

Preface

The brief letter to the Colossians was etched deeply within my soul just a few weeks after becoming a follower of Jesus in late 1974. As a new believer, the Bible had just begun to make sense to me for the first time in my life.

Somewhere I ran across a pocket Gideon New Testament that I took into my office at General Telephone Company in Ashland, Kentucky where I worked as a Customer Service Representative. It was a low-level job, but I got my own small office and desk to go with it.

I kept the little Gideon Bible in my center drawer, and every time I had a moment and usually over every lunch break, I read it. I was soaking it up like a sponge!

The very first book of the Bible I read in its entirety was The Book of Colossians. I will never forget finishing those four chapters. I couldn't have been more proud if I had just finished War and Peace.

But reading it through that first proud winter's day was just the beginning. There were things I encountered in this little book that I needed to know about. I was learning and forming my understanding of Who the Bible said Jesus really was: "The image of the invisible God..." "The firstborn of all creation..." I read those four chapters continuously, returning to it like a favorite food dish. I couldn't get enough of it!

I was wrestling with the concept of Christ being in me....ME..."the hope of glory." And I was lost in the idea of "setting my mind on heavenly things, not on things of the earth" as we are told in the third chapter.

These thoughts I first encountered and contemplated while working in my cubicle office at the phone company never left me. And I have, in forty-five years of reading, studying, preaching, and research in the Scriptures, still not reached the bottom of their riches. I come back to these four chapters time and again.

So now, four and a half decades of walking with Christ later, I will attempt to put some of these thoughts in writing. Many authors, much more accomplished than I am, have written commentaries and studies on the Colossian letter. I doubt seriously that my thoughts will add anything to that which has already been written.

However this letter has been such a personal and constant part of my journey as a Christian, I find myself needing to share some things I have learned. And maybe as I hold this jewel up to the light, it will allow you to see a facet you might have missed.

And selfishly, I hope it might do the same for me!

Introduction

The Bible, while God-breathed throughout, is a book written by men "led by the Holy Spirit" who were living in a specific historical period of time. To correctly and aptly interpret it, it must be read and analyzed with that context in mind. God breathed His Word into an historic setting that spanned 1500 years— from the mountains and wilderness of Sinai, to the flowing waters of the Jordan River, to the rocky shores of Patmos. It was inspired and written on three continents, in three distinct languages, and by forty different human authors.

As a book written in history and containing history, it stands above any other surviving documents of the period or of most any other epoch of human existence. No other book compares with it.

We are left with over fifty-eight hundred documents, manuscripts, papyrus fragments, scrolls and other written sources, including pottery fragments! These sources agree in every major point, thus weaving an absolutely extraordinary historical record. No other historic document in our possession contains as much objective historic manuscript evidence as does the Bible. We do not have nearly that number of manuscripts of Plato or Aristotle's philosophies, or of the writings of Julius Caesar. Of those we have, hundreds of years lapsed between their first being written and the date of the manuscripts, weakening the authority of these sources. In addition, archaeology has consistently supported the accounts of the Bible as historically valid, much to the ire of the Bible's critics.

Many books have been written concerning the information above. It is not my intent to travel back through them, except to say that when I read or preach or teach the Bible, I stand with absolute confidence in its statements, doctrines, descriptions, historic and theological premises. Where science or historians or archaeology seem to disagree with the Bible, they consistently find themselves proven in error. History truly is "His story" and God has Divinely protected its transmission and preservation over the millennia. The Bible can be trusted, and is the most historically validated document in the possession of humanity!

The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul (formerly known as Saul the rabbi), was a man of his time. Though the Holy Spirit inspired the documents of the Bible, He did not pick up the chosen writers like some living "ink pen" and write the words of Scripture through them.

It came through their personalities (Paul's writing differs greatly from Peter's which differs greatly from John's). You can see their fingerprints on the pages they wrote or dictated to a secretary who carefully captured each word spoken.

Paul was, humanly speaking, a brilliant man. Yet in spite of his background and education he claimed before one audience to "know nothing among you but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." He did not write Romans simply relying on a brilliant legal mind. The Holy Spirit overtook Paul's intellect without destroying Paul's individuality, personality, or background. God compressed personality, education, background, heritage, experience and Spirit into the vessel He used.

But Paul was also a man of his time. He could speak with eloquence of the nuances and idiosyncrasies of Jewish law as well as write with first-hand knowledge of the Olympic Games and other sporting events.

These things are influential and need to be kept before the reader as we move into the work of interpreting Colossians for our time. World history of the day must also be kept in view to get the best understanding possible of God's Word.

Rome and Colossae

Paul and the Colossians were people of Rome. The Roman Empire stood for almost 1500 years influencing, challenging, and changing their world. The maps of Europe and Asia and some of Africa that we still use today contain delineations of countries put in place by Rome.

Many words we still use in our language today were inspired by usage in the Roman Empire, as are laws and understandings of law and justice that still impact the judicial system today.

The empire was, by some accounts, just over sixty years in existence when the words of Colossians were first written. Rome was young, and hungry, and had already conquered territories that expanded from India in the east to Great Britain to the west.

Rome also kept a relatively uneasy peace among the people's conquered in its 4 million plus square-mile-empire which stretched from India to Britannia, the Netherlands to Africa. The "pax

Romana,” (the peace of Rome) allowed for the employment of massive numbers of slave labor and unemployed soldiers in creating the Roman Road, of which “all roads lead to Rome” was speaking.

The empire wisely embraced a “laissez-faire” or “hands off” approach when it came to allowing existing religious systems to continue. In Rome’s view, this was added value in helping the peace continue. And in fact with a few insignificant exceptions, attempts to overthrow the Roman government were few and always failed.

In the same time frame, the Jewish religion grew aggressively. A few years ago, while visiting Macedonia, we were confronted in every small town with an Islamic prayer tower. I asked the missionary giving us the tour if the religion of Islam was prevalent there. He said, “Many of the prayer spires and mosques are not being used yet, but they intend for them to be.” The mosques reflect Islam’s determination to be a worldwide religion.

That was what the Jews did. They embarked on an aggressive growth campaign that involved building a synagogue in every city possible, even though a rabbi was not available to oversee it. These synagogues became vital for the propagation of the Gospel, as Paul was a trained and credentialed rabbi who would be eagerly heard by a Jewish audience, especially in those places without their “own” rabbi.

The Roman road system, some of which is still in use today (including some bridges!), provided ample freedom for Paul and other missionaries to move quickly into the world conquered by Rome. The trip that the leaders of the Colossian church took to Ephesus was about one hundred twenty miles in length, but could be accomplished in safety and relative ease, thanks to the Roman road system and the guards along the way who kept it free from highway bandits.

This may sound like a treatment of Rome that glosses over the abuses, and capricious cruelty and even the attempted genocide of some populations, including the enslavement of millions. Rome was not all good by any stretch of the historian’s pen. However, we need to acknowledge contributions of this culture where they were made. And there were many we still feel the impact of today. (Beard, SPQR)

Galatians 4:4 said, But when the time was fulfilled, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying, “ABBA, Father! So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. The timing for the propagation of the Gospel could not have been more perfect historically. It was “pregnant and about to give birth,” to capture the literal meaning of the phrase, the “time being fulfilled.” It was literally God-timed and God-birthed. The stage had been set for the Gospel to travel into the world!

As we read Colossians, one more historic reality needs to be considered, and that is the fact that Paul was in prison in Rome. The letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon were written during this same period of imprisonment, around 60-62 AD.

Not an uncommon practice in that day, prisoners would be allowed some freedom to entertain guests, receive gifts of food and clothing, and send out correspondence. I have often said that, had God not allowed Paul to experience occasional prison sentences, he would never have stopped long enough to write the many documents that make much of our New Testament!

And so as we begin our journey into the Colossian letter, let’s keep these things as an historic backdrop. They will help provide a sense of context to the letters on the pages of your Bible. This is real life we are reading about as first-century Christians grappled with the implications of their newfound faith in the resurrected Jesus.

My prayer, as you read the inspired words of Colossians, is that real life may be yours as you see again why Christ is above all!

CHAPTER ONE

A Culture on Fire

The fire was raging in the small town which was lodged in a valley between green rolling hills. It had started in a lumber warehouse and began to spread quickly from there. Local fire departments lined the hilltops with their shiny red trucks and lights and ladders and axes and water trucks, but by the time they arrived the fire had grown into an inferno.

That's when an old firetruck belonging to a local volunteer fire department arrived and, without even slowing down, went over the crest of the hill and headed directly for the burning warehouse below.

The other firefighters that were on hand were so impressed with this little band of brothers in their rickety truck, bravely leading the way, that they followed them into the fire and, after a courageous battle, got it under control and saved the town.

The citizens were so grateful that the mayor awarded the volunteer firefighters the key to the city and a \$10,000 check. After the enthusiastic applause died down, the mayor asked the captain of the department what they would do with the \$10,000 check. The captain said, "Well the first thing we're gonna do is get the brakes fixed on that old firetruck!"

In this message, I want to "drop you" into a fire that is burning in our culture. We are living today in what many would refer to as a postmodern" and "post-Christian" culture which essentially means the influence of the church and Christianity have run their course in America and the Western Hemisphere.

Maybe they're just not looking in the right places! The "post-Christian" assessment seems true without question when you visit larger urban centers like London, Montreal, Chicago, Miami, and New York City. There you see once-thriving places of worship now abandoned or repurposed for entertainment uses or event sites. Many of the people encountered in those cities find little time in the course of their normal days to think about or consider the reality of God. To many gathering and working there, thoughts of God seldom consciously pass through their minds.

We must acknowledge that we have changed profoundly as a culture in the past few decades. Since my initial reading of the Book of Colossians in 1974, the first major stream of cultural shift that deeply impacts us has taken place. We have become much more multi-cultural as a nation, and as a result more and more religious systems are now competing for a hearing. This stream of change has had a profound impact on churches around the country.

Secondly, our morality has shifted, in the name of progress, to the point that a New York Times article a few weeks ago lamented the indecency of advertising on New York City's subway system. When morality is becoming offensive even to those with no professed religious or moral persuasion, it is nearing a tipping point!

Philosophical naturalism is the third stream that has informed and led to the current state of our culture. Though naturalism itself is a broad term that has branches in literature, sociology as well as science, it is scientific or empirical naturalism that is of most concern to people faithful to God's Word.

The impact and influence of scientific thought and achievement has been remarkable over the past two centuries in the west. We are bombarded daily with new scientific discoveries, to the point that no normal human being could completely comprehend the discoveries of just one day!

Remarkable, even amazing progress in fields of scientific study and research has accelerated the move of this philosophical viewpoint to the forefront, and influences everything from entertainment to education, and even government. Each of us has been impacted on some level whether we are aware of it or not.

This view may be summed up by the late Carl Sagan, who would begin every episode of the wildly popular PBS series “Cosmos” by stating, “The Universe is all there is. It is all there ever was. And all there ever will be. “Sagan, a cosmologist and astronomer, believed we were made of “star stuff” and that “we are a way for the universe to know itself.” (Sagan “Wikipedia”)

His views have influenced some of the most respected thinkers of our generation, including the late Stephen Hawking and Bill Nye. This system of thought eliminates the consideration of any reality apart from that which can be seen with our eyes, tested in a laboratory, or discovered through exploration as imaginations and fairy tales that no longer serve a purpose.

Shifting Sands

I take the space to briefly point out these three prevailing streams of thought pouring into our thinking, our educational systems, the way our children are educated and trained in many public school and university classrooms, and the belief systems of many of those who govern us. They are significant because, as a result of their pervasive influence, the foundation of our worldview now sits on the shifting and sinking sands of science.

We have been, in my lifetime at least, a culture that believed in God without question; a Supreme Deity unseen and yet real, Who created all things. For many years, it was unheard of and untenable to argue against this belief at least in the world in which I was raised.

But with the rush of scientific achievement and discovery we have experienced, we have now convinced ourselves that we were naive at best and deceived at worst to ever have believed such an idea. The proponents of the naturalist position cannot answer the foundational questions, “Why are we here?” “How did we get here?” This has pressed those who support a scientific worldview to theorize that we are probably the result of an advanced alien species depositing us here millions or billions of years ago.

The outcome of such a view serves to undermine not only a Biblical view of creation, but even the very possibility of a Creator in the minds of many. Even as Christians, we find it more and more difficult to affirm the truth that “By faith we understand that everything was created by the Word of God created everything...” (Hebrews 11:3a). In fact that very assertion is what has caused many to reject all the claims of Christianity as antiquated and irrelevant.

This is a very simplistic snapshot of the problems facing us today as we seek to advance the Gospel of the Kingdom into a modern culture. The worldviews we operate from are not only different, but are in radical conflict with one another.

To borrow from the great Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer, “how shall we now live” in such a culture? Turning back the hands of time to a prior time is unrealistic and not a helpful alternative though some have proposed it as such. Running away and hiding in small enclaves of a remnant of believers is also

not the prescription the Bible gives. Leaning on political forces and figures to resolve the issues and return us to a day when Biblical thought was prevalent is also not a realistic solution to our problems.

We must learn to confront the philosophies and false beliefs of our day, as Paul did in the Colossian correspondence. Christianity in our day is not the first to confront shifting cultural mores, or a plurality of religious views, or even the first to challenge prevalent anti-Christian philosophies and patterns of thought. (See Colossians 2:8)

Paul's engagement of the fires burning in the culture of his day emboldens us to do the same. We cannot confront the viewpoints antagonistic to our faith while sitting safely on the hillside away from the flame and smoke of the inferno.

Paul brought with him the weapons of the Spirit, and wielded the sword of the Spirit in doing battle. We must stand on the same truth and the same bedrock that emboldened him as he did battle. We too must hold high the banner of the cross, not only upholding its truth but brandishing it for all to see.

We cannot hide our lights under a bushel and at the same time fulfill the mandate to be "a city set upon a hill." The world around us is on fire. The culture that most of us were steeped in is collapsing on shifting sand.

As we go forward, we stand on the Rock that does not move. We have a firm foundation and, even though we walk through the fire, "the flames will not hurt us." We hold high the truth that Christ is above all, and as we do, some will be drawn to it and others will perish in their rejection.

But having done all, we must stand. We must hold fast the truth we believe. And we must boldly and unapologetically engage our culture with the truth that will save those who will believe it.

"On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand."

Chapter 2

Colossae lay about one hundred miles inland from the much larger and more prominent city of Ephesus. Colossae along with Hierapolis and the more familiar city of Laodicea were located along the Lycus River valley, a busy shipping route.

At one time a prominent town itself, Colossae had, by the New Testament era, declined to the point that it lived in the shadow of the larger two sister cities. Much uncertainty exists as to why this happened, but it did. In all likelihood an earthquake that happened in the region around 4 BC devastated Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. The latter two, more politically significant and self-sufficient financially, rebuilt after the disaster. Colossae never did recover, and in the New Testament era it was a simple market town.

Word had spread apparently, as we learn from the Book of Acts, "throughout all the world," and that included to the little unimportant town of Colossae. Two men, Epaphras and Philemon, had found faith in Jesus.

Both men had given their lives to follow this risen Messiah named Jesus, and a church was born through their witnessing and teaching. In fact it is likely that Epaphras was also responsible for starting the

churches in both Laodicea and Hierapolis. Both Epaphras and Philemon were recognized leaders in the city of Colossae. And both were troubled by strange teachings fomenting in Colossae. Epaphras was Paul's right hand in evangelizing the area of the Lycus Valley. The Colossians had been brought to the Gospel and taught the Word of God by Epaphras, a "fellow servant" (1:7) of Paul. Philemon on the other hand was the host of the Colossian church, apparently owning a large enough home to accommodate the gathering. But he was also regarded as a leader in the Colossian community. They visited Paul while he was imprisoned in Rome. Together they laid out their concerns about this new and erosive teaching that had taken root in their young church. Paul's "letter to the Colossians" was a response to this visit, delivered later by Tychicus.

The Colossian Problem

There are a variety of opinions among scholars as to exactly what the "Colossian problem" was. The evidence in the pages of the letter does not clarify an answer for us.

Due to the presence of travelers moving merchandise through the Lycus Valley from different parts of the continent, new ideas would travel with them. Many of these were heard and brought into the church.

Obviously, Judaism had an influence on the new believers. By some existing tax rolls discovered in the area, it was estimated that there were upward of fifty thousand Jews living in the cities of the Lycus Valley. They may have been seeking to proselytize the new Christians into a more faithful Judaistic religion, or more than likely, were seeking to pull back the ones who had apostatized from the synagogue for a new belief system.

There is also evidence in Paul's letter that eastern mysticism was also in play. This would have been a natural result of merchants from the east traveling through to the larger populations of Ephesus and surrounding cities. These would be steeped in thoughts of the power of the heavenly bodies on life, asceticism, and the worship of angels.

There are even some opinions, notably M.D. Hooker of Cambridge, who theorized that there was no false teaching in Colossae at all. Instead, new believers were under extreme influence from Jewish and pagan sources to leave their faith in Christ.

While I do not agree with her position, I do believe that sometimes the greatest problem we face in church today is the pull to go back into the world. The temptation to grow cold in our faith or to abandon it altogether has been a problem faced by Christians from the very beginning.

This is especially true of college students who walk into an academic environment that takes direct aim at assumptions and presuppositions their faith is built on. When those come under attack, these students will often retreat, having never been prepared to defend what they believe. They then reject it as intellectually inferior and look for something new. This story happens over and over again, and something akin to this was probably happening among the Colossian believers as well.

Other interpreters believe that Colossae had come under the sway of early Gnostic teaching. While Gnosticism as a recognized religious system had not yet fully appeared, the early seeds of this syncretistic philosophy had been planted.

As a simplified explanation, Gnosticism was a blend of Greek, Roman, and eastern-influenced philosophies. To the proponents of this system, matter (the material world) was seen as evil. For this reason, Jesus could not possibly be the Son of God in flesh.

Their teaching said that Jesus was one of numerous "emanations" that came from the Creator, but there were other steps that needed to be taken to truly find God. These steps could be taken through secret knowledge, or "gnosis," that the initiated could learn. The other "emanations" from God were likely angels that the Gnostics knew how to contact. Jesus, in other words, was not rejected but relegated to

a step on the ladder of spiritual enlightenment, but not enough in Himself to be considered “creator” or certainly not God.

They created fanciful and romanticized stories of Jesus walking on sand and not leaving a footprint, since He did not truly occupy a body of flesh but only seemed to do so. As ludicrous as these teachings may sound to us today, they had tremendous influence in swaying the belief of the early New Testament believers.

The danger, as those who have been long in the faith or the church world know, is far more insidious when it’s inside the church. Outside threats have always existed. Even the most immature believers know what to avoid when it comes to threats from those outside the community of faith.

Far more dangerous are teachings that come from inside the church; a little grace mixed with legalism, grace pressed to the limit and beyond with license and immorality; a belief that Jesus is not enough—that our efforts and work must somehow be added to assure salvation. A little truth mixed with malignant and devastating lies.

We are also victims of attacks from inside the church. High profile pastors and leaders fall prey to the seduction of immorality. Young leaders, given influential platforms but sometimes with little grounding in the faith, draw many after them and then abandon the faith. The foundation begins to be eroded as though by acid from within. Charlatans and phony religious leaders lead multitudes astray with charming and winsome public persona. We buy the packaging but never read the contents!

Today’s church is not the first to confront these problems. They have been a part of the attacks on the church since its earliest days of existence. And the solution was given in God’s Word over two millennia ago:

Jesus. Is. Enough.

Chapter 3

I have on occasion received letters from prisoners incarcerated by the state. The letters are clearly from the prison; the prisoner’s number is clearly printed on the return address. The envelope has been opened and its contents read by a guard before being allowed to enter the US Mail, and is sometimes mangled and taped together.

Before I read a word, there is an immediate swell of suspicion that comes up inside of me. The men who write are normally men I know well from visits to their prison. But the stigma of prison remains in the correspondence.

I have often wondered how the people who first received and heard the letters of Paul, particularly those written from prison, would have seen them. Obviously, they knew or knew of Paul. But I wondered if some felt the stigma of Paul’s chains; of this letter written by a person arrested and held in jail or under house arrest by the Roman government?

And yet I also sincerely believe that Paul was imprisoned, not because Rome wanted him there, but because God did! In China today, it is just a given, because of their testimony to Christ, that every

pastor would go to prison at some point. Those who had not been in prison yet were not given the regard of those who had spent months or years under arrest by the Chinese government. Even today, the Christians consider imprisonment as “seminary.” That is where their pastors go to learn to pray, to learn the Bible, to learn to minister.

Isn't it interesting how God uses the unlikeliest of experiences from our perspective to do some of His greatest work! Paul was where he was by Divine appointment and for Divine purposes. His calling to go to prison for the Gospel was as important to Paul as the times he stood before people in public, teaching and preaching that Jesus was the Christ.

The Colossian Letter

Colossians 1:1-8

The need for this letter was born in a visit by Epaphras, the founder and pastor of several congregations in the Lycus Valley. This fertile valley, a notorious earthquake zone, was home not only to Colossae but also to the larger cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. The Meander River also merged in this valley with the Lycus River.

Colossae was a Roman province founded prior to the reign of the Persian king Xerxes. It was in existence as a noted city a full five hundred years before we encounter it in the New Testament through this letter.

Epaphras was, in Paul's words, a “dearly loved fellow servant” and “a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf.” (1:7). Epaphras had come to Jesus during Paul's time in Ephesus. Only around one hundred miles from Colossae, Epaphras obviously traveled to Ephesus and heard Paul preaching.

From there, Epaphras became Paul's lieutenant in planting churches in the Lycus Valley, where Paul himself had never been able to visit. He would bring Paul occasional reports concerning the welfare of the churches that had begun.

The Greeting

As was customary in his letters, Paul began his correspondence with his own name listed first. In the practice of the day, letters like this would be written on a piece of fabric or leather, or sometimes on a papyrus leaf which would then be rolled up like a scroll. The first thing the reader encountered then would be who the letter was from.

It is in the greeting that Paul introduces himself to an audience which had, no doubt, heard of Paul but had never seen his face. He does this in much of the New Testament correspondence, and certainly here he introduced himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” Paul's assertion from the outset is that he is one with apostolic credentials and authority, but is also under the authority of another, Jesus Christ. Paul's testimony was never that he sought apostleship or even took it upon himself. He was called to that by Jesus Himself!

I sat on a denominational credentialing committee at one time as we were interviewing a gentleman who pastored a handful of people in a storefront ministry. He introduced himself to us as “Apostle _____”. As evangelical believers and Southern Baptists by tribal affiliation, we were not used to anyone taking the title “apostle” for themselves. So we asked the brother how he received his title. He said, “My wife told me I was an apostle.” And we asked, “How did your wife come to that conclusion?” And he said, “Well, she's a prophet.”

Paul did not take this title to himself, nor was he told by his wife that he was an apostle! He was “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” This was no casual claim, but a life-altering one.

Along with his own name, Paul added "Timothy," who was with him. Now that could sometimes mean "with him" as "in chains" or it could simply mean Timothy accompanied Paul in prison and would run errands for him and assist in bringing companionship and comfort. Paul said himself that "he had no one like Timothy" who would look after the things that concerned him. Obviously in this correspondence Timothy needed no further introduction than "brother." He was apparently known already by the Colossians.

The letter was addressed "to the saints" (the "holy ones") which was a typical address but here Paul adds "who are faithful brothers and sisters." This bears down on the special nature of their circumstance as they stood strong in the pressures they were enduring. (v2).

But they were also "the saints in Christ...". Their lives were now located in Christ, and the things that were true of Christ are now true of them. Those two words indicate a transfer of spiritual "place" and ownership of another. While they lived "in the world" of Colossae, their lives were hidden in Christ. Finally Paul gives his tradition greeting of "grace" and "peace" from God the Father. It has been mentioned by many that "grace" always preceded "peace" in Paul's greetings. There is a sound theological reason for this. The grace of God always comes before the peace of God!

The Thanksgiving

Though Paul had no specific memories of time together or of gifts given by the church to thank them for, he "always thanked God" (v. 3) when he prayed for them.

Specifically, he thanked God for their faith in Christ (which he had heard by reports given), for their "love for all the saints," (v.4) and for "the hope reserved...in heaven." (v.5). As to their hope, Paul returns to this subject briefly as he talks about the Father enabling them to share in the "saints inheritance in the light." (v12)

Each of these three: faith, love, and hope stand as evidence and spiritual proof of the truth of the Gospel that they had received and "that has come to you." (v.6) It was a Gospel that was fruitful and growing all over the (known) world, just as it was among them since they first heard it and truly appreciated and received the grace of God. (v6)

A Prayer for Spiritual Growth

Colossians 1:9-14

Paul's writing and, I am equally confident, his life were saturated by prayer. Reading the prayers he prayed in his letters give us a brief glimpse into the mind and prayer life of a man who was literally taught to pray by Jesus Himself.

The prayers of Paul bear no resemblance to the mechanical and memorized rabbinic prayers typical of his day. As the other apostles had spent three years walking with Jesus before witnessing the resurrection, so Paul was given a three year period to walk with Jesus.

It was during those three years that Paul unlearned much of his deeply entrenched legalism and began learning the way of the Master. It was in those days that, no doubt, Jesus also breathed life into Paul's own prayers.

They were fresh, and never selfish in nature. Often, as we hear in Colossians 1:9 and following, they are focused on spiritual growth and depth of understanding God and the way of the Kingdom. Much of how we pray today needs to be rethought in the light of Paul's prayer life.

He prayed constantly, "since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you." (v9) We would do well to take time to learn what this means. Our prayers are often fitful, and short-lived, and

usually turned toward ourselves more than others. Even when others are in focus, we are praying far more frequently for their safety or their physical rather than spiritual needs.

It may help us to personalize Paul's praying like this:

"(I am) asking that (name here) may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that (name) may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might, so that (name) may have great endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, Who has enabled (name) to share in the saints inheritance in the light."

Now that will change one's prayer life! Praying that prayer by putting the name of each member of your family, each member of your church staff, your pastor (!!), your Bible study teacher, or, really your own name will radically begin to alter the way you pray.

Look at everything that this prayer encompasses:

Growth in knowledge and spiritual understanding (seeing things from God's perspective).

Praying for a worthy walk, conduct and lifestyle

Praying that their life may be pleasing to God

Asking that their life may be fruitful in every good work

Praying that they may grow in their understanding of God

Asking that they might have patience and endurance in affliction: Perseverance!

Praying that they might be joyful and filled with thanksgiving

Asking that they be made aware of their eternal inheritance from God

No less than eight areas are being prayed for which, for the average Christian, are seldom if ever mentioned when we pray for each other! We pray eagerly for physical healing, an end of discomfort or an unmet need, for our kids not to ruin their lives (or ours), or for an impending medical treatment . Sometimes we pray for a missionary. How about praying for them like Paul prayed? Who needs this prayer more? Spend some time reflecting on and meditating on the eight statements of intercession in this prayer and come to your own conclusion: Could a more thorough-going prayer be prayed for a Christian than this one?

Paul prayed fervently and specifically for this young church. The text uses two different words to describe Paul's praying. The first, proseuchomenoi or "praying" is the most common word Paul uses for prayer. It is the state of being in prayer, of "praying without ceasing." This word is used to describe the posture of prayer, as well as the preparation for it. It is closely akin to praying as an act of worship. The second word, aitoumenoi or "asking," is a word that has more to do with asking for a specific request. Paul toggles between these two words as he talks about prayer in this passage. (Melick, New American Commentary Vol 32)

The theme of the prayer from verses 9-14 seems to move in and around the word “knowledge.” It’s important to remember that one of the present pressures being experienced by the Colossian church was brought by a mystery religion called Gnosticism. The word “gnostic” is the Greek word for “knowledge.”

This religion taught that the true key to spiritual enlightenment and freedom from the captivity of our flesh is spiritual knowledge. There were secret rituals and secret words that the initiated would know about, but if you were on the “outside” you would not understand.

Therefore “knowledge” and specifically spiritual knowledge was what their adherents sought. Paul is coming directly at this cult in Colossians. His prayer for the Colossian believers was that they would be “filled (to overflowing) with the “knowledge of God’s will” in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. (v9)

His second statement which directly assaulted the Gnostic view was that the believers would “grow in the knowledge of God,” (v10) a knowledge the Gnostics believed was only possible through their religious system and philosophy.

It is human nature to go searching for water in cisterns that have a crack in them. (See Jeremiah 2). We look in places that can never satisfy our hunger and thirst and live frustrated lives as a result. The Colossian Christians were tempted to go after these “empty cisterns” that can hold no water. But Paul’s letter cautioned them that all they ever needed to know and all the knowledge of God they could ever want could be found in Christ Jesus. Yet we continually need the guardrails up to keep us from wandering off the ledge.

Colossians 1:9-11

The focus of Paul’s concern for the Colossians experience of a growing “power” and “might” was that they might have two particular strengths or qualities

The first was the strength of “great endurance.” This was the ability of a person to keep going under great stress or difficulty. It is endurance that allows a marathon runner to finish a race. Endurance or perseverance is the quality that will not allow one to quit. Warren Wiersbe in his commentary *Be Complete*, quotes Ray Edman who often told his students, “It is always too soon to quit.”

Patience has to do with one’s state of mind while they are persevering. It is the ability to be long-suffering, to not react too quickly when injured or be strive to change difficult circumstances and become bitter when they stay as they are. Patience does not always come along with endurance, but they should ride in tandem. Sometimes I’ll see someone going through a time of great distress and pressure, and they will lash out at people who try to get close. They are enduring WITHOUT patience. That is not Gods desire for us.

To endure without patience is to grit one’s teeth in bitterness while the storm passes. To endure with patience is to beautify Christ in the midst of the worst that life can bring. They belong together. Paul prays that both patience and endurance will be present in the Colossian believers.

Colossians 1:13-14

This prayer concludes by introducing a subject that gets expanded in the next verses. It is the subject of God’s rescue of the believers by “transferring us from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of the Son He loves.”

The picture has deep historic roots. It would have been not only commonly known by the readers but maybe even the experience of their family to be a part of a kingdom’s overthrow, probably by Rome.

It was the practice of that day to remove large swaths of population from their homeland and relocate them into another area. This would be done to lessen the possibility of a resistance movement arising, and also would be an effort to take skilled labor out of the defeated land, making it more difficult to rebuild. Paul uses this picture to describe our salvation, which was like being part of a kingdom that had been overthrown by a new king, and being moved into a completely new dominion. Spiritually, this is exactly what has happened to us.

Our old master, Satan, has been overthrown by King Jesus through His sacrifice and obedience on the cross. In that overthrow, the new King has taken those who will follow Him into a new kingdom, the “kingdom of the Son.” We have had, not our residence, but our spiritual identity and our eternity relocated by Christ’s sacrifice and His willingness to become the target of God’s wrath in our place. It is “in Christ” (our new spiritual location) that we can know redemption; which is the forgiveness of sins. In the next section, we are introduced more fully to this King Who created and now rules all things.

VINE ARTICLE Sept 8

Paul was addressing some very specific issues in the church at Colossae, as he did with all the letters we know he wrote. His theological training was the finest of his day, but his writing normally stayed very connected to the earth.

As far as we know, Paul never set foot in the city of Colossae. (Colossians 2:9). Located some eighty miles inland from the city of Ephesus, Colossae as a city was overshadowed by Laodicea and Hierapolis. This would place the city in the western part of modern day Turkey.

Though it was what we would today refer to as a “small town,” Colossae was located at an important point geographically. A well-traveled trade route went through the city and brought with it travelers and ideas primarily from areas in the East. These ideas brought in with those coming from different parts of the world had begun to impact the thinking of believers in Colossae.

As a young church (probably less than five years old), their teaching and preaching about Jesus and the Scriptures was not well developed. The conflicting ideas, religious systems, philosophies of the travelers as well as the presence of a Jewish synagogue began to threaten the spiritual health and vitality of the young believers.

Two men, Epaphras and Philemon, traveled to Ephesus to meet with Paul about the problems they were seeing arise among the Christians in Colossae. Paul sent them back with his response and authority, and with instructions that they were to share their letter with other churches in the Lycus Valley.

The danger, as those who have been long in the faith or the church world know, is far more insidious when it’s inside the church. Outside threats have always existed. Even the most immature believers know what to avoid when it comes to threats from those outside the community of faith.

Far more dangerous are teachings that come from inside the church; a little grace mixed with legalism, grace pressed to the limit and beyond with license and immorality; a belief that Jesus is not enough—that our efforts and work must somehow be added to assure salvation. A little truth mixed with malignant and devastating lies.

We are also victims of attacks from inside the church. High profile pastors and leaders fall prey to the seduction of immorality. Young leaders, given influential platforms but sometimes with little grounding in the faith, draw many after them and then abandon the faith. The foundation begins to be eroded as though by acid from within. Charlatans and phony religious leaders lead multitudes astray with charming and winsome public persona. We buy the packaging but never read the contents!

Today's church is not the first to confront these problems. They have been a part of the attacks on the church since its earliest days of existence. And the solution was given in God's Word over two millennia ago:

Jesus. Is. Enough.