

98-09-18a Colossians

Let's prepare ourselves for the study of God's Word this evening with a word of prayer. We thank you, Father, as always, for the privilege of coming into your presence in a unique way through the study of your Word. We thank you for the ministry of your Spirit.

We thank you for the standing and the place that we enjoy in your plan, especially the relationship that we have with you through our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray tonight as we study Paul's letter to the Colossians that God the Holy Spirit will give us insight and understanding, not only of the words on paper and the concepts that are introduced, but the meaning that these things have in our thinking and in our lives. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. We resume tonight in Colossians chapter 1. And since it's been a week or two since I reminded you, I'm going to remind all of us once again of the situation into which this letter comes. You have a town that has become something of a backwater.

Civilization and progress seem to be passing it by. It's small. The church there is small.

It meets in a home. Outside ideas have been introduced that suggest that maybe the teaching the Colossian believers have received is not completely correct or is not complete. That they don't have everything they need.

They haven't been told all of what they should know about life and how to please God. That they are missing out. That they need to add something or need to change in some way from what they are doing.

Add something to their lifestyle. Add something to their activities or to their way of life to truly be fulfilled, to truly maximize their lives before God. This, of course, reflects a variation on the theme that prevailed in the church from its earliest days, beginning with the Jews who felt like the Jewish religion, both that which was based on the Bible and all of its additions, accretions, and distortions, that these things were necessary to complete and fulfill one's life before God.

If you were going to have a relationship with God, you've got to keep the law. Well, now we have variations on that theme. Well, you don't necessarily have to keep the law of Moses, but here are some things you do need to do.

We have this same experience today. There are many winds that blow in the doctrinal realm today as far as what makes for a healthy, fulfilled, fruit-bearing Christian life. It is commonly asserted that we need to have accountability to one another, that we need to open up and be vulnerable, that we need to be mentored, that we need to model.

There's a whole litany of teachings that are not based on scriptural truth. They have the ring of truth. They have the sound of truth.

They often use the vocabulary of truth. They can make scriptural defense of what they state and what they teach. Those are the most difficult errors to detect because they have scripture floating around in the punch bowl there.

They have argument that seems to make sense on the surface. How do we sort out truth from error? How do we sort out the things that are truly edifying and up-building and the things that wind up distracting and taking us off in directions that are not a part of God's best will for our lives? Epaphras had that question for his group in Colossae. People were coming in and presenting these things.

Epaphras, as everybody at that point, is a relatively new pastor. There aren't pastors who have been pastoring churches for decades and decades because the church itself is very new. So Epaphras faced with this, these pressures from society, pressures from culture.

It's not just pressure from within Christianity to change or to distort or to water down and dilute. It's also outside pressures. Well, you're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good and you're not making a difference in the world.

The world throws rocks at Christians sometimes because they say, well, if you're a Christian, how come you're not more involved in save the children and feed the hungry and clothe the homeless and so forth? And again, it has the ring of truth. Well, doesn't the Bible say that God cares about widows and orphans? Doesn't God make a point of saying that this is the measure of true religion? Jesus says, I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison and you visited me and so forth.

And so people can go to these and make a case that your Christianity is not complete if you can't point to visible actions and visible ministries and concrete results that you are producing day by day in your life. And this is very unsettling. It makes us insecure.

It makes us a little depressed and introspective and it shakes our confidence in the teaching that we have had that tells us the nature of the Christian life, the life that we have studied in many parts of the Word of God over many, many weeks and months and years that tells us that our life before God is primarily an exercise in letting God do his work in us and through us rather than going out and engaging in our own work. And there is a subtle difference. Two people can go out and clothe the naked.

Two people can go out and visit the sick and afflicted. Two people can engage in a visible ministry. One is pleasing God and the other is causing God to wince.

It's based on what happens in our soul. We have to be the recipients of God's grace and God's work before we can be the vessel of God's grace and God's work. And people say, the argument comes back, well then, are you saying that new believers and believers who are not far along on the road to maturity shouldn't go out and engage in any ministry and so forth? It isn't a matter of

spiritual age or spiritual maturity.

It's a matter of why we do what we do. And as we grow, as we spend time in God's Word and under the ministry of God's Spirit, we develop to a greater and greater degree the ability to function in a way that pleases God and in a way that bears that genuine fruit of the Spirit. But this isn't an easy thing to explain.

There are a lot of debates going around in our country today about corruption in government and policies and politics and economics and one thing and another. And there's always the sound bite. There's the quick, catchy argument, the statement that people make, well, the polls indicate this and the mood of the country is that and the people just want to put it behind them and get on with it and so forth.

And people often allow themselves to be convinced by this kind of talking and this kind of thinking, well, that seems to be the mood, that seems to be the flow, I'll just stay kind of in the middle of the crowd here and no one will argue with me or think that I'm odd or strange or out of step. When in fact we have to pause and remember that we are called to be odd and strange and out of step. We have been challenged to walk a narrow road through a straight gate that leads to life and Jesus said there are few who find it.

We are not going to find ourselves in the majority. We're not going to find ourselves in a stadium with thousands of cheering individuals all of like mind. It is not the popular, not the common, not the easily grasped.

God has arranged things in his plan in such a way that the great truth and the hidden manna comes to those who ask and seek and knock, who are diligent. First part of Proverbs chapter 2, you lay up the word of God in your heart, you seek it, you search for it, you cry out for it, you lift up your voice for it, you spend time mining it and getting it out from beneath the surface. God doesn't put pearls up in the swine yard.

You know where pearls originate, down under the water. Somebody has to hold their breath and dive a long way down to grab an oyster and get those pearls. Things that are valuable, things that are precious are valuable and precious because they're rare and they're difficult to obtain.

When the streets are all paved with gold, nobody is going to be hoarding gold and being miserly and greedy about it because it's going to be literally as common as dirt. Things that are common as dirt aren't valuable. The same sort of environment and the same sorts of factors were at work in Epaphras' day, in the days of the Colossian believers as we have around us today.

The clothing was a little different. The type of media was a little different. There was much more face-to-face conversation in the markets and among people.

But it's essentially the same challenge. So this book is very important to us. The answer that Paul

gives, that Epaphras went to Paul to get to this problem, that's what's in this book.

We've seen how Paul begins because he lays out for them and reminds them of the essentials, faith, hope, and love. He says, you all are doing well. I've heard of your faith.

I've heard of your hope. I've heard of your love. We've spent a little time reviewing the direction of those things and the place that they hold as the great triad of Christian virtues.

Faith is the means of living our life. We walk by faith and not by sight. Without faith, it is impossible to please God.

Faith is the substance of what we hope for. It's the evidence of what we can't see with our eyes. Faith is the means of laying hold of that hidden treasure.

Again, how do you find that rare and precious commodity of truth and of worthy walk before God? It takes faith. It takes faith in the right things for the right reasons. That's what Paul is going to encourage us in in this book.

He does so by reminding us of his prayer. He says, I pray that you will be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding because this is the key. Those who are mature, Hebrews tells us in the end of chapter 5, mature believers have their senses exercised to discern good, to discern evil.

Paul's prayer is that we come to discern the better things. Not only be able to discern between good and bad, right and wrong, but when we're looking at several good things, to discern the best. It's good to nurture your family.

It's good to spend time with family members. It's also good to engage in ministry and it's good to engage in your occupation or your vocation or your work. How do you balance those? They're all good things.

You don't say, well, I have a sinful job, so that answers that question, or I have a sinful family, I'll just separate from them, or I've engaged in sin in the area of Christian ministry, so I'll just cut that out. These are all good things, but we have to set priorities. We have to decide when and where and how and how long we operate in those various spheres.

That's a measure of maturity, learning to discern the better things. That's also something Paul is going to talk to us about in Colossians. So it's a wonderful book, a relatively short letter, but where we have arrived in our study of it after reviewing Paul's greeting and his commendation of the Colossian believers there in the little house church that meets in Philemon's house, talking about faith, hope and love and the review of the prayer that he prays for them, which outlines the goals that we should all have as believers, he shifts to focusing on Jesus Christ.

The reason that this is important at all, the reason any of this matters is because Jesus Christ,

who is at the very center and focus point of God the Father's plan, came and did something unique, did something that has never been seen before, opened up a way to the presence of the Father that did not exist in Old Testament days. Adam didn't have access to it. Noah, Moses, David, Daniel, Isaiah, John the Baptist, none of them had the access to God the Father that we have.

None of them was promised the opportunity for the indwelling presence of God the Father. In the Old Testament days, the presence of God the Father dwelt in unapproachable glory behind curtains and walls and veils. In this age, that same living presence of God is within us.

God the Father and God the Son will come and make their homes within us. It's an earth shattering. These are things that angels longed to see, that Moses looked forward to and ached in his heart.

Moses had to stand on a mountain and ask God to walk by and show him his glory. We can have that glory within, but we are so casual and take it for granted and miss things that people would literally have given anything for as believers who understood the value of presence and fellowship with God in the Old Testament. This is what Paul is leading up to in the section we're studying where we resume our study tonight because we are going to arrive again in chapter 1 verse 27 where God has made known the mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Christ in you, the hope of glory. He's moved from Christ that he reviewed from the divine perspective as the creator, the originator, the forerunner and the purpose for all things that have been created. He shifted perspective and talked about Jesus Christ as the firstborn from the dead, the head of the church, the unique person in the universe that bridges the gap between humanity and divinity, that bridges the gap between man and God.

What does that mean to us when we ask ourselves the question, granted Jesus Christ is the focus point and is unique in the universe and God has worked incredible things through him, what does that mean to me? What it means to me, what it means to us is opportunity. Christ in you, the hope of glory. How do we lay hold of that? Well, Paul says, look at where you came from.

If you're having trouble and sometimes, this has happened to me and if it's happening to you, don't feel bad. I have sat in my share of sermons over the course of my young life from the earliest days that I can remember. I have sat in church and listened to sermons and pastors have waxed eloquent.

Teachers have waxed profound about the opportunities that we have as believers, the grace of God that is available to us. And I sometimes find myself unable to catch the view that's being presented. It just doesn't quite compel me.

I think, well, that's all fine, but I've got a life to live. I'm here, I've got problems, I've got failures, I

have circumstances and all of this sounds great while I'm sitting here in the pew or sitting here in the chair, but when I get up and resume my real life, that all kind of fades and dissolves and I'm back to tables and chairs and doors and stairways and cars and the daily visible things of life. And I can't really maintain the golden glow of heavenly things all the time and what am I missing? Where am I failing? Because then you really get depressed.

You think, well, I ought to be just constantly motivated and compelled by these things. And then because we realize we're not, then we feel twice as bad because not only are we not compelled, but we know we should be and we feel guilty about it. Well, Paul says, knowing that this is the situation he is writing into from afar, he begins to answer this question and address this problem.

What does he do? He begins, he transitions from talking about Jesus Christ, these heavenly glorious things that we have trouble really catching the glory of and holding on to. He says, look, in verse 21, you were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works. He has reconciled you.

Just start with the basics. Go back to the absolute truth of where you were and where you are. Sometimes to get your mind into heaven, you've got to build a ladder.

You've got to have Jacob's ladder or you've got to have an ascension process of some sort. You can't just have a flash thought and immediately have a sense of eternal things and divine things. We have to concentrate our way into awareness.

It is not unlike other tasks in life. All of us have them. Some of us need to gain weight or gain strength or gain fitness or cardiovascular or whatever.

Other people say, well, I need to lose weight or I need to not eat as much or I need to cut down on certain kinds of food or I need to get rid of a habit. I've got some sort of a habit that's detrimental or whatever. We would like to think that we could just have a thought that whenever we are under pressure in this area and somebody puts a big bowl of dessert out there or the alarm goes off at 5.30 in the morning, you think, I really don't want to run this morning.

It's probably cold. It's dark. The motivation is lacking.

We think, well, there's got to be one thought. I can just think that thought and suddenly I'll be charged up. I'll be like Popeye after a can of spinach, get out there and just do everything I need to do.

It never happens, does it? How do people get on a track and stick with it? It's not one big inspiring thought. It is a series of small steps. We start by thinking about the facts.

What are the facts? I know where I was. I know where I am. And I know where I need to go.

We have to concentrate ourselves into where we need to be. This is an exercise of the mind. The

reason it doesn't happen very often is that it takes a little bit of work.

Anything that requires work, you've automatically weeded out a goodly portion of the human race. Sometimes we're even in that portion. In the realm of spiritual things, if we find ourselves not quite able to get our motor running, start at the beginning.

Start at the basics. It doesn't matter how many years we've been saved or how long we've been in the church or how many people think of us as a paragon of Christian virtue. When we run out of gas in our spirit, where do we get refueled? It's the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

That's where the power resides. It doesn't reside in a vision. I cannot tell you how many times I have been depressed by people saying, where there is no vision, the people will perish, so you've got to have a vision.

If you want to live the Christian life, you've got to have a vision. If you want to engage in ministry, you have to have a vision. No, you don't have to have a vision.

What you have to have is truth. Truth is not a vision. Truth is a collection of facts.

Truth in the spiritual realm, truth from the Word of God, contains within it. It's like uranium. It has inherent power.

It's like a radioactive substance. All truth is not God's truth. The fact that 2 plus 2 equals 4, the fact that Oklahoma City is the capital of the state to our north, these facts are true, but they don't carry power.

Truth from the Word of God is inherently powerful. The Bible says of itself, the Word of God is alive. It's living and it is powerful.

It has a dynamic force within it. So when we find ourselves powerless, when we find ourselves faithless, when we find ourselves clueless, the thing to do is stop and concentrate on small pieces of truth and build those pieces of truth into a framework in our thought life that will eventually elevate us to where we can see and glimpse the glory and the potential of what God has put before us. But it's not a flash thought.

You can't just flip a switch and suddenly be transported to the heavenly realms and be motivated by all the hope of the glory of God. Nor can you flip a switch and suddenly experience the fullness of the indwelling of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of God the Father. These things are all wrapped together and they come by a process.

They come by time spent by establishing a pattern of thought, a pattern of priorities, a pattern just like these other things I mentioned. If you want to lose weight or gain weight or put on muscle or break a habit or whatever, what do you do? It's not a one-shot decision. It is a pattern of decisions.

It's a pattern of thought. It's remembering that you have a goal, that you have something that you don't want to lose. You have something that you want to gain.

You have something that's more precious. You can ask anybody. Most people who have a failure in some area and then have a sense of remorse, their basic set of values has never changed.

There are people who get caught up in a wave of whatever and do something they sincerely wish they had never done. They may break their marriage vows. They may abuse a substance.

They may say or do something that they can't take back. And it doesn't really reflect their normal priorities and their true loves and their true values. It is an aberration.

Well, how can you keep that from happening? Somebody who, and I have, especially in the Marine Corps, had a chance to observe a lot of people who developed substance problems. Seventy-five to eighty percent of all the Marines I was ever around smoked. Eighty-five, ninety percent of them drank and drank heavily and drank to excess.

How do you break the grip of something like that? How do you keep something like that from overpowering you? It isn't in the grip of a big remorse saying, gosh, I'm never going to do that again and having some sort of a crisis, catharsis experience. It is reminding yourself daily, I have things that are too important to me to lose. I don't want to lose my health.

I don't want to lose my family. I don't want to lose the respect of my peers. And to keep these priorities and these known facts, this is what I have.

I have a great family. I have a good working body that God gave me. I have these things.

We start with these small truths and build them and concentrate on them and keep them fresh and circulating in our thinking. It gives us something to keep. It gives us something to hold on to.

Something that you're not going to sacrifice these wonderful, long-lasting things for a momentary pleasure or a momentary gratification. But these things have to be real and they have to be in the forefront of your mind. You can't be ignoring them and not thinking about them.

I think a lot of marital affairs and extramarital affairs begin when people don't stop and count their blessings and think about the things that are good and noble and lovely and of good report. They just don't think at all. Things get taken for granted.

Things become routine. Things just fade into the decor. And then something flashy comes along, some sudden opportunity that's stimulating and people throw over.

And then in the cold light of dawn look back and realize what wonderful things. Well, why weren't they thinking about those wonderful things the night before, the day before, the week before and nurturing and building up those things? We have to decide what we value, what matters to us and

think on these things. That's when the peace of God that passes understanding keeps our hearts and minds.

So this is where Paul begins. These people are caught up in a maelstrom of conflicting ideas and people telling them one thing and telling them another just like we have today. So where does Paul begin after his introduction and his review of the goal and his review of the person that made the goal possible? In verse 21 he says, look, remember where you came from.

You were once enemies. You were once alienated in your mind. You were trapped in wicked works.

You didn't have the choice to do anything but wickedness. You have been reconciled because Jesus Christ became flesh. This tremendous person that has been described in these preceding verses, he cared about you.

He came and reconciled you in the body of his flesh. He sacrificed himself on your behalf. One of the most compelling motivations in human life is gratitude and feeling that you owe someone that debt of gratitude.

You want to do right by them because they have done right by you. We read books about life on the prairie when neighbors really meant something. People didn't get all out of sorts with their neighbors over small things because neighbors were valuable to have.

You would help them knowing that at some point you might need their help. People came together. Someone's barn burned down.

All the neighbors gathered and helped build a new one. If fire threatened or famine threatened or disease threatened or whatever, people banded together and worked together. If someone came over, we read in the little house books where there was this fire sweeping through and threatened to burn up the apple orchard that was their entire future.

All the neighbors came over and worked all through the night with wet toe sacks and buckets of water and rakes and hoes. Everybody just worked themselves to the bone. They were all completely muddy and black and filthy and everything else worked for 14, 16, 18 hours and kept the orchard from burning down.

This orchard that takes five years to reach the point of bearing any fruit. These neighbors who came literally saved the future for this family. Without that orchard, they couldn't stay on the land.

They could never get out of debt or do anything. And so they had a sense of gratitude to those neighbors and they're constantly aware. I would have nothing if it wasn't for these who sacrificed themselves on my behalf.

Well, magnify that a thousand fold, a hundred thousand fold. That's the attitude we should have

about our Savior. Jesus Christ has done far more than keep our orchard from burning down.

He has given us a future that lasts eternally. He's given us a standing with God. You can't even begin to enumerate the things that Jesus Christ has given us.

How did we receive those things? He sacrificed Himself on our behalf. We were reconciled through the body of His flesh. Well, what happened to the body of His flesh? It was bruised.

It was wounded. It was crushed. He suffered indignities.

He suffered humiliations. He suffered shamefully at our hands in the process of doing something for us that's eternal. That's a good place to start our thinking.

When we start feeling sorry for ourselves, we start thinking, woe is me. My life's a mess. My pressures are great.

My blessings are few. We get this preponderance of the first person singular pronoun going on in our thinking. We turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face.

And the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and His grace, as the song so aptly says. So this is where Paul turns. Epaphras comes to him and says the people are getting distracted.

All this teaching's coming in. They're losing confidence. They're getting insecure.

They don't know if what I'm teaching is true or not. Where does Paul begin? How does he restore them to the narrow path and the upward way? He turns his attention to Jesus Christ and reminds them of what a great Savior we have and what He has done for us because that settles us down. That gives us these small facts to build into our thinking to base our rebuild, to base our recovery, to base our reorientation on.

It has to have a foundation and that foundation is Jesus Christ. No other foundation can be laid. We don't base it on everybody will be happy over there.

We don't base it on every cloud has a silver lining. We don't base it on well, other people have had this problem and they got through. Go join them in a support group and let them comfort you and cry with you and be with you.

The Bible says that there is a place for weeping with those who weep, but the foundation is Jesus Christ and that's where we turn our attention. So Paul says, He has reconciled you in the body of His flesh through death. There is no greater sacrifice than a man laying down his life for his friend.

That's what Jesus Christ did for you. That's what Jesus Christ did for me. That's a good place to start building or rebuilding objectivity in our thinking.

In the body of His flesh through death, He has reconciled. Has this thought ever occurred to us when we were under stress or having problems or whatever? Have we ever sat down right in the middle of the whole thing? Decisions have to be made and the pressure is on and the fur is flying and everything is bleak and the lightning and thunder are going off in the background. Do we ever just pull ourselves up short and stop and think, Jesus Christ came to earth and died to give me this life.

Jesus Christ has redeemed me with His own blood. I belong to Him. The only reason I am even alive drawing breath is because of Him.

I was created for Him. He is the purpose for which I even exist to have these problems. There is a reason why He has gone to such great lengths to prepare this exact set of circumstances for me.

And to start with Jesus Christ just as Paul does and realize that He is the originator, He is the first and the last. He is the author of creation, He is the author of salvation, and He is the purpose for those things. And to start by focusing on not ourselves and the maelstrom swirling around us, but Jesus Christ and where we are in relationship to Him.

That's what these verses do for us. He's reconciled us in the body of His flesh through death for a purpose. And what is the purpose? Prosperity, lack of problems, great health, great material goods, wonderful relationships.

What's the purpose? Those things are not necessarily bad, but that's not the purpose. The purpose is to present us holy, blameless, and above reproach in His sight. Not in our sight, not in the world's sight, in His sight.

How do we avail ourselves of that opportunity? We will be holy and blameless and above reproach in His sight, verse 23, if indeed you continue in the faith grounded and steadfast and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel. We let ourselves get distracted and we let people and circumstances rob us of our hope by blinding us to it, by obscuring it. We were singing just a couple of weeks ago when I was up at home, the hymn, I have resolved no longer to linger charmed by the world's delights, things that are higher, things that are nobler.

These have, and I can't even remember the right words to it now because I used to think it said these have obscured my sight, but I think it's that these have allured my sight. But we ought to be looking at the higher, nobler things. That's how we avoid being moved away from the hope of the gospel.

Paul says, You've heard it. It was preached to every creature under heaven and it is a gospel of which I, Paul, became a minister. So now, interestingly, Paul has transitioned from looking at the believers themselves, their faith, their hope, their love, and their goal in his prayer, the process by which they will be brought to maturity.

He's looked at Jesus Christ from two different perspectives. He's returned to believers and he said, You were over here in the darkness. Now you're in the light with all of these possibilities through the gospel of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Now in this next section, he's going to talk about himself a little bit. His ministry and his stewardship of the mystery of the gospel. This is a good place for us to pause and take our break.

When we come back, we want to revisit this statement that Paul makes in verse 24 when he says, I now rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ. What does this mean and why does Paul say it to us? That's where we'll resume shortly.