

Women's Bible Study Fall 2018
Who We Are Because of Christ - Colossians 1:1-14
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Suddenly Colossians is everywhere. The other night I met with three friends. One of them was studying it on her own because it had been helpful in her past. Two of us were memorizing part of it. Another was using it in her life group. Colossians is important right now because our church is in transition. John and I are retiring in January; many changes have already occurred. It's important that as a body of believers we keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, and what better place to find him than Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Svea gave an excellent overview of this letter last week. Today we are in the Foundation section of Colossians. I'll start by looking at the Colossians themselves and seeing:

I. Who They Were Before Christ

I've been to Colossae. Nothing is left of this church; very little is still standing from that time period. In the centuries before Christ they had been famous for their wool trade. In fact the wool itself was called *colossinus*, and was a particular purplish shade. When we visited the shopkeepers were still selling wool scarves as they traditionally had.

Colossae was once an important commercial center, but by the first century AD it was eclipsed by nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis. So by the time of this letter the town itself was a bit of a provincial backwater, not exactly in its glory days.

Who were the Colossians before the gospel arrived? They kept flocks, produced wool, traded in commerce. The town, in the Lycus valley, would have been exposed to many different religious views. Like every church in Asia Minor, Colossae struggled with competing cultural forces.

But then Epaphras arrived. He was a young convert of Paul's who had heard the gospel in Ephesus, 120 miles away. When Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae, it took hold and a flourishing church developed. Despite the affectionate warmth of this letter, Paul had never actually met the Colossians but knew them only through Epaphras. From Epaphras Paul heard that pagan religions, Jewish tradition and Roman influences meant this young church struggled to maintain the truth of the gospel.

Alarmed by what he saw, Epaphras returned to Rome to see Paul and this visit resulted in Paul's letter to the Colossians.

So given the fact that they are strangers to Paul, in a town he's never visited, converted by one of his disciples, it's all the more impressive the way Paul speaks to them.

Please turn with me to Colossians 1:1, where we read

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother..."

Paul starts by giving his credentials. Even though he was not one of the twelve disciples, Paul became an apostle or eyewitness of the resurrected Christ when Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus. Paul's conversion and mission is by the will of God. Paul wants them to know that he is not just a unknown busybody, but has a God-given task to pass on the gospel. And the gospel here is Jesus Christ, without any cultural additions. So most of this book tells us who Christ is, and by contrast, false beliefs and practices just melt away when viewed next to Jesus.

He also mentions "Timothy our brother", referring to the young pastor at Ephesus whom Paul mentored in the ministry. As Svea mentioned last week, Timothy was likely taking down Paul's words while he was in prison. But I think it shows an additional greatness of spirit about Paul that he includes those around him and doesn't take all the credit for himself.

You might wonder if, having acquired the gospel thirdhand after it was transmitted from Paul to Epaphras to the Colossians, the believers there were lagging in maturity. Or maybe it's like playing the game of telephone...several people down the line, something gets garbled or misunderstood. So Paul ignores who they were before Christ.

He speaks instead to

II. Who They Are In Christ

Like all of us who have given our lives to Christ, we are, theologically speaking,

A. Holy

Look at verse 2:

2 To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. (Col. 1:2)

We think of holiness as something acquired by a certain behaviors. But scripture tells us we are holy now because of Christ in us. So Paul directs them back to their standing in Christ.

In the same way it does us good to be reminded that we are holy in God's sight. We are set apart and consecrated by the fact that Jesus died for our sins. Knowing that God treats us as holy should make a difference in our behavior. It is human nature to rise to the expectations of those we love. So when I said to my young children, "I expect excellent behavior", more often than not, they delivered. God expects us to live holy lives because his Son has made us holy. Gradually it becomes easier to make our lives sync up with the theological truth that we are already holy by Christ.

But there is more to his commendation. Paul knows the Colossians are:

B. Full of Faith, Love and Hope

Look at verse 3:

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— ⁵the 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. (Colossians 1:4-5)

The theme of thanks is very strong throughout Colossians. In practical terms it is very hard to hold on to anger and bitterness when we are being thankful. So Paul starts by thanking God for the Colossians because of the extraordinary way they have embraced the gospel.

We've heard about the trilogy of faith, hope and love many times in the N.T. Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians 13 that "the greatest of these is love." But here he implies that hope is the source of both faith and love.

The word "hope" here is synonymous with "Christ, who is our hope". Our hope is stored up in heaven because that is where Jesus is, sitting at the right hand of God. Jesus personifies our Christian hope. And it is not wishful thinking, but a certainty which will come to pass, even though we have not seen it yet.

You'd never know that Paul hadn't spent time in Colossae when reading these words. There is an affection, a sense of being all part of the same family, that comes through very strongly. Last May my four siblings and two spouses traveled to Norway together. This was a lifelong dream for us Norwegian Americans; none of us had ever been and none of us were getting any younger. So instead of trying to lose our lives backpacking as we did last fall, we opted for Norway. No tents, no backpacks.

Two things happened to me there. First, I kept mistaking strangers for my siblings. There was someone I thought was my brother until he was five feet away. Next was a double of my sister Paula. All around me were Norwegian strangers who looked just like us. It was almost creepy. But I realized that our gene pool wasn't just a myth. We look like Norwegians because we are Norwegians! They are our brothers and sisters, genetically speaking.

Second, I discovered a land for which I had been searching all my life. I've been in many northern parts of the world. But when I saw Tromsø, above the Arctic Circle, I knew I was coming home. This may not be your idea of a good time – taking ferries through lashing rain, seeing snow in late May – but Norway in some mysterious way felt familiar. My people emigrated from this mountainous place. I finally understand why I love to be outside in all weathers. There's a Norwegian saying: There is no bad weather, only bad clothing. So even though I was a stranger, I felt a kinship with Norway and the Norwegians.

Paul feels that same sense of family with the Colossians. He understands their cultural problems. He knows they are his brothers and sisters in Christ because of their faith and the love they have for God's people. So he gives thanks and prays heartily for them; their faith, love and hope makes them family.

Another proof of their belief is the way they are

C. Sharing the Good News

Look at verse 6:

"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. ⁷You 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. (Colossians 1:6-8)

When people are coming to Christ and growing in faith it means that the body is basically healthy, even though everything isn't perfect. Paul wisely concentrates on the good things happening in Colossae. He points them to Christ instead of pointing to their faults.

But look for a moment at verse 6 and that picture of the gospel bearing fruit throughout the whole world. At this point in history the gospel was reaching the known world – through Paul's imprisonment in Rome, it was spreading through the Praetorian guard and into the city, and through the Pax Romana Christianity would spread everywhere that Romans went. But Paul also speaks prophetically. The gospel would someday go to the whole world, a process we see unfolding in our century.

In August I was alarmed to see a strange vine taking over the fields and hedges in Rochester. As I biked I saw entire structures and trees covered over by wild cucumber. It had been hiding there all along, but when it suddenly flowered its extent became visible. Here's a picture of some poor guy's farm being taken over by the vine.

The gospel is a good thing, not a bad thing like a vine gone wild, but it spreads just as rapidly and finds its foothold in the smallest places. Vines grow by putting out tendrils, and the tendrils hook on to another plant or a structure, and soon there is a support for a gigantic edifice of vines. The gospel grows by one person telling another the good news, finding a foothold in willing lives. It spread through Colossae from Epaphras to others, who told others, and soon there was a flourishing church.

So that's who they were in Christ at the time of this letter. But Paul also sees the Colossians with the eyes of faith, and prays for:

III. What They Will Become in Christ

This next section allows Paul to explain how he prays for the Colossians. Notice he asks God for some pretty big things. First he prays that they would be

- **Wise**

Look at verse 9:

“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the **wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives...” (Colossians 1:9)**

When King Solomon could have asked God for anything, Solomon asked for wisdom. And he got it, with tremendous results for the nation of Israel. As it was back then, wisdom is a scarce commodity in public life today.” Paul asked God to give the Colossians a knowledge of God's will by giving them understanding and wisdom.

This verse gives us a little peek at the work of the Holy Spirit. We're told in the gospel of John that the Spirit guides us into truth. Here we see the Spirit giving wisdom and understanding. Honestly, if there is one prayer I have prayed more than any other lifelong, it is to ask for wisdom. Knowledge of God is important, but unless it is coupled with wisdom and understanding, it can become sterile, or just a source of pride. Paul asks for the whole package – knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

Next he prays they would be

- **Worthy**

Look at verse 10:

¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way... (Colossians 1:10a)

There's a point to having wisdom. It is in order that we may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him. To say that we are worthy of something means that we are qualified to represent it. Olympian athletes are worthy of representing a nation because they are the fastest, strongest or best at their sport. We want to be worthy to represent God.

In a marvelous way we can become worthy to represent him, because we are in Christ, and Christ is the exact representation of God. So, as we demonstrate Jesus' character, we live a life that is worthy of the Lord and which pleases him.

Next Paul prays for what will please God and show our worthiness.

It is that we become

- **Fruitful**

"...bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1:10b)

See how knowledge is coupled with action in verse 10? We are not just mindlessly serving, like drones in a hive. Christian service always needs to be coupled with worship and reflection, just as worship and reflection needs to be joined up with action in God's kingdom. At the same time as we do worthwhile work for God, we grow in knowledge of him. You see, God wants us to know him better and better. That is what pleases him. And it's not like we have to go to seminary or get a doctorate in theology. We come to know God through simple familiarity with his word, and by serving him.

That makes sense. When John and I first got married there was an AWFUL lot we didn't know about each other. We had never shared a bathroom or a house or a bed. We hadn't eaten much together. All your quirks come flying to the surface when you're newly married because everything is strange and new. But after 41 years we know each other's habits. I didn't go to school to study John; I just lived with him day after day.

The longer we walk with God the easier it becomes to know him. While there is much that is mystery, he proves himself reliable and faithful each day, and so we can grow in the knowledge of God simply by walking with him daily.

Next Paul prays that the Colossians will be:

- **Powerful**

Look at verse 11:

"...being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience..." (Colossians 1:11)

The purpose of this power is not to become superheroes. Rather, it's to equip them to have great endurance and patience. God gives us power to endure suffering.

At this point I'd like to introduce you to Pippa, my second grandchild. She is 21 months old and quite an independent little miss, as you can see from her sprinting into the distance at the airport. Pippa's life is mostly governed by doing what her big brother Charlie does. If

he makes a face, she makes a face. If he likes something, she likes it. But Pippa is beginning to demonstrate a strong will and she had reached the point where her mother wanted to wean her. Pippa was having none of this – she wanted to have a milk snack all night long. So Emily asked my help in getting Pippa onto a better sleeping schedule.

I had four children and could never properly sleep train them. I just did not have the heart, or more specifically, JOHN did not have the heart to let them scream at night. So I had broken sleep for more than a decade. And I could see that my daughter Emily was going down that same path. So we worked together. We put Pippa in the downstairs bedroom. When she woke up crying for her mother, she got Grandma instead. And after a brief pat, the door was closed and Pippa began screaming.

That first night showed me just what the human lung is capable of. Pippa screamed angrily at an astounding volume. Then she screamed “Mama!” inconsolably. Then she just cried in a broken hearted way. And this went on for forty minutes, and it took four nights of crying to get her to sleep through the night.

From Pippa's perspective she had been abandoned by two people she thought loved her. She was suffering, and no one was coming to her aid. But the truth was that I was just outside the door, listening carefully and telling myself that I was doing this for her good. What I couldn't do for myself I was determined to accomplish for my daughter.

Colossians 1:11 assures us that we will be strengthened with **all power** according to his glorious might, for the purpose of gaining great endurance and patience. It is not power for the sake of power, but power for the sake of enduring suffering with patience. When we are at our most despairing, we need to remember that Christ is just outside the door, listening carefully to monitor our heartbreak and fear, and helping us to learn the power to endure suffering.

Unfortunately there is no shortcut. We gain the power of God, but we learn it in the school of suffering. And when we face suffering in the future next time we can tell ourselves, “He gave me the power to endure before, and he will again.” We will be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might.

But then Paul prays for us to be

- **Thankful**

Look at verse 12:

“...and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.” (Colossians 1:12)

Remember, Paul models thankfulness, and he prays that the Colossians will practice it as well. But he also talks about the joy of receiving an inheritance. An inheritance is generally unearned. It comes to us because of someone else's hard work. Our inheritance as holy people comes from the work on Christ on our behalf.

So that's what Paul wants for the Colossians – that they be wise, worthy, fruitful, powerful and thankful. Now we must ask

IV. What This Means For Me

If we turn Paul's prayer for the Colossians into words we can live by, we see that

Because of Christ I am:

- **Rescued**

Look at verse 13:

“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves...” (Colossians 1:13)

This evokes the story of Exodus, where God rescued his people from slavery with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. We may not feel like slaves to sin, but we are. We may not realize we live in the dominion of darkness, but we do. Most of the time we can marvel at the beauty of the world around us. But scripture tells us that beneath the surface the world is temporarily, by the permissive will of God, a place where Satan roams freely.

Wanda Barzee was one of the two people who abducted Elizabeth Smart, a 14 year old girl, in 2002 and who colluded in keeping her from her family until 2003, when Elizabeth was rescued. Her husband, Brian David Mitchell, is still in prison. But Wanda is now being released, having served her prison term. Elizabeth Smart has spoken out on the danger of releasing Wanda Barzee. Wanda was not an abused wife who complied with a dangerous husband, but was an active participant in the abuse and rape of this young girl. Reading that a woman could harm a young girl is sickening. But in the kingdom of darkness, Satan desires to degrade the image of God in us. Maybe we haven't met the dominion of darkness face to face yet. But it is there, and Christ came to rescue us from it. So instead of darkness we have been taken to the kingdom of light, and that comes about because we are:

- **Forgiven**

Look at verse 14:

“...in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:14)

The Son God loves is Jesus Christ, and in him we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. To be redeemed means that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin and rebellion against God. To be forgiven means that the record of those sins is no more. It doesn't matter, and it can be forgotten. We have a clean slate and we never need to go back to being under Satan's thumb.

So what does that liberation bring in practical terms? It means that

In Christ I can:

- **Unleash the gospel**

Most of us don't feel particularly responsible for spreading the gospel. But Colossians reminds us that the gospel is bearing fruit and growing among us, from the very first day that we hear it and believe. Just like the wild cucumber which flowered everywhere during August, the gospel is being seeded and rooted all around us. To help it flourish we just have to speak it and live it. The gospel has the power to run its course to the ends of the earth because of Christ, and it will do so whether or not we participate. But if we love God and want to do his work in this world, we can help stamp out the dominion of darkness and help bring people to the kingdom of light – simply by speaking about it and living according to it. We can help unleash the gospel.

Paul writes to Timothy from prison:

“This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained.” (2 Timothy 2:9)

God’s word isn’t chained. It is rooting and flowering all around us. Following Hurricane Florence we have seen regular people become heroes by rescuing others from floods. People all over the country are flying in as first responders. That’s important work, but we have something far more important for eternity – unleashing the gospel and rescuing those around us from the dominion of darkness.

Next, in Christ I can

- **Pray profoundly**

I’ve spent a lot of time in prayer meetings over the years, and some have been amazing while others have been...well, let’s just say, pretty basic. Most of the prayer requests people make, including me, involve sparing others from sickness, harm or injury.

You’ll notice that Paul’s not praying those prayers. He’s asking God for big things - to make the Colossians powerful, thankful, full of wisdom and understanding. So I am challenged to pray bigger prayers along with the practical one. God knows the number of hairs on our heads. He encourages us to pray for our daily needs like food, shelter and forgiveness. But Paul shows us we can aim higher, pray bigger, less selfishly. In Christ I can pray profoundly.

I can also

- **Bear fruit**

This year we had a bumper crop in our plum trees, our apple trees, and our black walnut trees. We don’t eat the walnuts; they are bitter and messy, and there have been so many of them that it sounds like we’re being shelled by cannon as the walnuts drop from great heights onto the roof. And there are so many apples that all the deer for miles around hang out on our front lawn.

But why is it, when we take the same care of our garden every year, that some years the fruit crop is amazing, and other years you can count the harvest on two hands? We have already harvested hundreds of apples and look how many are still there!

Jesus promises us a bumper crop of spiritual fruit. We might not see the same results each year. But he does promise that when we seek to be fruitful we will know the fruits of the Spirit, like love, joy, patience and peace, gentleness and self-control. But we will also know the outcome of good works done for him. We are continuing what Jesus started on earth, work that he tells us he does on his Father’s behalf. So unleash the gospel – pray profoundly – bear fruit. May God give us a remarkable harvest.