

## 2. Priorities from Paul: The truth of the gospel

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray together. Our gracious God and our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you, Lord, for this, another Wednesday, another opportunity to meet in the name of Christ as his gathered people and in the presence of your Holy Spirit.

Father, we thank you for your mercies which are new every morning. We thank you that you have sustained us physically, enabling us to attend the service. We thank you that you have sustained us spiritually, helping us to press on with Christ on our earthly pilgrimage.

We thank you, Lord, that you renew us day by day. We thank you that you are a God who protects, who keeps us from evil, a God who provides for all of our needs, a God who comforts, Lord, who draws near to the brokenhearted, and a God who encourages us to press on with all endurance. So we ask that as we gather and as we listen to your voice in the words of Scripture, that you will help us to grow into maturity, help us grow up in Christ, that we might be holy, pure, and blameless on that last day.

We thank you, Father, for the hope which is laid up for us in heaven, for the inheritance which is ours in Christ, for the reward you have in store for those who love you.

[ 1 : 25 ] And we thank you, Lord, that you do not lie, that your word is truth, that in this world of spin and deception and little white lies and exaggeration, that you speak the truth to us, that your word tells us of him who claimed to be the truth.

And so as we gather to hear his voice, Lord, we pray that you will help us to be spiritually minded. Whatever pressures, whatever needs, whatever responsibilities are weighing upon us, we ask that we will cast them upon you, that we might own Christ as Lord, that we might continue to walk in him, to be rooted and built up in him, established in the faith and abounding with thanksgiving. So we thank you for him, who is the supreme Lord and our sufficient saviour. And in his name we pray. Amen. So reading this week is, same as last week, we're doing a series on Colossians chapter 1, verse 1 to 14.

And this is on page 983. of the church Bibles. Beginning at verse 1.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.

[ 2 : 56 ] We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you, since the day you heard it, and understood the grace of God in truth.

Just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant, he is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

[ 4 : 27 ] We thank God for his inspired word. Well, this is our second study in Colossians, and I've got my notes in completely the wrong order.

Last week we looked at this prayer together, and we thought of the circumstances of Paul's letter to Colossae. This was a church he had never met. He says in the letter that, I have not seen you face to face.

People Paul had never met. He is in prison. But while he is in prison, Epaphras, who is from Colossae, comes to Paul, and he tells him of this church, which has grown up in response to the preaching of the word of God.

Epaphras was a colleague of Paul. Perhaps he had, in fact, been converted through Paul's ministry. And Paul was very encouraged by that report, of the gospel bearing fruit in a distant land.

And so he writes this letter to them. And I think there are two purposes in writing. Firstly, he learns that the church has begun well. It's established.

[ 5 : 32 ] And he wants to encourage them in their faith. He wants to encourage them that they have heard the true gospel, and that their profession of faith is genuine. He wants to encourage them, therefore, to maturity, which is what he prays for them, and what he labors for.

But there is a second reason he writes. And Epaphras, as well as giving him the good news of the growth of that fellowship, also tells him that the church was coming under other influences.

There were visitors, perhaps there were teachers, who were seeking to add something more to what Paul had taught. And Paul writes to warn the Colossians that actually, in seeking to add more to the gospel, they were undermining the gospel itself.

In promising more, they were delivering less. And so Paul writes to correct their thinking and to return them to wholehearted devotion to Christ himself. Last week then, Paul gives thanks for the grace of God.

He heard of their faith in Christ Jesus, their love for the saints, and their hope in the Spirit. And he gave thanks for it. Because the Colossians had heard the word of the gospel.

[ 6 : 43 ] And God had used that word to give them new life in Christ. Their profession was true. And I think in verse 6 to 8, Paul is emphasising the truth of the gospel which they heard, and the faithfulness of Epaphras who preached it to them.

So we want to look today at these verses, verse 5 down to verse 8, under the heading of the truth of the gospel. Now I drive a Japanese car, and I've driven it quite happily for many years.

And I bought it from a dealer. And I took it there a few years ago to have it serviced. And they've got this little coffee area you sit in while you're waiting for your car.

So I sat and I read a copy of a newspaper. And by the coffee area, there's this little water feature.

Just a little stone with water kind of bubbling out of it. And I thought, that's very pretty. And I looked at it, and there's a little plaque and a photograph of a Japanese man.

And this plaque was to commemorate the visit of some very, very senior executive who'd come to visit the franchise and to inspect its premises and to see that what they were doing was in line with the vision and the standards of that organisation.

[ 7 : 57 ] A little lovely fountain. Very restful while you're waiting for your car. The fountain endorses that franchise. It says, this car dealer is genuine. He's the real deal.

And I suppose in verse 5 to 8, that's a little bit like what we have here. Paul is endorsing Epaphras' ministry. He is saying to the church, which he evangelised, in which he pastored, this man is the real deal.

And he reminds them of certain things. Firstly, he reminds them of the truth of the gospel. Verse 5, Paul says, Of this, the hope in heaven, you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

So Paul claims that the message he was preaching and the message Epaphras was preaching was the word of truth. And the 21st century world is in many ways not very different from the 1st century world in Rome and Colossae.

There were all sorts of different teachers preaching different world views, different philosophies, different religions. And Paul says in the middle of this, the gospel is the truth. It is only in the gospel that we find out the truth about the universe.

[ 9 : 18 ] Why it is here. That we find out the truth about God. Who is he? What is he like? That we find out the truth about humanity. The truth about the state of our hearts and God's purpose for us.

And it is only in the gospel that we find out the truth about Christ whom Paul was preaching. And of course, if you get up and if you get out into Buchanan Street and start saying, I've got the truth and

I'm right and others are wrong, then people would accuse you very quickly of arrogance. But Paul's claim is not an arrogant claim. He says in chapter 1, verse 25, I became a minister, that is, of the gospel, according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you to make the word of God fully known.

What Paul is saying is the gospel he was preaching was revealed by God. He makes it very clear in Galatians. I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. He claims that the gospel he was preaching was divine revelation.

[ 10 : 35 ] He didn't cook it up himself in his own head. He received it from God. God who cannot lie and whose word is truth. But it's more than just a philosophy.

It is a universal truth. And he says, verse 6, this gospel has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing. It is not simply one gospel for one people group. We often think that, don't we? We think, ah, Christianity, there's a British religion. But Paul is saying, no, the gospel is for the whole world. And what an encouragement that as we gather here to study the scriptures and to pray together, that there are people in every land doing just the same. Home fellowships meeting secretly, believers meeting one-to-one to share the Bible together, sermons being preached, tracts being distributed, MP3s being downloaded, people in every nation listening to the word of truth, the gospel.

But it's more than a philosophy. It is powerful, verse 6. It is bearing fruit and growing as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

[ 11 : 52 ] You see, when the gospel comes to people, it's not simply something just to think about. One writer says this, it is not the presentation of an idea, but the operation of a power.

However, the gospel bore fruit in Colossae. These people, who previously were pagans, had come to know God. They were alienated from him and now they had been reconciled to him. And they experienced new life. They died to sin. They were rescued from the dominion of darkness. And they were raised to life in Christ. They knew his presence in their hearts. And they knew the power of his spirit to transform them day by day and to draw them into closer fellowship with God the Father. And we know that in Glasgow as well, don't we? If we just think through the years, the gospel first came to Glasgow, I think, in the 7th century. Mungo preaching up by the high streets. And then there was Wesley preaching that same gospel, seeing multitudes converted.

[ 12 : 51 ] Whitfield down in Cambus Lang. The 19th century, Moody and Sankey. Their great campaigns in Glasgow. Following that, the formation of the Tent Hall, the ministry of Drop Troop. And in this very church, Tom Allen. All men preaching the gospel and seeing its power at work in transforming individuals, in saving them from sin, in transforming families. And in some instances, transforming communities. The gospel is truth from God. It is a universal truth for people from every nation.

And it is a powerful truth. And Paul says, have confidence in the true gospel and have confidence in the true preacher. Verse 7. Just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. Why did they need to know that? Well, Epaphras was the one who had gone to them and he preached and when they got converted, maybe they met in his house, maybe he taught them, maybe he pastored them.

[ 13 : 56 ] And they wanted to have confidence in the person who was watching over them in the Lord. He didn't have a water fountain to give him to commemorate the apostles' approval.

These people needed to know that Epaphras was a true disciple preaching the true gospel. And Paul says, he is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf. You can have confidence in him to lead you into maturity in Christ.

Well, why is that important for us? Well, it's nice, isn't it, to be settled in Glasgow, but we often find ourselves maybe on holiday or maybe moving to a new town or maybe actually being converted in the first instance.

And of course, when we become a Christian or move to a new area, we want to seek fellowship. And it can be slightly bewildering. We can think, well, where will we find true fellowship? Where will we find true gospel preaching and true Christians?

I read last week that there are apparently 35,000 denominations in the United States alone. Very bewildering if you become a Christian. Where do I go? And Paul is saying Epaphras is a true disciple because he preaches the true gospel.

[15:07] And therefore, as Christians, we should be looking to hear the true gospel. A word of truth. A word of revelation. A word which is powerful in bringing people to faith and bearing fruit in their lives.

And a true and a faithful servant of God is somebody who preaches that gospel. Who holds on to it as divine revelation. Who preaches the same message as the apostles before him.

And who longs for it to bring people to maturity in Christ. So we need to know who are the faithful shepherds of the flock. And Paul says Epaphras is one because he is faithful to the gospel which he received and which he has passed on.

But the second reason they needed to know that was because there were these other teachers. These other preachers had begun to appear. And they were seeking to lead people along a slightly different path. And what Paul is saying is don't listen to them.

Listen to Epaphras because he has the truth. Now the thing about these teachers is they were very subtle because they used religious language. They used spiritual terminology.

[16:14] And they weren't blatantly trying to take people away from Christ. But often it's the things which seem helpful which can be very harmful. Apparently in South America just now there's a trend for criminals to dress up as policemen.

And what they do is they send one of their friends onto a tourist bus and drives around for a little bit. Then the policemen, the fake policemen turn up and they stop the bus. They arrest this man and they say we need to take a witness statement from everyone on the bus.

They take them to a building at a fake police station and then they ask them for their credit cards and their PIN numbers. They empty their bank accounts and then they send them back onto the bus. You see these policemen look like they're doing a great job, don't they?

They look helpful. But actually they're fakes. And what they promised is not help but serious harm. And the people in Colossae they promised help but they were very harmful.

Chapter 2 verse 4 Paul says I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. They sounded rational. They sounded reasonable.

[17:22] And yet Paul says they will delude you. And he has some very strong language to describe them. Chapter 2 verse 8 He says See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ.

The Colossians have been set free from sin. They have been delivered from the dominion of darkness. And Paul says watch out that you are not taken captive. Chapter 2 verse 16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These Colossians had been forgiven of all of their sins. And Paul says these people are trying to pass judgment on you. Chapter 2 verse 18 Let no one disqualify you insisting on asceticism and the worship of angels going on in detail about visions puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind and not holding fast to the head from whom the whole body nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments grows with a growth that is from God.

Having been qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints Paul says to them be very careful that no one disqualifies you by leading you off into esoteric religious practices.

It was very subtle and we're not exactly sure what they were teaching. It seems to be a bit of a mixture of traditional Jewish practices the talk of Sabbaths and holy days and a little bit of paganism the angel worship and the asceticism.

[19:02] One commentary lists 44 different explanations for what they were actually teaching and I thought it would be helpful to go through all 44 just now. In fact well actually looking at the clock we'll have to move on but it's not exactly clear but the unifying feature seems to be they were adding something more to the gospel.

Paul uses language like fullness and freedom. They seem to be promising power over evil. They had this impressive asceticism maybe starving themselves. They promised a deeper knowledge of God.

They said we have something more to give you. But actually what they were offering was less. Verse 8 it is empty deceit and it is according to human tradition and not according to Christ. Verse 22 referring to things that all perish as they are used according to human precepts and teachings. So the gospel was the revelation of Jesus Christ from God.

It was divine truth for all people and it was powerful in effect. And these people came promising something else but it was human. human tradition human teaching not the power of the revelation of God.

[ 20 : 19 ] Jesus had the same didn't he? When he was ministering as he debated with the religious leaders of the day he said this you leave the commandment of God and hold on to the tradition of men.

They exchanged what God had said and done for something men were saying and doing. They had cut themselves off from Christ who is the head. John MacArthur says this the particular heresy in Colossae was saying that all of these things are necessary for complete spiritual life and for a right relationship to God.

Christ is not sufficient. It is one of the deceptive ploys of Satan not to deny outwardly the person of Christ not to attack overtly the person of Christ but simply to try to demonstrate that Christ is not enough that he is insufficient.

Well how does Paul counter that? Well he simply shows that Christ is enough. A few years ago I met an anaesthetist who did some work in Africa and he paid one visit to one hospital for one week and during that week a lady was brought in with an exceptionally rare tumour.

Nobody in the hospital had seen this tumour before. And they were all very worried what are we going to do how do we handle something like this? And the anaesthetist too like I say was just there for one week said very humbly he said well actually I'm the world expert on treating this tumour.

[ 21 : 45 ] He published papers on it he was the people others consulted for his wisdom and his experience. He'd done it before it was actually quite straightforward for him. This man was absolutely up to the task he was sufficient for what was required.

And Paul is saying to the church in Colossae Christ is sufficient he is enough for you. Chapter 1 verse 15 he is the image of the invisible God the firstborn of all creation for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth visible and invisible whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authority all things were created through him and for him and he is before all things and in him all things hold together and he is the head of the body of the church he is the beginning the firstborn from the dead that in everything he might be preeminent for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven making peace by the blood of his cross.

Christ is the Lord of the universe he is the head of the church in him the fullness of God dwells and he is able to reconcile all things to himself as Dick Lucas puts it he is the supreme Lord and he is the sufficient saviour he is up to the task of saving people and sustaining people and bringing people to maturity he is in them until the day they are with him in glory but that's very important to notice because that was the Colossian heresy and it is a heresy very much in abundance today in particular with the various cults perhaps you encounter in Glasgow so for example we know that Christ is the image of the invisible God Hebrews tells us that God has spoken through the prophets but in these last days he has spoken by his son he is the full revelation of who God is and yet some people say well we take that on board but what we actually need is another revelation perhaps we need another prophet perhaps we need another book or perhaps we need another person to come along and show us the true interpretation of the Bible to offer us another testament for example of Jesus Christ and they are saying the revelation of God in Christ is not sufficient that something more is needed some other prophet some other writing some other organisation to really teach us the truth or it might be more subtle so Paul tells us that Christ will reconcile through Christ he will reconcile to himself all things through his blood on the cross and Hebrews tells us that Christ had offered for all times a single sacrifice for sins and then he sat down at the right hand of the Father one sacrifice sufficient for sins but we meet people who say well of course

Christ did offer that sacrifice but what is required is a further sacrifice or a continuation of that sacrifice in order for our sins to be forgiven what he did on Calvary and what he achieved there was not sufficient for all your sins to be washed away and to be assured of a place in glory or sometimes it can be even more subtle Hebrews chapter 11 tells us that Christ always lives to make intercession for his people that now seated at the right hand of God on high he prays for his people

that they might be brought to maturity and brought to glory and of course there are some who would tell us well of course Christ prays for us but it surely can't do any harm to have other saints or other heavenly hosts praying for us other people interceding for us before the throne of God Christ is not sufficient he is not sufficient to reveal to us the nature of God he is not sufficient to offer a sacrifice for our sins he is not sufficient to intercede for us and to sustain us all the days of our earthly pilgrimage the list could go on but Paul says yes

Christ is supreme and because he is supreme he is sufficient and I want you to have all of your confidence in him to trust in him to look to him for your salvation for your sanctification for your growth for your final assurance of salvation and I want you to trust this gospel the word of truth which has gone out to the whole world and which is bearing fruit and which has been preached faithfully by faithful ministers being faithful to that gospel Christ is supreme Christ is sufficient do not be led astray by those who promise more because all they will deliver is less Paul says in verse 22 Jesus has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him if indeed you continue in the faith stable and steadfast not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven and of which I

[ 27 : 09 ] Paul became a minister he does not want anyone to shift from the hope of the gospel and how do we do that well chapter 2 verse 6 therefore as you received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving Christ is supreme Christ is sufficient he is all we need and in him we have everything let's pray together Father we thank you so much for the word of truth Lord we thank you that you have spoken to us and given us truth and given us hope we pray Lord that you will keep us from shifting from that hope either through personal difficulty or through the influence of those who would seek to lead us away from a wholehearted devotion to Christ we pray Lord that as we read the scriptures you will help us to see his face to hear his voice and so to follow him wholeheartedly we thank you for this time

Lord we ask that as we share fellowship now the word of Christ might dwell richly among us that we might encourage one another to remain faithful to him and as we go back to our homes or our workplaces our offices wherever it is that you go before us and that you help us to walk in a manner worthy of him and to speak of him and of his love to those around us so we thank you for this Lord and pray that you keep us until we meet again asking this in Jesus name Amen Amen