe ourselves in some things. And I actually love that Paul uses this analogy of telling us what to wear. I love it because I often feel unsure of how to dress for different occasions. I never feel confident if a certain party should be a jeans type of thing, a blouse and slacks, or a dress kind of event. Several of you know this about me. You've gotten texts from me over the years asking what you're going to wear so I can copy you. But we don't have to stress about how to clothe ourselves as Christians. Paul tells us to put on the qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, and above all, love. And as we put on these beautiful things, we are also to shed, put to death even, sinful behaviors that are incompatible with God such as sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which he says is idolatry, as well as anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language.

Paul will also give us more ideas of what it means to keep our minds set on things above. He tells us to let God's peace rule in our hearts and to be thankful. We are to let the word of Christ live in our hearts, teaching each other his word and admonishing each other in wisdom, worshipping God together with thankful hearts.

I haven't specifically brought this out yet, but have you noticed that several verses that I've mentioned encourage us to be thankful to God? I'm not going to develop that idea for you today. Rather, I encourage you to watch for it yourself as you study this book. He brings it up 7 times in these 4 chapters. See if you can find them as you go and think about why thankfulness keeps coming up because of Christ.

But back to Paul's solution. He summarizes this whole idea with another one of the great verses in this book, chapter 3 verse 17: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

So you say, "ok Paul, that all sounds great. I do want to be a woman known for being compassionate and patient and full of forgiveness, but how does that actually play out in my everyday life?" And Paul would say, "I'm so glad you asked." Because that's what the rest of this book is about.

THE APPLICATION (3:18–4:18)

Paul gets as practical as he can, driving to how relationships flow when you're living in light of the truths of Christ. We'll get into the specifics of these applications later in the fall, but for now, look forward to this. Paul gives specific instructions for relationships within our household, and how we should relate to Christians and non-Christians in our community.

Brief instructions are given to wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. I know our breath can catch a bit when we across the word slave. Some of your translations say household servant instead and that's a legitimate translation. Jann will address this when we get to this passage, but slavery in this context was not the same as either modern day human trafficking or the injustice of African slavery in Colonial America. It had more in common with being an indentured servant. People could choose to sell themselves into slavery if hard economic conditions warranted, and freedom was possible to be earned or given. It was still not an ideal situation, still a system which forced one person to work at the pleasure of another, but their obligation to serve their master was more due to their lack of other options than wrongful imprisonment.

But what is really beautiful about all of Paul's instructions for these relationships with the people in your family and home is this one overarching principle, one so key that he mentioned it before and now he's going to say it again, and that is that everything we do is for Christ, not for other people, because it is ultimately him that we serve and it is ultimately through him that we are rewarded. This is radical and amazing. It's a game changer for how you live your life. If you correctly view all that you do as an act of service to the sweet and loving and mighty God who saved you, it is a joy to serve others. The indignation that is so easy to feel when it seems like others don't deserve what we're doing for them fades away because Christ deserves everything and more than we have to give.

After encouraging us with a right frame of mind for how we interact with the people closest to us, Paul also describes for us how we should view those in our Christian community and those who are not yet a part of it. He emphasizes the importance of prayer that God would give opportunities for more people to hear about the truth of Jesus Christ, and that we should always be ready for those opportunities, speaking with words "seasoned with salt" that will be appealing to those who need to hear.

The letter ends like Paul usually ends his letters, with greetings from the people with him. I won't spoil the details because there are a few fun surprises in store for us when we get there.

But I will say this, one of the people Paul mentions is someone who is someone who was from Colossae but left. His name was Onesimus, and you see, Onesimus was a slave, one of these people whose life circumstances had left him serving someone else. And at some point, Onesimus broke his contract with his master and fled to Rome. While there,

he met Paul and give his life to Christ. We don't know the details of how this happened, maybe Onesimus spent some time in the prison with Paul, maybe they had a mutual friend, maybe God simply made their paths cross.

But as Paul finishes up this letter to the Colossians, he's about to set in motion a situation that will test the strength of a particular man's roots in Christ at a hurricane force level. I mean, this application goes way beyond "husbands love your wives and children obey your parents." Paul sends the runaway slave Onesimus back to Colossae to his master's home. And here's where it's going to get really interesting. He doesn't tell Onesimus to turn himself in and go back to his duties, Paul entrusts a letter to him, a very personal letter to one man, Onesimus's master. And in this letter, Paul will challenge this man, whose name was Philemon, to not only accept Onesimus back home, but to accept him as a free man, as a fellow brother in Christ in full and equal fellowship in the church. And that is why the other book we'll study at the end of this fall is this letter to Philemon. Besides having this cool connection to Colossians in that the two letters were written and brought to Colossae together, the book of Philemon is an amazing application of what is possible when people live rooted in Christ.

And that's what I want for myself. Isn't it what you want? Roots that make us so bottom-heavy in Christ that hurricane force winds can't blow us over? Roots so deeply enmeshed in Christ that we are constantly fed by what truly nourishes and satisfies us so that we are able to keep our minds set on Him, on who He is, on what He has done for us, keeping Christ as our motivation for everything we do.

I hope now you see why this letter to the Colossians, perhaps better than any other book of the Bible, is going to help us grow our roots firmly in Christ as we study it together this fall, both as you study on your own with our new workbook at home, and as you gather with the other ladies in your small group and discuss how these Scriptures impact your life.

Women's Bible Study is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
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