

*Colossians: Christ In Us, The Hope of Glory*

It's a privilege to kick off a new series in 2024. We're going verse by verse through the book of Colossians. It's Paul's letter to this church in Colossae, and we've titled it Christ In Us: The Hope of Glory. That's the title of our series. I'm so glad that you're here to kick that off with us.

As I was preparing for the sermon, I was thinking about when our focus is always only on Jesus; it's going to bring a proper perspective for all of us and all the things that may come our way. It will bring proper perspective on all the decisions we have to make, all the opportunities we have, and all the challenges that we will face as we go into 2024.

Well, in the week between Christmas and New Year's, I got to enjoy a trip down memory lane as well as some history. Julie and I rented an Airbnb down in Orange County, Southern California. We invited our kids and grandkids there. It was kind of a wild time, for sure.

A very special day was when all of them went to Disneyland except Julie and I, who got to stay at home and watch our eight-month-old granddaughter, which beats Disneyland any day of the week. The day before that, though, we went to the beach. We wanted to take our four-and-a-half-year-old grand-daughter to the beach. So we went down to Corona Del Mar beach, and we took Julie's 91-year-old mother and the four-and-a-half-year-old.

We were down there frolicking in the water. Julie's 91-year-old mom didn't do a lot of frolicking. But our four-and-a-half-year-old did. She was running around. We were playing. It was great. And there were some bluffs over to the right if you're facing the ocean, which are familiar bluffs to me. As you walk up those bluffs and peer down, you see a somewhat isolated little cove. It's called Pirate's Cove. It's a place where, over the last 50 years, tens of thousands of Christians have been baptized. There was a ministry that began there called Calvary Chapel. I became a Christian and got saved through Calvary Chapel's ministry. And 44 years ago, I was baptized in Pirates Cove. About eight years later, my wife was baptized there.

It was an incredible movement of God in Calvary Chapel, where they taught the scriptures. It was young people who were saying, "I don't want anything to do with religion, but I want Jesus." Always only Jesus. And there were people trying to figure out what this Jesus movement was all about that started down there, spread across the state, spread across the country, and across the world.

There were reporters, historians, sociologists, theologians, and pastors continually asking why this took place. What was happening? I mean, there were these modern musical expressions, which we called Maranatha music, back in the day. I see some heads nodding and remembering that. Do you remember Phil Keggy? Do you remember Larry Norman?

Some of those names were the beginners of this movement. People were wondering if it was just a counter to the hippie, LSD culture and Timothy O'Leary's phrase, turn on, tune in, drop out. Or was it the reaction to the unpopular Vietnam War? Or all the racial unrest of the late 1960s? Or the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK?

So these may be factors, but the people who were living in this moment said those were just outside peripheral factors. The real thing was Jesus. He was moving, and this younger generation was seeing it through fresh eyes. God said, "I'm going to do a work here. I don't care who's in charge. I'm doing a work here. We are tempted, as we get older and wiser, to think that maybe we need a little more than Jesus. But when we think about where Paul wrote this letter to these Christians in Colossae, it was all about Jesus.

When we think about in the 1960s, when this movement, this revival occurred, it was all about Jesus. And when we think about what we need in the mid-2020s, it's always only Jesus. It's the same message. We have this timeless passage. When we think about our age of reason and scientific advancement. It's all about Jesus. When we think about the divisions and the hate that's going on in our world, the competing worldviews, the deception that's happening out there through different messages that aren't true that come our way, it's still always only Jesus.

Just a brief background on our letter. I don't want to spend too much time on this because I want to get right to the verses. But some historical context and more will be leaked out over the course of the series. These Colossians were from the city of Colossae, which was located about 90 miles east of Ephesus. That's a city, if we read our New Testament, that might sound familiar to us. Ephesus was a port town. It was on the Aegean Sea. It was a thriving Greek city.

Ninety miles inland, what's now modern-day Turkey, is Laodicea. That's a name of a city that we know about. It's in the book of Revelation, Phrygia, and then there's Colossae. All I learned about the Colossians; I'm going to take my next vacation and that's one

of the things I want to do. I'll do a Mediterranean thing and I want to go visit Colossae.

Well, you won't find Colossae. Because in that first century, soon after this letter was delivered, there was a massive earthquake and the whole city was wiped out. There is no Colossae anymore. There's some archaeological evidence that they're finally finding now, and they are beginning to tell us more about what that city was like. Another interesting fact about this church in Colossae was that Paul never went there. He never met them face to face. He was writing them a letter and didn't know them personally. And it was a healthy church that Paul didn't plant.

We're going to hear about a gifted man named Epaphras a little later this morning, who was a citizen of Colossae who was likely converted under Paul while Paul was in jail. It could have been in Rome, which is about a thousand miles away, or it could have been a jail in Ephesus, which was 90 miles away. We're not sure, but we know Paul was in jail.

Our text this morning is broken out into three sections, verse 1 and 2, Paul greets the Colossians. In verses 3 through 8, he thanks God for the Colossians. And in verses 9 through 14, Paul prays for the Colossians. So he says hi, he thanks God for them, and he prays for them. So, let's get started with his greeting.

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. Colossians 1:1-2**

It means literally one who is sent, but it also implies one who is sent with authority. And Paul is saying his authority comes from the will of God.

Another familiar name is Timothy, who was a Christian brother of Paul's, but he was more than that. He was probably Paul's best friend. He was his companion, his assistant. Paul mentored him. There was this bond of affection. Timothy often appears in headings in Paul's letters, in this greeting, 2 Corinthians, Philippians 1 and 2, and Thessalonians, to name a few.

Then he says, "to God's holy people." The idea here is saints, those set apart by God. We need to understand that only God can make saints. We can't earn sainthood through our good works and then get the label saint. We are made saints through God's good work when we believe in the good work of Christ dying on the cross for our sins and accept that work that he did on our behalf. Then we are made saints.

It is perfectly appropriate, and I have brothers in this church that do this, to greet one another as a precious saint at CPC. It is so appropriate to do that. It says, "to faithful brothers and sisters," the best meaning of this is dedicated. That their faith has taken root. Being dedicated doesn't mean just that they trusted Christ at that moment of conversion, but they continued to trust Christ over time.

It's so powerful and encouraging to join a small group and hear faith stories where people have been dedicated to the Lord over time, and it's taken them through difficult times. They have a story to tell to encourage the rest of us. I want to encourage you who are going back to your small groups at the beginning of the year to carve out time to tell stories, to talk about God working in your lives, and be encouraged by that.

Did you notice that Paul also referred to these Colossians as in Colossae and in Christ? So it's like having dual citizenship. It would be the same for us today. It would be fair for me to say, I'm Dan, and I am in San Mateo County, and I am in Christ. So Paul uses the term "in Christ" 83 times to remind us that we are citizens of God's kingdom, that Christ is our anointed king, and that Jesus is our Messiah.

So, just to stir our imaginations a little bit now. "In Christ" means that we have been given a new identity as a saint and that we have been forgiven instead of condemned. We've been pronounced justified instead of being pronounced guilty. We have eternal life instead of death and eternal separation from God. We've been given freedom that allows us to escape bondage as opposed to being slaves to bondage and enslaved by strongholds. The whole theology of Paul can be summed up with, "Now I am in Christ."

He ends this greeting on an even more encouraging note. Familiar and important words: grace and peace. The word grace here is translated from the Greek word *karis*. Paul took a common Greek word in his day, it was a variation of *karis*, which means to rejoice. And it was a word that the Greek people used all the time. Paul then made it spiritual by using the word *karis*, which can now boil down in simple terms to meaning unmerited favor of God, grace. And we received that unmerited favor of God. And what happens here is why he's doing this: he's saying that God's grace in us produces something wonderful—peace.

Someone said, "Grace is the fountain, and peace is the stream that flows from it." Paul shows some brilliance here because his audience is both Greek and Jewish, and the word for peace in Greek is *eirēnē*, and it's rooted in the Hebrew word *shalom*. I took a year of Hebrew in seminary, and I think that's the only word I remember. So Paul brings the Colossians with the Greek background and the Colossians with the Jewish background together with this greeting, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father."

You notice in that word order that grace is always first; peace always follows grace. We never hear Paul say, peace and grace. Because when we experience God's grace, that gift of God's grace, that unmerited favor, it produces peace in us. If we go into 2024 believing and making it a priority that it's always only Jesus, we can experience God's grace that produces peace in our lives. So, a question for all of us. Is our mind and our heart at peace?

It's been said that Caesar Augustus struggled with finding peace. I can imagine that's true. So, one of his advisors told him that there was a man in his kingdom who was under incredible pressure. He had pressure in his business. He had a great responsibility. He had accumulated a lot of debt, but he appeared to be the most peaceful man in his village. And they evidenced that by the fact that he slept so well at night. So when Caesar heard about this man, he told his guard to find this man and bring him his bed. The right solution to finding peace in our lives, as much as we try, it may not be the right sleep number on the bed. It's embracing the grace of God. There will be no personal peace, let alone world peace, until people accept the amazing grace of God.

We see here that Paul has this deep concern for his readers to comprehend more and more how good God's grace is. Understanding grace requires us to assume a position of humility because it's only in a humble position that God exalts us with his grace. His grace changes hearts. It changes the hearts of legalists, humanists, males and females, Jews and Gentiles, and slaves and free. His grace pours out on families. We'll have a section on families in Colossians.

Paul was a recovering legalist as a Pharisee. As Paul was processing this, he was reminded that whatever good work he did as a Pharisee, there was never enough good work that could be done to earn him the worth of God that was given to him by God received on faith. Our worth in God is a gift; it's a gift of grace, and it comes through accepting Jesus's act of sacrifice on the cross. When we recognize our complete unworthiness, grace comes to us in amazing ways and has the power to save us. It has the power to change us and grow us.

So, in verse 3, he moves from saying hi to thanking. *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—"* (vv. 3-4). You can't see it in English, but verses 3 through 8 are one long sentence in Greek. I had a pretty tough college writing professor, and he would never let me do a run-on sentence like Paul did here. He's showing us in this long sentence that the English editors made into separate shorter sentences that there are three things that he's thankful for.

First, he's thankful for the Colossians; second, he's thankful for the gospel; and third, for this guy named Epaphras. He says, "We always thank God." Anytime you think about Paul, he's in jail. Still, he has a reason to give thanks. I think that's worth noting for us. It tells us that we can always find something to be thankful for, no matter what's going on in our lives. It just seems so natural for Paul. He and his prayer team gathering together and consistently giving thanks for the Colossians.

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," I love that triple name expression here. The title, Lord, that refers to his being Lord and God over all. "In the name of Jesus" that speaks of

the incarnation of God, God becoming flesh, what we celebrated with Jesus' birth, that he was born also into the human race. And then Christ reminds us that he's the promised Messiah. He's the king who will come to rescue us from our sins and establish his kingdom. "because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—"

Such affirming words here, "your faith." It's mentioned first here because that's the starting place for everything else in the Christian life. He affirms them. Why? Because they put their trust and confidence in Christ Jesus. The vertical dimension of faith in Christ leads to a horizontal love for all the saints. A sure sign of grace at work was the fact that we have a loving, inclusive community. That's a great measurement of God's grace in a group or not God's grace if it's not there. The love there is not a gushy feeling. It's agape love, which emphasizes sacrifice and it's displaying actions. That's the love. True faith always produces love.

Paul's putting on his pastor hat and bragging about the love in this Colossae church. Allow me to indulge a little and follow Paul's lead. I like to brag about God's people here at CPC. I think we're brag-worthy here to some degree, not all the time, just occasionally, like right now. So, we care about love for our own, and that love extends into our community. Just thinking of a few examples such as backpacks for kids, thinking of supporting groups by providing food and supporting groups that provide shelter for our homeless. Our Christmas offering is to get the gospel into the most underserved neighborhoods around us. Those are just a few examples, but the need for love in our world couldn't be larger. It just continues into 2024. Our faith in Jesus must continue to be proven by our love as we go into this next year.

Jesus said, *"By your love they will know you are my disciples"* (John 13:35). Our love makes us visible. *"the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel"* (v. 5-6a). Again, the word order here is important: faith, love, and hope. Faith is always first. It produces the other two. Faith that began in the past, love that is working in the present, and hope that looks to the future.

So, really, why would we have faith in Christ now if there's no hope of a glorious future? Why would we love others now if it really doesn't matter in the end? We have hope because we have confidence that everything God says in his word is true. It's true today, or it will come to pass in the future.

We have these solid facts from God's word that no matter what may be happening on Earth right now, no matter what may be happening in your personal life right now, hope is being stored up for us like a treasure in heaven. We see people all the time in our ministries here who have no hope. Without hope, we don't have an anchor in our lives. There is not much that I could think

of that's worse than seeing somebody grieving who doesn't have any hope.

Next, Paul is thankful for the Colossian's response to the gospel. *"In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace" (v. 6b).*

So, first of all, here, Paul is thankful for the gospel itself. Gospel literally means good news. The Colossians heard the true message of the gospel when somebody shared it, somebody proclaimed it, somebody preached it to them. They heard the words, and they believed it. When I think back to what happened to me before I was baptized in Pirate's Cove, I remember that people preached, they proclaimed, and they shared the gospel with words. Then I saw love actions to back it up.

Paul's making it clear, though, to believe the gospel, we don't just see love, we need to hear the words preached. Words have power in and of themselves, and we need to hear it in order to respond to the message. Also, the gospel produces life and growth—fruit.

The grammar in verse 6 tells us that there is this innate energy in the gospel message itself. It's alive. It's growing; it's spreading. In Romans 1, Paul says, "The gospel is the power of God." We get the English word, dynamite, from Paul's word he chose for power. So, the gospel message is the dynamite of God to break through hardened hearts and sinful habits so that the fruit of the Spirit can grow and ripen into maturity. The gospel isn't just for the past; it's for every day. Power is there for us as believers.

Then, he goes on to say the gospel is for the whole world. That's why we have an outreach and mission team at CPC. That's why we support many mission partners around the world. That's why we send short-term teams to help, assist, and encourage our mission partners.

And the gospel is the grace of God. He wants to make sure we understand that the gospel is the good news of grace. When we receive the gospel, we receive what we don't deserve. In fact, when we receive the gospel, we're recognizing that we fall short and recognize we've been disqualified on our own merits.

Christianity is the only world religion that offers salvation without demands for our works. When the gospel is working in our lives, it brings faith, love, and hope, and also a desire to share it with others. Now, in verses 7 and 8, Paul's thankful for one more thing here: a guy named Epaphras. What do we know about him?

His home is in Colossae. And he likely heard and responded to the gospel that Paul preached, probably when Paul was in Ephesus. He was in Ephesus for about three and a half years, planting a vibrant church there, sending people out, and probably Epaphras came to Ephesus, heard the gospel, stayed with Paul, discipled by Paul, and then he returned home to plant a church.

It's these reports that Epaphras reports back to Paul that led Paul to write this letter we're studying today. *"You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit" (vv. 7-8).* The verb "learned" at the beginning of verse 7 is the basis for the word disciple. He was discipled and then he went and discipled these people in Colossae. Then, they accepted Christ and became a church.

There's another word in there "told us." It's a legal term indicating that Epaphras gave Paul real evidence, like legal evidence of their love, true stories of God at work, solid proof of their conversions, of their growth, of their love.

For Paul, the reason why he's so thankful is he's looking at this and saying that this is all because the Spirit of God is working. That's grace. And that's real. So if we believe in this always only Jesus going into 2024, the gospel leads us to recognize and be thankful for God at work as the gospel does its thing in our world.

Paul says hi, and then he says thank you. And now he prays for them. So verse 9 says,

**For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, v. 9**

The first thing he prays for is that they would know the will of God. Have you ever prayed to know the will of God? They're not a struggling group of believers right now. They're doing amazing things, but I think it's important for us to understand that doing amazing things and a ministry being totally healthy doesn't mean we don't stop praying for them.

We have amazing ministries that are happening here, and we have ministries that are struggling a little bit. We need to pray for all of them. I know for me, what happens is on my prayer list; it's the crisis. It's the momentary problem that's going on that I'm praying for, and I should be praying for that. But I also recognize that we need to pray for all of our ministries. I should pray for the healthy ones, that they would continue, that they would stay protected.

His nonstop prayer is convicting to me. His prayers were not sporadic. His prayers were consistent. He had, I'm sure, a systematic prayer list that he went through to make sure that he maintained that consistency.

The word "knowledge" is used twice in this letter. It's used in verse 9 and then again in verse 10. The idea of this word is it's connecting the knowledge of his will with our brains. God's will needs to stay attached to our brains. We need to think coherently and practically about God and about his purposes for us. The Spirit and the intellect work together. It's not this mystical; I will know God's will simply because I have a feeling about

something. Or it's not circumstantial; it's not, "Well, okay, I'm going to continue to drive around this parking lot, and if a parking place opens up in front of that donut shop, I'm going to know it's God's will for me to park there and go grab a dozen donuts." That's not God's will.

So there's always a connection between growing and knowing things, and there's a connection between learning and living. It's good for us to strive to study deeper truths, but I found through my years of ministry, I want to be careful that when I'm pursuing more Bible knowledge, that my life is living out the current Bible knowledge that I have.

There's a level of obedience we need. Spiritual maturity doesn't come from focusing on more knowledge. It comes from applying what we already know. And I can tell you, I wish I'd learned this lesson earlier in life. I remember praying so many times in college to know God's will. Boom, it was just like hitting a ceiling. And in reality, what I needed to do was be obedient in what knowledge I had, and God would then make my future more clear. So I hope I saved some of you young people a lot of the frustration that I went through.

He continues. *"so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God," (v. 10).* Paul is saying, live your life in a way that pleases God. He wants the Colossians to ask this question, and it's a great question for us to ask in 2024: Will this please God? Will this decision that I have to make, this opportunity that I have, this challenge that I'm facing, and my response please God? It's this great baseline with which to filter through everything that comes our way. Will this please God? Then we will know if we're doing that, he says, we will live worthy lives and bear more fruit. Jesus himself in John 8 said, "I always do things to please my Father."

Now verse 11, he continues his prayer. *"being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience," (v. 11)* Every church needs strength to protect us from bad influences from the outside or false teachings on the inside. We forget that a healthy church is really a target for Satan. That's what he's going to go after. There are two great forces at work today: the power of God and the power of Satan.

The power of God is infinitely greater than the power of Satan, but we're affected by both. Satan fears our prayers more than anything. A great prayer warrior said this, "Satan laughs at our toiling, mocks our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." I love it.

When I was baptized and I came out of that water, we were singing Maranatha songs, we were at the beach, a beautiful place, and I was committing publicly to Christ. I had in my mind that the Christian life was going to be a playground. But I soon learned that it's a battleground, not a playground. And I need to be reminded of that going into 2024. I think all of us do.

So how do we handle this battleground? Paul helps us out. The original language tells us that Paul prays for them, for strength every day. What a real confidence builder it is to know that when we pray, we pray with the full force of God's power and might at our disposal. Paul prays that God's power would produce two things: Great endurance and great patience.

We need to look at those two words. In English, we kind of think they are the same thing. But they're not. Patience in the original language means to be patient with specific problems. It's when we have to wait on God for something to happen. God's power gives us the power to wait and trust through a problem.

And then Paul prays for endurance. Endurance here doesn't apply to problems; it applies to people. It's when we have to wait on God as we're working with a difficult person. When we think of patience with problems and we think of endurance with people, I think for some of us, it's as if Paul's reading our mail. He's getting what we're dealing with.

I think this is good evidence here. We know we are learning when we are really relying on God's strength, leaning into God's strength. When we see evidence in our lives of growing patience in our problems and growing endurance with difficult people in our lives.

In verse 12, he wraps it up, *"and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light" (v. 12).* So I'd end on this last word, joy. Joy through worship, joyful thanks to the Father because we're in Christ, and our hearts are being reminded today to be bent toward always only Jesus. If we think about this, a hundred years from now, whatever hardship you're going through today won't matter.

One hundred years from now, it won't matter how hot the battle is, how hard it is, it won't matter. And whatever material blessing you're after now, 100 years from now, it won't matter. Your house, your investments, your status, your body, your education, it won't matter. The only thing that will matter is if you are saved. If you're saved, give joyful thanks to the Father. Feel that joy. Live in the peace that surpasses all understanding that God provides his people today as we lean into Jesus. And if you're not saved, get saved.

I've only been to New York City once in my life. Several years ago, I was on this tour on the East Coast with other pastors and we were visiting historical Christian sites that were an early part of American history. We came to New York City. We'd seen the things we were supposed to see, and we were given six hours to go out and enjoy New York City. Several of the pastors said they wanted to go to the Harley Davidson restaurant and sit there for the afternoon. I decided that I was not going to do that. So I started walking into Midtown Manhattan, and I came to the Rockefeller Center.

What an impressive building that is. Out in front of that building is a four-story statue of Atlas, the Greek mythological half-god, half-man figure. A strong figure. It's a picture of human strength. What he's holding on his shoulders is this gigantic sphere that represents Earth. Atlas is carrying the Earth on his shoulders. It's a tribute to the endurance, strength, and power of man to be able to take the world on their shoulders. A magnificent tribute to wealth and to the glory of man carrying that.

Now, directly across the street on 5th Avenue is St. Patrick's Cathedral. Another amazing site with gothic architecture, brick, and marble. There are these spires that go up and point to heaven. Just this beautiful building. And if you go inside the cathedral, you'll see many statues. But the one that will catch your eye, at least it caught my eye, stands only three feet high. It's a statue of the boy Jesus. In his little hand, not his right hand, but in his left hand, his nondominant hand, he holds the world about the size of an orange. The little boy can handle it. So, there are the contrasting images that represents holding the whole world, his non dominant hand, but knowing now, as a believer, that Jesus truly bore the weight of the world on his shoulders. The tonnage of all the sins of all the people in the world rested on him on the cross. In Jesus, that's where true power, true wealth, and true glory are found. He carries mankind on his shoulders, and he carries us into future glory.

For you here, all those things that you still carry, he invites you to place it on him. He came to save you and to save the world. He says he's the hope of the world, not the Atlas figure. Give him your sin; give him your struggles. He died on a cross to take those burdens away from you so you wouldn't have to carry them. He gives you grace and mercy. He gives to you a new life.

What he's telling some of you if you haven't put your trust in Christ and believe the gospel, to leave the Rockefeller Center and go over to the cathedral. Meet the true Savior of the world, who carries it all on his shoulders.

I was praying about this this week and how God continues to carry the weight of my sin and carry the weight of my unfaithfulness and my inability or lack of desire to turn things over to him. I try to hold on to control. He holds our troubles like a child would hold an orange. He takes it from us.

I came across two verses in Galatians 5:22-23. I read it in Eugene Peterson's translation called The Message.

**But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life and serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense**

**of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Galatians 5:22-23, MSG**

Grace and peace to all of you this new year! May God give us a wonderful journey together through Colossians in the coming weeks.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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