

98-05-29a Colossians

As we prepare to study the Word of God together this evening, let's begin, as we always do, by going to the Lord in prayer. Father, we thank you for preserving us, protecting us. We thank you for the basic necessities of life that you have provided for us.

And we thank you for all of the wonderful things that you have done above and beyond, providing the necessities, the many blessings, as well as the challenges and the tests that we have faced. We thank you that you exercise your watch over us day and night, and that you bring everything into our lives that results in good. We pray tonight, as we study your Word together, that God the Holy Spirit will enlighten us and lead us into all truth.

We pray that as we examine this letter that Paul wrote so many years ago, that we will see its pertinence and its application to our lives today. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Last week we began the study of this great letter of Paul to the church at Colossae. By way of quick review, you know that Colossae had once been a very great city in the Lycus Valley. The Lycus River runs roughly east-west.

It kind of goes a little south as it heads west. It meets the sea near Ephesus. Ephesus is at the western end of this valley.

As you travel several miles inland in an easterly direction up the valley, you eventually come to this triad of cities in Paul's day. Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. Colossae was a town whose glory days were in the past.

It was by this time some 500 or 600 years old in Paul's day, and had been surpassed in importance and in beauty and in vigor by the younger cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Hierapolis means holy city and was noted for its hot springs. It had pits that were deep.

Some of these were worshipped because they were thought to go down to the center of the earth and the mysterious vapors were thought to rise out of these. In fact, one of these pits was called Plutonium because the vapor from it was thought to be poisonous. Of course, our element plutonium is also highly toxic if you spend any time around it, but its name harks back to these earlier days.

But the church at Colossae had come into existence during the time that Paul was ministering at the other end of the valley in Ephesus. Epaphras was one of the men who grew under Paul's ministry and as a pastor returned to his native region at the other end of the valley and apparently was sort of a circuit riding preacher and went between the three cities teaching the word of God, evangelizing, and nurturing the new believers that were cropping up all through the region, specifically in that area. So Epaphras was the pastor of the church at Colossae.

This church was a house church, which just gratifies me to no end. It met in the home of a family. The patriarch of the family was Philemon.

His wife was Aphia and his son was Archippus. And we find this information just before Hebrews in the letter that Paul wrote to Philemon. And really these two letters we will study more or less together.

When we conclude Colossians we will take a formal look at the letter to Philemon because they were written on the same occasion, delivered by the same messenger and addressed to essentially the same people because this church met in Philemon's home. We also noticed last time that there was a reason why Paul wrote this letter. Even though Colossae was a fading town, it was what you might call an old neighborhood that was run down and not ever likely to be rebuilt.

The whole region was fraught with earthquakes and as each wave of destruction would hit every 50 or 60 years they would have another earthquake and it would be another blow. Less and less of the city could be rebuilt. People would move away.

It's one of those towns you see where, like in the rural parts of America where the young people grow up and they say, I've got to get out of this burg. I've got to go to where there's civilization and life and opportunity. And so the median age of the population gradually increased because the older folks had nowhere to go and would stay.

The young people would get up and go to Laodicea or down to the coast to Ephesus and so forth. So it was sort of a dying town. You think, well, here's this church, but it's sort of spinning into the wind.

Why doesn't Epaphras concentrate his efforts on the future and look to the young people who are going to be the next generation and so forth? Why doesn't he get more of a youth program going instead of ministering to the senior citizens as it were? But Paul wrote this letter. He could have just said, I'm going to write this letter to the big church in Laodicea and when you all finish, send a copy over to that little band of people that are still hanging on over there in Colossae. But instead, Paul writes a separate letter to Colossae.

Many of the themes are the same. It's a very interesting exercise if you want to try it. Skim through Ephesians and note the major points, the major flow of argument in that book, which is in fact the letter to Laodicea.

And you can also see one of these human nature type of things. This letter was sort of a general letter that Paul wrote to everybody in the region. It was sent first to the church at Laodicea and then Paul said, circulate this, let it be read in Colossae, read their letter and so forth.

Well, the people down in the big town of Ephesus said, well, Paul used to live here. This is our

letter. So they put their name on the front.

Now, when you look in your Bible, it's called the letter to the Ephesians. But it's not. It's the letter to Laodicea.

And in the first hundred years or so of the early church, once they got their copy and filed it away, they said, well, obviously Paul meant this for us, so we'll just fill in to the saints in Ephesus. Most of the earliest and best manuscripts don't have that phrase, but the later manuscripts do, because Ephesus loaned their copy out to be copied again and again. And so it's come to be known as the letter to the Ephesians.

If you read through Ephesians and look at the major themes, the flow of argument and so forth, you will see that Paul had the same things on his mind. He expands some things in Ephesians that are more briefly stated in Colossians. Colossians is, of course, a shorter letter.

But in other ways, he expands on themes in Colossians that are not given quite as much emphasis in Ephesians. Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were three letters all in the same pouch, same messenger carried all of them down to the valley, and they were delivered to their original recipients and then circulated. The letter to the Colossians was carried over to Laodicea and was read in their church.

And really to do a proper study, you have to look at all three of these together, because that was Paul's intention. We will see after we do Colossians and Philemon if we are ready to tackle Ephesians. But I know for sure we will do these too.

What was the occasion? What sparked Paul to write this letter? First of all, as I have mentioned, he doesn't give that small, very small church short shrift. They are just as important in Paul's mind as the largest churches down in Ephesus or in Laodicea and elsewhere, the churches that he writes to in Philippi and Corinth and so forth. The letter to Colossae is a beautiful letter, and it is written for a reason.

Paul values the believers who are there. He has heard that they are interested in the Word of God. They are growing.

They are operating in faith. They are operating in hope. They are operating in love.

And even though they are few, and even though they are in sort of a dead-end community from the standpoint of the Roman Empire, those individuals are important to Paul. But there is a specific event that sparks Paul's desire to write this letter, and that is the visit of Epaphras. Epaphras, the pastor, has been laboring faithfully for years in that eastern end of the Lycus Valley, going around and teaching and preaching, delivering to others the things that he has learned under the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

But something creeps in to the entire region. It's all over the province of Asia, and when it

reaches the Lycus Valley and starts affecting Epaphras congregations, Epaphras gets concerned, and he redoubles his efforts in teaching the Word of Truth and so forth. But this problem starts making inroads in his congregations and in his community, and he finds himself at a loss as to how to deal with it.

So Epaphras packs up and travels to visit Paul. He has heard from others who have traveled back and forth that Paul is in prison in Rome. His mentor, the one who first shared with him the things of Christ, and he knows that Paul as an apostle will have the answer.

So Epaphras travels, I believe as the crow flies, it's well over 100 miles westward to Rome, finds Paul, visits him. They have a great time of encouragement and fellowship and exchanging experiences and so forth, and then eventually the conversation turns to the reason for Epaphras' long trip. Epaphras says, Paul, here's what has been happening recently in the region.

And as he describes this problem to Paul, Paul, you know how this is. If you have an area of expertise, if you have something that you know about, somebody else may look at it. It can be as simple as vacuum cleaners.

Maybe you have a particular brand of vacuum cleaner. I looked at one recently that has a belt-driven beater bar in it. You turn it on, and it's got a brush that turns.

Well, there are certain things, if you've operated one of those and had to change out that belt, you know certain symptoms. Ours has a little green light on it. There's a magnet or something in there that makes a light shine as long as the beater thing is turning.

But if you set it too close to the carpet or something, and the light goes out, you say, well, something's wrong. I've either got it set too low, or something's the matter with my belt, or it's all gummed up. So if somebody else comes to you, when you have an area of knowledge like this, and they say, well, you know, I was sweeping along, and all of a sudden it was really hard to push the sweeper.

My little light went out, and so forth. Well, you know. You've got one.

You know what the problem is, and you know how to fix it. So you can imagine the apostle, when Epaphras comes, Paul, having traveled through all of these regions, and worked for years, and labored among churches, small and large, has seen these things before. He has a lot of experience.

He has the gift of apostleship. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is strong. So when Epaphras starts describing this situation, a little light begins to go off in Paul's mind, and he says, I know what this is.

I know what they need to hear. And so after this conversation with Epaphras, he says, I'll tell you

what, I'll write them a letter, and we'll send it back. Because in the meantime, Epaphras, for all of his trouble in coming out to visit Paul, has now been detained, and Paul says, he's now my fellow prisoner.

So apparently, being a close associate of Paul, the Romans decide they need to keep an eye on Epaphras for a while, and so they detain him in Rome and don't let him return. So they say, well, write this letter, send it back with Tychicus. We'll let him and the slave that escaped from Philemon's house, Onesimus, we'll let them take this bag of letters back to the Lycus Valley.

Because also during Paul's imprisonment, as we reviewed last time, Paul has come to know and love a young man named Onesimus, who has come to faith in Christ, and has come to hear the teaching of Paul, and so forth, and has become like a son to Paul, and has been very helpful to him, and has ministered to his needs. Being a slave, a good household slave, he knows how to obtain things, he knows how to keep someone like Paul comfortable, and keep him supplied with parchment, or with ink, or whatever he might need to write his letters, and so forth. Light at night, and the various other bodily comforts that he might require.

So, Paul values him, but this Onesimus, oddly enough, has escaped from the household of one of Paul's very good friends, way over in Asia, in the Lycus Valley, and it's the household of Philemon. The household where the church at Colossae meets. Onesimus was a slave there, and you have to wonder if maybe he wasn't there serving the coffee during Bible class, and didn't catch on.

Maybe what Epaphras was teaching didn't sink in, didn't catch on to it. But when he escaped and was free, and came over and heard the teaching of Paul, heard somebody different, teaching the very same things, because Epaphras learned everything he knew from Paul. And yet, it wasn't until Onesimus heard Paul that it clicked in his soul, and made sense to him.

And just as an aside, the lesson there is, don't be discouraged if you are listening to somebody, and it can be anybody. It can be a book that you've read, or someone you hear on the radio. It can be me, or a pastor somewhere else.

There is a lot of wonderful teaching of the Word of God available. And everyone is built different, and that's why God has put so many men with communication gifts out in the world. And what really is helpful and clear to you, and ministers to your soul, may be completely opaque to someone else.

And they need to hear it, maybe this very same truth, from a different source. And it's been called, people have said, well, it's kind of like the husband and wife thing, where there's a right man and a right woman. And some people have said, well, there's a right pastor and a right congregation.

I don't know if I'd go quite that far, but I do know that God, at specific times in our lives, will use a

particular person's communication gift to meet the need in our soul. And over time, you may outgrow that person and be ready for someone who's digging a little deeper, or looking at different portions of the Word of God. And we shouldn't be shy or feel guilty about that, or feel like, well, we're betraying dear old so-and-so that I learned my first truth from, because now I'm moving on to someone else.

Or if you come here or listen to the lessons that we have, and then suddenly you find someone else, and it sparks a fresh enthusiasm and fresh understanding in your soul, the goal is to learn the Word of God and have it be meaningful in your life. And whoever you listen to, wherever you find it, that's what counts. Epaphras didn't get his feelings hurt because Onesimus didn't catch fire when he overheard the Bible classes in Philemon's house, and you know that he heard it.

He was a slave in that household, and Epaphras has been teaching there for years. But it wasn't until he escaped and heard Paul that it made sense to him. Now he's going to go back.

Onesimus is going to go back. And now the things that Epaphras has to say are probably going to make a lot more sense, if and when Epaphras ever gets free and gets to go back. But it's just a reminder to us that sometimes it's the very same truth, but it needs to be heard from different lips.

This can be true as a parent. You may try to inculcate, especially as your children get older, maybe certain truths that you really want to inculcate into your young teenagers, your junior high and high school age children. And it may be that they actually come to understand that by listening to their Sunday school teacher or listening to some other teacher.

Be glad. Rejoice that that truth has come by some means and has gotten into their soul. And don't feel like you've failed or why couldn't I have said that or why couldn't I have been the one to share that or how come they had to hear it from someone else instead of from me? That's just the way it works.

And God will provide for anyone who's seeking. So that's one little side lesson to think about when you think about Onesimus. He had to travel a long way to hear what he needed to hear and then go right back to where he started.

So Onesimus is going to return now. He's the freed slave and Paul's going to write a letter of introduction to his former master, Philemon, to sort of reintroduce him and say he's run away, he may have done you wrong, but charge that to my account and so forth. So that's the occasion, that's the circumstances that surround Colossians.

But we're left with this one big question. What was the big problem that so stymied Epaphras that just baffled him as to how to cope with that he made this long journey, was willing to risk imprisonment with Paul to get the answer? That's what we want to look at tonight. We need to understand this because Paul does not spell it out in the letter to the Colossians.

He doesn't come right out and say Epaphras has told me A, B, C, D, and E about what's going on. Well, let me tell you what to do about that. We learn about this by studying closely Paul's answer.

It's sort of like Jeopardy. You get the answer and from the answer you figure out what the question must have been. Well, we look at Paul's answer in Colossians and we work backward to figure out what Epaphras' question was.

But I want to share that information with you now so that we can be watching and we'll understand why Paul is saying what he's saying in the letter because the original recipients knew what the problem was, didn't they? Epaphras knew what the problem was and the people who get these letters back in the Lycus Valley, they know what the problem is. They know the stuff that's circulating in their environment. So it will be helpful if we know it as well.

I had a choice during my travels this week of either writing my notes on an air-sick bag or on an airline napkin. And I wound up choosing the airline napkin but I will confess that it has hidden itself somewhere in the pages of my Bible. So, I'll proceed without it.

We'll just trust my... Hopefully, I haven't forgotten everything I learned as a plebe about committing things to memory. One of the first things that we need to know is something we talked about briefly last time and that's the composition of the population up in the Lycus Valley. As I mentioned last week, we have some historical records.

We know that based on the temple tax that was seized by Antiochus II in the amount of 20 talents of gold that was on its way down to Jerusalem, that working backwards from a half-shekel tax, we know that there were some 11,000 Jewish males in the area. So the point is, there's a substantial Jewish population up in the region. These Jews, where did they come from? Where do all the Jews come from? They come from Israel.

What do we know about Judaism in Israel? Is it a monolithic? Is it all one? Everybody believes exactly the same thing in Israel? What sort of religion or what sort of diversity of religion can you think of in Israel? We know of two very prominent types of religion. We think about the Pharisees and Sadducees. If you spend any time looking at the Dead Sea Scrolls, 1948, a kid chasing goats throws a rock in a cave and here's the clink of breaking pottery and out come these scrolls.

After studying those, they've decided that these came from a community that lived at Qumran. Do you remember what they think those people were? The manual of discipline and so forth. The warfare between the sons of light and the sons of darkness.

They concluded from all this that maybe they were Essenes. That's E-S-S-E-N-E-S. There has been some speculation that perhaps John the Baptist was one of the monolithic ways.

Asceticism, if you've never tried to spell that before, that's an A-S-C word, A-S-C-E-T-I-C-I-S-M, I

believe. Asceticism is self-denial and other religions also practice asceticism. You see the holy men who sit at the side of the road and live on bean sprouts and have no worldly possessions.

People used to actually wear hair shirts, wear a shirt that would afflict them and scratch their skin. The Essenes believed in this self-denial, the Spartan life, the hard life. The Essenes, there were two factions and we know this from Josephus.

You've probably heard the name Josephus. Josephus was a Jewish historian who wrote. He was actually a contemporary of the Apostle Paul.

A little bit of difference in age there, but they were alive at the same time. And Josephus himself had once been an Essene. And the reason we have the writings of Josephus, partly because he was trying to write a defense in the Roman Empire, in the Roman culture, of Israel and Judaism.

And so he describes the Pharisees and the Sadducees and he also spent some time describing the Essenes. And because he had been one, we know a good deal about them. And Josephus tells us that there were two different kinds of Essenes.

There was sort of a liberal wing and a conservative wing of the Essenes. The conservative Essenes, I guess you would call them conservative, the right-wing Essenes or the more radical in terms of asceticism, did not believe in marriage. They believed that, of course they were all men, and they believed that the women's wiles and their deceptive ways and so forth were a corrupting influence on them and they were just going to stay away from women.

They thought that was a source of distraction and all kinds of problems. The milder form of Essenism would marry, but they would put their wife on a three-year probation. They would try her out for three years and see if it in fact was a big distraction or not.

And I'm not quite sure what happened if they decided at the end of the three years that it wasn't working out, but they believed in a probationary period of marriage. But they had some ideas that were the precursors of what would later be called Gnosticism, where the idea was that things that are material, things that are a part of the world, corrupt. And it's only when you concentrate on things that are out of the body or away from the body, spiritual things, that's where truth and beauty and genuine value lies.

And you can see the danger as soon as I say that. Because there is an element of truth in that, isn't there? It is ultimately what goes on in our soul that counts. Genuine good, divine righteousness, and so forth are intangibles.

And we know that it is not what you do, but why you do it. It's the motivation, it's the thoughts and intents of the heart that count. And you can see that by taking that truth and twisting it just a little, you can produce a significant distortion.

This distortion was, well, since truth and beauty and nobility and value are all in the invisible

world, and the visible world is what corrupts, it's matter and the body and the material things that corrupt, we're going to concentrate on the immaterial and the spiritual, and we're going to ignore the things of the body. And this is where asceticism comes in. I don't need to cater to my body.

Paul says, I will bring my body into subjection. And they would say, Amen. That's a good solid Essene idea.

But they went further. In some cases, of course, it's unnatural to avoid marriage as a policy for an entire community. Your community is not going to last very long if you don't have marriage.

They probably tolerated the liberal wing so they could have some future generation of Essenes. But they moved from asceticism and self-denial to thinking that, well, because everything of the body is so mundane and unimportant and doesn't matter, then they said, Oh yeah, it doesn't matter. So the body doesn't matter.

The body is sinful and so forth. So what I do with my body doesn't really matter. And so then they began to justify ignoring any sins that were committed in the body because it isn't the body that counts, it's the spirit.

As long as my soul is thinking high thoughts, it doesn't matter what my body does. So I can let my body go and start doing these unwholesome things, immoral things, wrong things. Why not go ahead and drink and so forth? The body is all corrupt and sinful anyway, so what's a little more corruption than sin? So what if I visit the prostitutes or engage in other illicit activities? Everything of the body is all transient and corrupt anyway.

And so they would start to fool themselves into thinking that they could be high-minded and engage in all sorts of hanky-panky in the body. So this begins to tell us what the problem is that Epaphras brings to Paul. Because if you wanted to put this in a nutshell, I can give it to you in two words.

Twisted truth. It is much easier to cope with an outright error. If somebody comes out here and tattoos I love Satan on their forehead and begins to draw pentagrams and sacrifice goats, it's a pretty straightforward identification.

Here is a bad thing. This is not good. This is not healthy.

We don't want our community promoting, tolerating, engaging in this terrible thing. Murder, rape, terrible things are easy to identify and easy to point out why they're not a part of a Christian's life. And I've used some very gross examples.

What's difficult is when something that is not inherently evil becomes evil. When something that is in actuality a part of the truth is twisted into something bad, something that doesn't carry the big sin label, doesn't carry the big evil, that doesn't sprout fangs and horns and a tail, and it slips

under our guard. We say, well, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with this.

This is a good thing. This may even be a biblical thing. This is something that is a part of a healthy believer's life, so doing this or pursuing this can't be bad.

When you take something that's true, like the one we've just used for illustration, we try to focus on the cultivation of our soul. It's God who is at work in us to will and to do. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

The Word of God is profitable for reproof, correction and instruction in our souls. It divides us. It pierces inside and is a critic of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Jesus said, it's not what comes out of a man, or what goes into him that corrupts him, it's what proceeds out of the heart, what proceeds out of the mouth. The things that take place on the inside determine whether or not you are corrupt. We understand that truth, but you can take that truth and by just spinning it about 30 degrees, you end up with a horrendous error.

This became the incipient Gnosticism. The seeds were being planted of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was the worship of knowledge for its own sake, cultivation of the soul and the mind, and completely ignoring anything going on in the body.

It doesn't really matter if you commit adultery, it doesn't matter if you lie, it doesn't matter if you steal, that's all in the body and it's all corrupt anyway. Everything in this world is passing away, so don't worry about it. Just have some high-minded thoughts every so often, cultivate your mind, learn some deep mystery truths, and you're all fine.

This was the terrible thing that you begin to see addressed more and more clearly in the Bible, such as in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation. But back to Colossians. Twisted truth is what Epaphras came up against and ran out of ideas on how to cope with it.

Because Epaphras could teach a truth and the people in the community would say, that's great, we believe that truth, and yet they would turn right around and twist it and abuse it. Continuing to teach the truth, in some ways, almost seemed to be encouraging those who were in error. So what we want to look at is, how was the truth being twisted? What was it, specifically, that was being put forward in the community there in the Lycus Valley, that took wonderful, biblical, beautiful truth of God and turned it on its head in such a way that Epaphras just stood there with his mouth open, not knowing what to do next.

We're going to pause here and take our break. When we come back, we're going to see the elements of what has come to be called the Colossian heresy. That which Paul addresses in this very important letter that's under our scrutiny this evening.

But let's pause and take a break.