

“The Celebration of the Church”
Colossians 1:1-8 (NRSV)

When we study Paul’s letters we see that each has a dominant theme. In **Romans**, it is justification by faith. In **Ephesians**, it is the mystery of Christ and his church. In **Philippians**, it is the joy that Christ brings. In **Colossians**, it is the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as head of all creation and of the church. There is, in fact, no book in all the New Testament, including John’s Gospel, which presents such a comprehensive picture of the fullness of Christ. Accordingly, there is no writing better equipped to **draw us upwards** than the book of Colossians.

Don’t you sometimes long for a **higher view of things**? We so easily get caught into the downward pull of this rather mundane and material world.

Here is a poem that may help you to think higher thoughts:

Think of –
Stepping on a shore, and finding it heaven!
Taking hold of a hand, and finding it God’s hand.
Breathing a new air, and finding it celestial air.
Feeling invigorated, and finding it immortality.
Passing from tempest and storm to an unknown calm.
Waking up, and finding it home.
(Hazel Felleman, Poems That Live Forever)

Yet **Christ calls us “up and away”** (as the title of a reader I once read in elementary school put it) far beyond anything poetry can accomplish. Therefore, reading the Letter to the Colossians’ elevated thoughts on Jesus Christ can also move us towards a higher plane.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col. 3:1-3)

As we study Paul’s letter to the Colossians, may our view of Christ and the world be so expanded and permanently impressed upon us that we will as a habit **seek those “things that are above.”**

1. The background of this letter.

The town of **Colossae** was located about 80 miles inland from the city of Ephesus, in the Lycus River Valley, in what is today the western portion of Turkey. At one time it was one of the prominent towns of the valley, but by the New Testament era it was a rather small town, well in the shadow of its neighbours, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Biblical scholars believe the Colossian church came into being during Paul's two-year ministry in Ephesus, because Acts 19:10 says that during that time all the residents of Asia [which included Colossae] ... heard the word of the Lord."

The Scriptures further reveal that as Paul was preaching in Ephesus, two visitors from Colossae came to believe – namely, **Epaphras** (Col. 4:12) and **Philemon** (Phil. 19). Philemon later hosted the Colossian church in his home (Phil. 1-2), and Epaphras served as Paul's lieutenant in evangelizing the Lycus Valley (Col. 1:7). Thus a new thriving Christian church sprouted up in Colossae though Paul himself had never been there. Nevertheless, Paul had a deep interest in the church and prayerfully advised Epaphras and Philemon as necessary. So it was quite natural that when **a major theological problem** arose in Colossae, Epaphras came to him for help.

The **problem** came from certain false teachers who were propagating what is called "**Gnosticism**" – a kind of **superior knowledge** which declared it could help "lesser" Christians attain a necessary "**deeper knowledge.**" The very word, "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek verb "**gnosis**" which means, "**to know.**"

The **Gnostics**, or "**people in the know,**" held as one of their basic ideas that matter (anything physical or created) was evil and that only the spirit was good. They reasoned, therefore, that **God could not be directly involved in creation**, because being perfect he couldn't touch matter, which was intrinsically bad. They said that the world came into being through a surrogate process as God put forth thousands of emanations (or lesser gods), each of which was a little more distant from him, so that finally there was an emanation so distant from God that it could actually touch gross matter – and it created the world. To me, this sounds rather weird and wrong. It takes more effort to believe this than the plain word of Scripture, where we are told God loves the earth, and was not afraid to get his hands dirty with it to create humans and animals (Gen. 2:7a, 19a). But I guess some people like their religion to be esoteric and complicated.

This reasoning also led to the belief that **Jesus Christ**, if he really was the Son of God, **could not have taken on a human body**, because all matter, including our bodies, is evil. This delusion spawned the Gnostic fantasies about Jesus being only a ghost-like phantom, only concerned about spiritual, certainly not physical, things. To the Gnostics, the Incarnation wasn't real; and Christ's work on the cross wasn't enough! So they built a system by which one could begin with Christ and work one's way up a series of emanations to God, all the while avoiding any thought that Jesus Christ was a real human being who lived among us, who ate and drank with us, who suffered and died as we do, and who really rose again. In Colossae this system added spiritual disciplines (many of which were borrowed from Jewish legalism – see Col. 2:20-23), secret passwords (borrowed from Eastern mysticism), the esoterica of astrology, and a number of half truths (borrowed from Christianity). The superior Gnostics, supposedly the only ones “in the know,” looked down upon the simple Colossian believers; they bow beat them, and they led some astray.

This is **the alarming message**, which Epaphras brought to Paul (Col. 1:8) as he waited for judgment in prison. Paul's brilliant response was his Letter to the Colossians, which presented Christ as the first and last, and all-sufficient One in the sublimest terms found anywhere in all of Scripture. Paul's masterful answer has served the church well throughout the centuries as it has repeatedly faced similar heresies and is, in fact, today assaulted by similar false teachers and cultists who see Christ as only part of the answer.

As we take up Paul's letter, we immediately see that the apostle did not directly attack the Colossian problem, but rather began with an exuberant introduction which **celebrated the Colossian church**. This was typical of Paul, who characteristically praised the churches he was writing to before dealing with them pastorally. He knew that honey attracted more bees than vinegar. He knew that authentic praise and real encouragement is the best way to disciple people.

Paul's heartfelt commendation rose from the miracle which had taken place in Colossae: a poor, pagan people without God and without hope in this world had found Christ. Their lives had been changed, and some remarkable things had happened, which Paul duly notes. His celebration was honest and beautiful, and **the celebration is ours as well** – for we, too, are the church for which Christ has died and risen.

2. A celebration of joy (Col. 1:1-2).

Though Paul had never met the Colossians he called them **“saints and faithful brothers and sisters”** (1:1a). They were God’s people, God’s holy ones, set apart for him. With Paul, they shared the same paternity – God was their Father; Jesus was their Saviour and Brother; they were brothers and sisters in him. They all addressed God intimately as “Abba” – Father God (Gal. 4:6). They shared a mutual domesticity of soul. They were “family”; it was natural for Christians to call each other “brother and sister.”

But, best of all, they were also described as being **“in Christ”** (1:2b), one of Paul’s favourite terms of endearment (see J. S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, 1935), one of the deepest and most joyous of mysteries. In its barest terms it means that the Colossians, and **all authentic believers, partake of all that Christ has done, all that he was (and is), and all that he would ever be.** This is also the essence of the great paragraph with which Paul opens his later Letter to the Ephesians. There Paul defined the church as being “in Christ” (1:1), believers whom God has blessed ... with every spiritual blessing” (1:3a), having chosen them “in Christ before the foundation of the world” (1:4a), which has resulted in redemption and forgiveness of sins “in him” (1:7). And “in him,” Christians are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit (13). The first fourteen verses of Ephesians use the phrase “in Christ” or “in him” no less than ten times to describe the profundity of regeneration in Jesus Christ.

As believers, they were **“in Christ”** – the old had gone, the new had come (2 Cor. 5:17). Archaeologists tell us that many of the nameless funerary marble slabs found in the catacombs of Rome carried the inscription **“in Christo”** (in Christ) – I myself have seen such slabs in a museum in Rome – and significantly it also bore on the same slab its spiritual corollary **“in pace”** (in peace), testifying to the radical newness and joy which comes in Christ. Being “in Christ” has always been ample reason to celebrate, and it is still the same for us today. This is a wonder of wonders!

Please also note that by sealing his greeting with **“grace to you and peace from God our Father”** (1:2c), Paul created a **unique Christian blend of Hebrew and Greek greetings.** The customary greeting in the Greek world was **“chairen”** -- a word that was a form of the word for “grace” and simply meant **“greetings”** (Jas. 1:1; Acts 15:23; 23:26). But in Paul’s hands it became the freshly minted Christian salutation, **“charis,”** the more common,

actual word for “**grace**” (Ralph P. Martin, Colossians and Philemon, p. 46). Greeting fellow believers with this word celebrated the work of grace in their lives. “**You are a recipient of God’s unmerited favour! Praise God for his grace in you!**” It was also a commissioning to live under grace (Peter T. O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon, p. 5). “**May you be a person** who has the disposition, the dependency, the humility which makes you **a ready receptor of God’s grace!**” And, “**May you operate by grace. May you be graceful!**” All that is packed into the first part of Paul’s greeting!

The other half of the greeting, “**peace**,” came originally from the Hebrew word, “**shalom**,” which means more than simply the absence of trouble, in fact, a deep sense of well-being which springs from a sense of the presence of God (John I. Durham, Essays..., 1970, p. 275-277). It is like the greeting with which South Africans leave you, “**May it go well with you**” or simply, “**Go well**.” Paul’s wish for the Colossians was that they would comprehend more fully their peace in Christ and enjoy it in all its depth.

It is the same for all people: there must be grace before we can experience the peace or “shalom” of God. Grace, God’s work, comes before peace, our new relationship with him and with one another (Eduard Schweitzer, The Letter to the Colossians, 1982, p. 30). Among the tragedies of our time is humanity’s pursuit of personal peace apart from God’s enabling grace. That pursuit takes many forms: material, intellectual, social, even religious, but pursued for themselves, these all end in futility. When sinners find peace through God’s grace, that is beautiful, that is a cause for rejoicing. “**Grace and peace**” is the proper Christian greeting and celebration.

3. A threefold celebration of thanksgiving (Col. 1:3-5a).

As Paul continued his greeting, he tells them that he prays for them with gratitude (1:3) and makes special reference to the familiar trio of **faith, hope and love** evident in their lives but, interestingly enough, he places hope last (1:3-5a). Of course, faith, hope and love are frequently mentioned in Scripture (1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8; Rom. 5:1-5; Gal. 5:5, 6; Eph. 1:15, 18; 4:2-5; Heb. 6:10-12; 10:22-24; 1 Pe. 3:8, 21, 22) as a sort of “**apostolic shorthand**” for **genuine Christianity** (R. C. Lucas, Fullness and Freedom, 1980, p. 27). And, clearly, none of these qualities can be manufactured; they all come from God.

Paul first celebrates their **“faith in Christ Jesus”** (1:4a). Faith is always mentioned first in the trio because apart from faith there is no Christian experience. Here, too, Paul was very explicit about the object of their faith: it was “faith in Christ Jesus.” We hear people say, “Everybody needs faith. You gotta have faith.” It’s considered to be a component of a balanced life, another charm on the bracelet of one’s well-being. Having faith means “You’re okay.”

Yet the truth is, **faith has no value in itself**. It must derive its value from its object. When someone says he or she has faith, the question must be asked, “Faith in what?” “That people are basically good?” “That there is some kind of afterlife – reincarnation of resurrection?” Or, “Faith in faith itself?” But salvation does not come by believing in belief, or in a set of beliefs, religious teachings, or even a creed. **Salvation only comes by believing in Jesus Christ**. When missionary **John G. Paton** was translating the Bible in the Outer Hebrides, he searched for the right word to translate “believe.” Finally he found it: the word meant “lean your whole weight upon” (Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Complete, 1981, p. 24). That was what the Colossians had done. In spite of their Gnostic detractors, they leaned their whole weight on Jesus Christ. They trusted in him. That was something to celebrate!

Paul then continued to laud the Colossians for **“the love that you have for all the saints”** (1:4b). For Paul, faith proved its reality by “expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6 NIV). Loving God is seen in how one loves one’s neighbour. We have all met people who claimed to be good Christians, who seemed to be upstanding people, honest and orthodox – but unloving. They possessed a loveless goodness, and orthodoxy without charity -- therefore, a questionable faith. They were the kind of people **Mark Twain** had in mind when he said, “He is a good man – in the worst sort of way.” Love for others is a sign of true faith.

When **Chuck Colson**, President Nixon’s former “hatchet-man,” was serving his prison sentence after the Watergate scandal, his newfound faith was severely tested. His wife did not understand the “born-again” business; his son was picked up on drug charges, and Colson himself was despondent. But God met him in his misery. A group of Christians in Washington DC, including the respected Senator, Mark Hatfield, from Oregon, prayed for him and met with him (Born Again, 1976, p. 338-339). Colson experienced “love ... for all the saints,” and he was refreshed in the reality of his faith. And after he was released, he dedicated his life to working with prisoners.

It is a **beautiful thing** when you see in the church “love ... for all the saints” not just for the loveable ones, but for all of God’s people, everywhere. This is what made the early church so amazing and enticing to the ancient world. Barbarian and Scythian, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, learned and unlearned joined hands and sat down at one table. They knew themselves to be one in Christ Jesus. There had never been anything quite like it. The world began to babble about sorcery and conspiracy and complicity in all sorts of un-nameable vices. But Christians were living out their “love ... for all the saints.” A new thing had come into the world – a community held together by love, not just by ethnicity or geography, a common language or culture, or by the iron chains of a conqueror. The world wondered. And not a few were drawn to Christ. Genuine love for all was a cause for Paul’s joyous celebration of the apostolic church, and it is a cause for celebration today.

Finally, Paul celebrated **their hope**: “the hope laid up for you in heaven” (1:5a). Hope is placed last in this case, because in this instance, Paul saw faith and love as springing from it. How does the hope of heaven cause faith and love to come forth? As pagans, the Colossians had been without God and without hope in this world. Then came the gospel message, shared by Epaphras (Col. 1:7), and Philemon, and the wonderful, surprising joy of salvation and the hope of heaven. This joy naturally enlarged their love and faith. In addition, by partaking in the same hope, sharing the same secret, they were bound more closely in their faith and love. One fed the other.

We ought to **cultivate Christian hope**. It can energize and encourage our longings for higher and better, greater things. Remember **C. S. Lewis’s** exhortation:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards offered in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong but too weak (The Weight of Glory).

4. **A celebration of the gospel** (Col. 1:5b-8).

You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. (1:5b-6)

Here Paul engages in a bit of justified hyperbole, for though the gospel had not yet spread over “the whole earth,” it was well on its way. What he was celebrating was its dynamic power and universality. Unlike the Gnostic elitist foolishness, Jesus Christ’s Good News was **for everybody** and was daily reaching more and more new people. May it be so, today, with us as well.

This little church in the Lycus River Valley celebrated, as we -- in our own Fraser Valley -- may do as well, that we are God’s holy and faithful ones. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, with a common heavenly Father. We are truly “in Christ,” part of the joyous mystery of his body. The grace of God has been freely poured out upon us. We have peace or shalom in him. God has given us faith, love and hope. I will admit that I sometimes worry that we are not as effective as the larger churches in our community. But the truth of the matter is that we produce as good a number of lively Christians as well as any other church – large or small – anywhere else. Let us celebrate the Good News of abundance of life in Jesus Christ!

Amen

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