

98-11-06a Colossians

Let's begin our study of the Word of God this evening with a word of prayer. Father, we thank you for your wonderful grace. We thank you for the transforming effect of your power in our lives.

We thank you that we enjoy the standing that we have in Jesus Christ. We have a secure future. We have the opportunity to redeem the time and make the most of the life that you have given us.

We recognize the circumstances that you have placed us in. We know that everything works together for good in our lives when we love you and when we recognize our calling and pursue it. We pray tonight as we study the truth of the Scriptures that God the Holy Spirit will be with us, give us insight, understanding, and remembrance of these things.

We pray that they will become a part of the resources in our soul to strengthen and sustain us and to enable us to live in a way that's pleasing in your sight. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

As we return tonight to the epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians, we find ourselves at the end of chapter 1 and preparing to begin chapter 2. Partly because we have digressed into several different areas and partly because I was not completely satisfied with my ability to organize some of this material as we went through it the first time. We are tonight going to summarize chapter 1 from the standpoint of concepts. What is it that we should know now as a result of having studied the first portion of Paul's letter? Right now, if we couldn't pursue our study in Colossians any further, what should we have gleaned from this portion of God's word? What do we know about the Colossian church, first of all? This is a non-formal point, but it is helpful to remember the context into which a letter is written.

You recall that Colossi is no longer a premier city. It's not necessarily the place of opportunity that it had been several hundred years earlier. People in the region perceive the opportunities and the growth and the excitement and the youth and the stimulation to be elsewhere.

This is sort of a quiet, it reminds us of Midwest towns where the buildings are older and the streets are narrower and life is slower. The median age is older. The stores are old-fashioned.

Not as many neon lights. Not as many young people walking the streets. Sort of a has-been, yesteryear sort of a place.

People who live in such a place might think, well, I'm not really in the mainstream. I'm not pulsing with the vitality of the forward movement of God's plan and God's purpose. We have two things in Colossians that remind us that this is a very shallow, superficial view.

In some cases, believers even use this as an excuse to not really pursue the heavenly calling. To say, well, I'm not active in the Billy Graham crusade. I'm not a member of a church with all kinds

of ministry opportunities.

I'm not plugged into the network of vital, energized, growing, active types of ministry. I'm just sort of in a backwater. I'm not really in the mainstream.

We then sort of excuse ourselves from any further diligence or any further vigilance in watching for opportunities to serve and to grow and to exercise the things that God has placed in our souls. And this is due partly to a misapprehension, because especially in our culture and in Christian society today, it is the prevailing view. It is perceived that, well, you have to hook up with an organization.

You have to be a part of some sort of formal ministry effort. An active evangelistic crusade or an active discipling ministry before you can really be hitting on all eight cylinders spiritually. There was this sort of talk going around in Colossae.

You all are not really with it. You're in the backwaters. You're out of the mainstream.

You don't have all of the things that are necessary for you to really grow in Christ and be mature and please God. You need to be doing and participating and thinking about some other things. This is, in general, the nature of the error that was swirling around the Lycus Valley and Colossae in particular.

And that's the reason Epaphras went to Paul all the way over in Rome and said, Paul, I'm having trouble confirming and stabilizing and encouraging the people that they're not on the outs. That they aren't somehow insufficient and lacking. Well, how many of us have ever had that feeling? That because of our circumstances, because of our situation, we are tied down in some way.

We're limited in some way. We're not plugged in to the places that other people are plugged in. We don't seem to have the exposure, the opportunity to do certain things.

Well, as you recall from the introduction to this book, this is the situation into which Paul writes this letter. He's writing to people who feel just the way we have felt. And so we want to keep that in the back of our mind as we review the concepts that we find in this first chapter of Colossians.

And we find this idea confirmed in chapter 1, verse 1. And so what I'd like to do now is to give you a series of short points on the sections of chapter 1 that we have studied. This first section, we're going to summarize the introduction of the letter, the greeting that Paul gives in verses 1 and 2. It begins, of course, by saying, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. And we want to pause and reflect just for a moment on that phrase.

Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. Who decided that Paul was an apostle? Did Paul work and strive and angle to get himself at the feet of Gamaliel and sidle up next to Peter and John and say, oh please, can I join the apostle club and so forth? Paul was a Pharisee. Paul was persecuting Christians.

He was on his way to Damascus to go round up some more. God knew Paul's heart. He knew that he had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge.

He knew that once he was confronted square in the face with the issue of Jesus Christ, he would recognize Christ for who he was. And all of that wonderful Old Testament knowledge and background would kick in and Paul would fill the place that was still vacant. There were supposed to be 12 apostles and there were only 11.

And as one born out of time, Paul would fill that gap. He was a man after God's heart in that sense. Jesus Christ personally commissioned Paul to be an apostle.

Chosen just like he chose Matthew and John and Peter and so forth. Our place, and this is our first point of summary of the introduction, our place in the body of Christ is assigned according to the will of God. You and I are exactly where we are by the will of God.

You are a housewife or a mother or a father or a businessman or an employee or you could be in the military. You could be someone's child in a household. Wherever you find yourself, that's at this point a part of the will of God.

We are all in the will of God. We have been fitted into the body of Christ by the will of God. Each of us is unique.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit in us and through us is unique. Some of us are uniquely gifted in the area of teaching. Others of us are uniquely gifted in the area of child training or of encouragement or of administration or of prayer or of faith.

That gift of faith is an often misunderstood subject that we've covered in other places. It doesn't mean that God just chooses to pour a great deal of faith into our soul. It means that when the chips are down and when it's time to act in faith, here's someone who has the perception to see clearly.

This happens a lot in churches where you have someone on the board. The board is considering a decision and out of ten people, nine of them are convinced that they need to take a certain step. But there's one individual there that says, you know, any organization could go to the bank and finance this new education building and go into deep debt.

Why don't we do this on faith? Why don't we trust God to bring this money in advance and spend what He brings us? And if He gives us the wherewithal to expand, we expand. Rather than obligating ourselves and placing ourselves in debt when we don't even know if the growth we're experiencing will last. That's just an illustration.

There are people who are uniquely gifted at critical points to see clearly the way of faith. It's a gift of faith. And they minister that insight and that perception to other believers.

All of us have had the experience, I think, of being around someone who when we are a little bit thrown by the way things have turned out, it's not the way we expected. We're trying to see, well, what would be the best thing to do? And there are other people involved. Should we take course A? Should we take course B? There's someone in the periphery, maybe a family member, maybe a friend, or somebody from the blue that lives in another state or something.

And we're talking to them on the phone or chatting with them via email or something. And we say, you know, I'm kind of in a quandary here. And that person has a precious insight, maybe offered in a very casual fashion, that just clears the fog out of the air.

And you say, of course. Why didn't I see that? It's a gift of faith. A gift of seeing the way of faith when things are confusing, when things are uncertain.

Each of us has a gift. And many times we don't even have a name for it. We don't have a little school to go to.

You know, teachers and pastors can go to seminary and hang a thing on the wall. I am seminary trained. I have some set of letters I can put after my name or whatever.

But most gifts are not so easily identified. And a lot of them don't have any sort of formal training. It's a gift of the Spirit.

We're trained in the Spirit. We're trained in the school of life. And it's a ministry to the body.

So, if we find ourselves living in Colossae, and we find that we don't have any particular letters after our name, we don't have any particular blazing meteor trail across the sky that we're making, it's easy for the enemy and it's easy for the viewpoint of the world to make us discouraged, to make us depressed, to make us feel like we're useless. We don't count. We're not making a difference.

We're just an appendage. We're that extra quarter inch of hair hanging over the ears of the body of Christ. We don't have a useful function.

And it's not so. Don't let anyone make you think that you don't count, that you're not essential. And we find this in the very opening phrase of the book.

Paul says, I'm an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. Each one of us has our assigned place in the body of Christ by the will of God. Don't let anyone cheapen your place in the body of Christ.

Your place is vital. Your place is central. You are in the middle of an arena of angels and saints who are going to see the revealed glory of God when Christ is formed in you.

And one of the things that Paul is doing in writing this letter to the Colossians is saying, you know,

it doesn't matter that you're not living in Rome or you're not living in Ephesus or you're not living in one of the big thriving towns, that you're not down there in Laodicea. It doesn't matter that your church is small. It doesn't matter that your friends and acquaintances are few and that your opportunities seem limited.

The playing field, the arena, is the soul. And your soul is just as big as anyone else's. Your place was assigned by God with the same level of authority and the same level of power as any other saint in history.

And your every bit is important. And don't let anyone else diminish your place in the body of Christ. And don't let it be diminished in your own mind.

Our particular place, our circumstances, our challenges are vital in God's eyes. And He's just as concerned with the thoughts and intents of your heart as He was with the thoughts and intents of the heart of King David or the Apostle Paul or any other believer that has ever lived. It counts just as much.

In the new creation, it is true that all men are created equal. So our place, and that's our first point of summary in the introduction, our place in the body of Christ is assigned according to the will of God. Don't forget it.

There's a wonderful gospel song that was written by a lady and my favorite version of it is sung by Cheryl Nielsen who has a beautiful tenor voice. He was the tenor in the quartet that Jake Hess formed when he left the statesman called the Imperials. And the song says, Little is much when God is in it.

Labor not for earthly fame. There's a crown and you can win it if you go in Jesus' name. And the verse is just as good as the chorus.

It says, If the place you're called to labor seems so small and little known, it is great if God is in it. He will not forget his own. Secondly, Paul writes in verse 2 to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colossae.

He's writing to the sanctified ones. He's writing to the faithful brethren. He's not writing to just anyone.

Teaching is only valuable. Teaching only benefits the holy and faithful in Christ. If we are pursuing holiness, if we are pursuing righteousness, teaching will benefit us.

Believers who do not have a heart longing to fulfill the call, believers who do not have the hope of being presented faultless before the throne of grace, teaching does not benefit them. There's a great misapprehension circulating in the church that, well, I know where there's some really great teaching. If I could just get so-and-so to hear this teaching, it would do them a world of good.

If someone could just get under the sound of the teaching of the word of God, if I could just cajole them to come to church, if I could just coerce them to come to class, if I could just get them to listen while I'm playing a tape of good teaching, it would do them so much good. It can't be done. You have to be pursuing holiness.

You have to be pursuing faithfulness. Paul writes to the saints, the faithful brethren, teaching only benefits those who are seeking it. Otherwise, it is pearls before swine.

And as much as we may want to try to cajole or coerce or put pressure on someone, you can't crawl inside someone's soul and grab the steering wheel and turn them in a different direction. God the Holy Spirit is much better at that than any of us. He knows when and where and how.

We can pray. We can speak the truth in love. We also have to exercise self-control and forbearance and endurance where believers who are apathetic are concerned.

You can't change their mind. I can't change their mind. It is an issue between them and the Lord.

Teaching benefits those who are pursuing holiness and faithfulness. That's who Paul is writing to. If you want to be a saint, if you want to be a faithful brother in Christ, this book is for you.

That's to whom it is written. So those are our two points of summary on the introduction. The second section of this chapter is verses 3-12.

This is the summary as we saw when Paul was praying. He uses his prayer as a way to structure this information. Our first point of summary here out of this section, verses 3-12, the fruit of the word in our souls.

Remember what this says? Paul says in verse 3, We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ever since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints, because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word and the truth of the gospel. Now, if somebody else was writing this letter today in the popular church, what would they say? Oh, we've been giving glory to God ever since we heard of all the people that walk down your aisle, ever since we heard the number of your ministries and the fact that you've got a singles ministry, and a couples ministry, and a youth ministry, and an old folks ministry, and you've got a prison ministry, and you've got a visitation ministry in the old folks home, and you've got this ministry, and that ministry, and you've got this program, and that program, and you've got this radio, and that TV, and this book, and that tape. What is Paul impressed with? What is he grateful to God for? Faith, hope, and love.

And that's our first point of summary in this section. The fruit of the word of God in our souls is threefold. It's not measured in ministries.

It's not measured in impact. It's measured in faith, hope, and love. That's why you can be living in

Colossae.

That's why your assigned place in the body of Christ may be obscure. You may be hidden under the shirt collar somewhere. But you have just as much opportunity as any other believer to develop, to exercise, and to bear the fruit of faith, hope, and love.

Each of those has a direction. What is the direction for faith? It's faith in Christ. Find that in verse 4. What is the primary direction for love? Fellow believers, love for the saints.

Also in verse 4. What is the content of the hope that motivates us? It's the hope laid up in heaven, verse 5. Faith is the means. Hope is the motivation. Love is the result of this fruit in our souls.

That's the first point. Threefold fruit of the word in our souls. Why do we say it's the fruit of the word? Paul says, We've heard of this faith and hope and love that you have, which has come to you in the word of the truth of the gospel, in verse 5. That truth has come to you just as it has in all the world and is bringing forth fruit as it is also among you, ever since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth, the truth of the word.

The reason the Colossians have that fruit of faith, hope, and love is they've latched on to the truth of the word of grace. So, the second point of summary here, the word of truth is heard and understood. That's where the fruit comes from, hearing and understanding of the word.

And that word is communicated under the faithful ministry of teachers who communicate the grace of God. That's verses 5 through 7. How did they come to know that gospel of truth that produced that fruit in their souls? You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf. A diakonos, a waiter of the table.

He brings the tray with the food on it and sets it on your table. He places it before you. And if you partake, if you incorporate it into your soul, that fruit of faith, hope, and love is produced.

So, that's the second point. The word of truth is heard and understood under the faithful ministry of teachers who communicate the grace of God. Thirdly, our need is to be filled with the knowledge of God's will by means of all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

That's what we need. We think, well, I need money. I need opportunities.

I need friends. I need stability. I need problems to be solved.

I need obstacles to be removed. I need to get rid of baggage. I need to get rid of insecurity.

I need to get rid of my sinful nature. I need to get rid of this. I need, I need, I need, I need.

What do we really need? We need what Paul prays in verse 9. Our need is to be filled with the knowledge of God's will by means of all spiritual wisdom and understanding. That's what we need. That's what every believer needs.

If you have the chance to pray for another believer and you're not quite sure what to pray, here's what to pray. This is what Paul prays. He's praying for a group that he hasn't seen face to face.

He says, Ever since I heard about you, I do not cease to pray for you, in verse 9, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. What is the purpose of that knowledge? Is the knowledge just an end in itself? Remember 1 Corinthians 13. Knowledge puffs up.

Love builds up. Our fourth point. The purpose of knowing God's will is to lead a worthy, fully pleasing, fruitful life.

That fruit of faith, hope, and love. The way that we please God, the way that our life is worthwhile and counts in an eternal way is through the knowledge of God's will. I was listening to a lesson taught by my good friend Don Hargrove up in Tulsa, out of 2 Peter.

He made an excellent point in this regard, talking about the knowledge of God's will. You recall we did a whole study on divine guidance. But Don made an excellent point.

As I was listening to him on the way to work this morning, he said, if you think about it, people say, well, I wish that I knew God's will. I wish that I knew exactly where He wanted me to be and He would guide me in a very concrete, definite way and just tell me where I should be in life. He said, remember the Israelites in the Old Testament, when they came out of the land of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they had divine guidance in a very tangible, palpable way.

They had the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They knew exactly where God wanted them to be, didn't they? They knew exactly where God wanted them to be. But that alone didn't ensure their success as believers, did it? Because even with the clear knowledge of God's promise, the clear knowledge of God's geographical will, the demonstrated protection of divine power that surrounded them, even with all of those things in a concrete, visible manifestation right in front of them, they still failed.

Because it's not just the knowledge of where you should be that fulfills our need as believers. That knowledge has to result in faith. That knowledge has to become the object of trust.

If you trust when God says, I have led you here to this dry wilderness, I have led you here to this place where there appears to be insufficient food, I have led you to this place where you appear to have exposed flanks where you can be attacked, I have led you to this place where you are far from all of the comforts and securities that you think you remember back in Egypt. It requires faith. It's more than just knowledge.

We think if we just knew God's perfect will, our problems would be solved. Israel had that knowledge and they perished in the wilderness. Why? What does Hebrews say? The promises of

God were not mixed with faith in them that heard it.

They heard. They knew exactly what the will of God was. But you've got to apply faith.

It has to be real. It has to make a difference. So the purpose of knowing God's will is to lead a worthy, fully pleasing, fruitful life.

Our fifth point, the benefit of knowing God's will is fourfold. Strength, endurance, patience, and joy. We get this from verse 11.

The benefit of knowing God's will when we make it the object of our faith is strength, endurance, patience, and joy. These are the things we really need, aren't they, to get through our day, to live a life that's pleasing in God's sight. We need strength because we don't come equipped with divine strength as human beings.

We need endurance. You think about this. There are lots of sensitivities that we have in our interaction with other people, aren't there? We have family members.

We have friends. We have co-workers. Life is full of other people.

I've often thought, and it's not an original thought to me, but I agree with those who have said in the past that the world would be a really great place if there weren't so many people in it. California would be a wonderful state if there weren't so many Californians in it. I can say that because I'm from there.

People pose some of our greatest challenges, and it's hard because a lot of times those challenges slip up on us. It sneaks under our guard. It hits us when we're not looking.

We find ourselves in the midst of error before we even realize that the challenge came up. We need strength and we need endurance. What happens? We find our ego under attack.

We feel that we have been slighted or we have been misunderstood or we have been unappreciated or we have been ignored. We haven't received our due from others in some way. Somebody shortchanged us.

Somebody didn't think of us the way they should, didn't treat us the way they should. They said or they did or they failed to say or they failed to do something that nettled us. This is a word that came up in one of the books we were reading for the girls the other night.

Somebody was nettled, N-E-T-T-L-E-D. The girl was explaining to them what that meant. You know what nettles are.

Those little tiny stickers, little thorns. You're walking through the woods and you get into the nettles and those little tiny things get into your skin. Any single one of them isn't a big deal, but you get them in your skin and they just sit there and they work and they irritate and clothes rub

against them and it's bothersome and it chafes and you get more and more irritable and you can't get rid of them.

They're too small to see. They're too small to pull out. This is what happens inevitably because all of us have a sinful nature.

All of us in some way will fail. Everybody will fail everybody else. You have failed everybody you know.

Everybody you know has failed you at some point. It's just inevitable because we're all flawed. We all have cracks in our ceramics.

So sooner or later we find this irritation and it's an issue and we can't get rid of it. We say, oh well, that's just pettiness. I shouldn't be thinking about that.

I'm not going to think about that. And 15 seconds later it has just worked its way back to our consciousness and we're thinking about it again. How could they do that? I can't believe they did it.

That's an unworthy thought. I shouldn't worry about it. I'm going to be patient.

I'm just going to forget about it and go on. And about 15, 20 seconds later it just creeps back in and it's like a hungry dog that just won't go away. You keep whacking it and making it go and it keeps crawling right back.

We don't have the ability to rid ourselves of those things. They will come in and they will poison our relationships. They will poison our joy.

They poison the well of water that nourishes us spiritually. It poisons our fellowship with other believers. It reduces our love.

It reduces our joy. It reduces and takes away our peace. We don't have the ability to rid ourselves of those things.

And we don't have the ability to cope with other people who are all tangled up with those things. It has to come from God. What does verse 11 say? Strengthened with all might according to His glorious power for all patience.

Not just some patience. All patience. All power.

Long-suffering with joy. Somebody can slight you and wrong you and hurt your feelings and not only can you be patient, not only can you suffer long, but you don't lose your joy. It doesn't mean it's a pleasant experience.

It doesn't mean that you didn't notice it as a potential stumbling block. But God gives us the

supernatural ability to get over it. That's what we need.

We need the power to get over it. That's what God gives us. He gives us all power.

He gives us power according to the standard of His glorious power. And that's what we need because we don't have it. And sometimes when we have access to it, we don't avail ourselves of it.

We sort of enjoy getting upset with people, and we kind of like stewing around a little bit, and it sort of feeds the fire of our ego and feeds the fire of our quote-unquote self-esteem to think, well, I didn't deserve that, and so forth. The purpose of knowing God's will, our fourth point, to lead a worthy, fully pleasing, fruitful life. That's a God-oriented life.

Our fifth point, the benefit of knowing God's will, is strength, endurance, patience, and joy. As a result, our sixth point of summary, we owe appreciation to the Father because He has given us these things. And above that, He has qualified us to share His Son's inheritance.

God the Father has qualified you, and He's qualified me. We are qualified to share the inheritance coming to the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything that God is going to give Jesus Christ, we are qualified to share.

He is going to be the firstborn among many brethren, and that's us. We are in that group of many brethren with whom He's going to share the inheritance. And that's verse 12.

We give thanks to the Father because He's qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. There's not a single one of us that's disqualified from the standpoint of the Father. The only way we can lose that qualification is if we throw it away like Esau did.

So, our thanksgiving is directed to the Father. Anytime these things start to wear on us, anytime we start feeling bogged down with issues from people, issues from circumstances, we can't shake it, stop thinking about people. That's subjectivity.

Eyes on self, eyes on people, eyes on things. Let's get our eyes back on the Father. Look at what He's done for us.

He's strengthened us with all power. He's qualified us for an inheritance that is perfect and undefiled, reserved in heaven. He has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.

That's something worth thinking about. That's one of our memory verses we talked about earlier this evening. One of the verses we're going to try to memorize in Philippians 4, 8, and 9. The things that are noble and pure and lovely, the things that are of good report.

These are the things to dwell on. Sometimes it takes a conscious effort, but that's what lifts us out

of the mire. That's what delivers us from the power of our sinful nature, is the greater power of God's deliverance.

The greater power that has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance. Well, this is the first half of the chapter that we have reviewed. We're going to pause and take our break.

When we come back, we'll review the second half of the chapter, and this will give us a good solid footing to move into chapter 2. Let's pause here and take our break.