

PAUL AND THE BASIS FOR SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT  
COLOSSIANS 1:1-8

I.

Margaret Peterson began dating a classmate when she was in graduate school. (PROJECTOR ON--- SING ME TO HEAVEN) Early in their relationship he explained to her that he was infected with the HIV virus. Both of them were Christians, and the guy gave her the opportunity to break off the relationship. Some of her friends discouraged her from pursuing it. But she did, and the two of them got married.

Eventually the HIV developed into full-blown AIDS. The young couple was very active in a church. They got moral and prayer support for their situation. Despite the prayers, his condition worsened. At age 38 he came down with pneumonia and had to be hospitalized. He was put into intensive care. People prayed, but he got worse. He was put on a ventilator. So he couldn't talk. The day before he died, he asked for a pad of paper. On it he wrote four words (FOCUSING ON GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY), "Focusing on God's sovereignty." (*Sing Me to Heaven*, 2003)

There are two issues which challenge the faith of the people of God as they encounter the trials of life. The first is: Does God care about me? The second is: Does God have control over this situation? (PROJECTOR OFF) Is He indeed sovereign? Is the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ, on top of what is going on in my life and in the lives of the people around me? It is this latter issue which is the central concern of the New Testament book that we are about to study. The claim of its author, the Apostle Paul, is that Jesus Christ is sovereign over all of life.

There are a couple of things that tend to pull us away from this conviction. One is the philosophies and mindsets of the world around us. Most of us have been exposed to an educational system that too often excludes God from the explanation about the origin and development of human life. Science has become the standard of truth. Unfortunately modern science starts with the presupposition that this is a material universe only, and everything must be explained apart from the existence of God. Given this materialistic mindset, success is measured in terms of material possessions. Ethics is reduced to the thinking that everything is OK as long as no one gets hurt.

On college campuses a well funded group called Second Nature is promoting its stated goal **"to accelerate movement toward a sustainable future by serving and supporting senior college and university leaders in making healthy, just, and sustainable living the foundation of all learning and practice in higher education."** (secondnature.org) [emphasis in the original] Many of us might not have a problem with "healthy, just, and sustainable living," but is that supposed to be the foundation of all learning? What happened to truth and knowledge? And what about consideration of a God who just might have some say about where we spend eternity?

A second factor that tends to pull us away from the conviction that Jesus Christ is sovereign over all of life is our temptation to sin. We have a sin nature that urges us to do our own thing, that tempts us to keep ourselves as the focus of our life, that makes us doubt, and that draws us away from Christ.

The Christians in the town of Colossae in the first century were also faced with the tempting pull of sin and the unrelenting pressure from philosophies and mindsets that were contrary to Christian values. We are going to look at their situation in coming weeks, and see how the Apostle Paul argued his case that Jesus Christ is sovereign over all of life. In the process we will hopefully strengthen our own faith and develop a deeper personal conviction that Jesus Christ is sovereign over each of our individual situations of life, and that we should draw close to Him because of that.

I.A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK) Let's consider, then, the BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK of Colossians. First, we are going to look at the CITY OF COLOSSAE itself. (I. THE BACKGROUND... A. THE CITY OF COLOSSAE...) Colossae was located in the western part of Asia Minor, what we know today as Turkey. (COLOSSAE MAP) In the first century Colossae was located in the Roman province of Asia, which occupied just a small region in western Asia Minor. The city was about a hundred miles east of Ephesus. It was in the Lycus River valley. There was a main road that passed through Colossae that stretched from Persia in the east to Europe to the west.

The two biggest sources of income for people in the area were figs and sheep. The wool from the sheep was also made into cloth in Colossae. In the fifth century before Christ a Greek historian by the name of Herodotus called Colossae "a great city of Phrygia." By the first century AD, however, the town had declined in size and importance. (COLOSSAE AND NEARBY TOWNS) There were two other cities a short distance away that had grown and become larger and more influential. They were Hierapolis and Laodicea. Laodicea is mentioned several times in the New Testament. There is a message addressed to it in the Book of Revelation.

Colossae continued to be a small town in the following centuries. By the Middle Ages it had disappeared altogether. (COLOSSAE TEL) Today the location of the ruins are known, but those remains have yet to be excavated.

B.

(I. ... A. ... B. THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH) Let's look then at the FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH at Colossae. On the Apostle Paul's third missionary journey he spent several years at Ephesus. (THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY) His experience in Ephesus is described in Acts #19. In vv. 8-10 (ACTS 19:8) we are told, "**And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. (ACTS 19:9) But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the**

**congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. (ACTS 19:10) This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”**

The term “Asia” referred not to the continent but rather to the Roman province of that name. (PROVINCE OF ASIA) Apparently Colossae was evangelized during this time, and a church was started there. Paul was not the one who went there and did the evangelism and church planting. Verse 7 in our passage indicates that a guy named Epaphras was the one who first shared the gospel with the Colossians. (COLOSSIANS 4:12) Chapter 4 v. 12 says that he was from the town: **“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you...”** Somewhere along the line he had become a Christian and returned to his hometown with the gospel.

C.

(I. A. B. C. THE OCCASION FOR WRITING) We want to consider for a moment, then, THE OCCASION FOR WRITING. In the last verse of this little book Paul asks his audience to remember his imprisonment. (COLOSSIANS 4:18) **“Remember my chains,”** he says. So apparently he is a prisoner when he writes this letter. At the same time it is clear that he is receiving visitors, talking to friends, writing letters, and carrying on an active ministry. This fits with the situation that is described at the end of Acts #28 when Paul was a prisoner in Rome. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Toward the end of his ministry the apostle went to Jerusalem for a visit. We touched on this briefly a couple of weeks ago in our series on civil government. In Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost he was arrested for the false charge of causing a riot. The Jews didn't like his message and his powerful ministry. So they brought charges against him to the Romans. The Romans kept him in prison in Judea for a couple of years. Finally Paul appealed to the emperor. So he was sent off to Rome for a trial there. It seems that he was found innocent and released. A little while later he was again arrested. This time he was condemned and executed.

At the end of the Book of Acts there is a brief statement that describes Paul's status (ACTS 28:30-31) in his first Roman imprisonment: **“He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”** Scholars estimate that this happened between 60 and 62 AD. It was probably during this time that Paul wrote Colossians.

His reason for writing it was that Epaphras had come all the way to Rome to give him a report about the church at Colossae. (PROJECTOR OFF) He wanted advice from Paul about how to handle difficulties in the church, especially difficulties that involved false teaching.

The exact nature of this heretical teaching is uncertain. One writer counted up 44 different views that commentators have come up with about the nature of this false teaching at Colossae. It may not have been just one set of wrong beliefs that the

Christians were confronting. There may have been several influences involved in these heretical beliefs.

One element involved Jewish tradition. There was a significant number of Jewish people in this area, and some of them were part of the church. There are references that we will encounter in this letter to feast days and circumcision and dietary laws and religious tradition that point to a Jewish religious influence that is leading Christians astray from a correct understanding of Christianity. References to ascetic practices like staying away from certain foods and certain drinks could reflect Jewish or Gentile practices.

There certainly seem to have been pagan ideas mixed up in this heresy. There are references made to angels, which could reflect pagan or Jewish ideas. There seems to have been a viewpoint that matter is evil and spirit is good. This was a belief common in Greek philosophy. Then there seems to have been an element of mystical knowledge that was involved in the wrong ideas that were infiltrating the church at Colossae. At the same time these false teachers somehow fit Christ into their system. But their portrayal of Jesus was not the fully divine, fully human Jesus who was the object of the teaching of the apostles. His sovereignty was undermined.

A hundred years after this time we have writings from a philosophical system called "Gnosticism." The thinking in this belief system was that spirituality came from knowledge of secret mysteries. A heretical strain of Christianity in the second century promoted Gnosticism. Many scholars suspect that the false doctrines addressed by Paul in Colossians were forerunners of that later Gnosticism.

(COLOSSIANS 4:7) According to #4 v. 7 Paul sends this letter to Colossae via some guy named Tychicus. "**Tychicus will tell you about my activities.**" There were bigger towns nearby. There were bigger churches nearby. The church in Colossae had problems. (PROJECTOR OFF) Yet it was the little church in Colossae that had the honor of having a divinely inspired letter named after it that would remain a permanent part of God's Word.

Does God's sovereign care and concern extend to small churches that are imperfect? You bet it does. Do such churches have a role to play in God's program? You bet they do. Can Christians from small churches have a significant impact? Epaphras is testimony that they can.

D.

What, then, is the THEME of the Book of Colossians? (PROJECTOR ON--- I. C. D. THE THEME) It is the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over all of life. He is fully God. He is fully man. As the sovereign God, He is ultimately Lord over science, over philosophy, over education, over culture, over politics, over churches, over Christians, over non-Christians, over nations, over pandemics, over death, and over the challenges which you and I encounter in life..

We may be convinced of that intellectually. But in the midst of difficulties and problems, in the midst of a culture that promotes other ideas and philosophies, we may be inclined to have doubts about that. The Book of Colossians will help us to be convinced that Jesus is indeed sovereign.

## II.

So let's look at the first eight verses of the book, which provide us with THE BASIS FOR SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT. (II. THE BASIS FOR SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT) Notice how Paul addresses the Christians in the small church of Colossae. It is a church that has problems with false teaching and temptations to sin. Yet his tone is positive. He begins with encouragement. He is not going to ignore the problems in the church. But he is going to approach these Christians as family members whom he loves, though he has not even met them personally.

That kind of encouraging tone is what Christians need. It is what churches need. It is what you and I need. It is the way that we need to be toward other Christians. It is the way we need to be even when, perhaps especially when, admonition is required, as was the case here.

## A.

First, Paul finds a basis for encouragement because of OUR IDENTITY. (II. A. OUR IDENTITY) He begins in vv. 1 & 2, **“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.”** Paul follows the typical form which Greeks used in sending a letter. “Grace” was a typical Greek word of greeting, “Peace,” or shalom, was more typically Jewish. “Shalom,” however, in the Jewish understanding meant more than just “peace.” It referred to one's general well-being. Paul identifies himself and those to whom he is writing. Timothy is with Paul, but it is Paul who is the author of the letter.

In addressing his audience Paul finds three things about the identity of the Colossians that are reasons for them, and for us, to be encouraged. First, he calls them “saints.” In common usage people who are especially religious or kind are called “saints.” In the Catholic church people who have demonstrated unusual service and who have been associated with miracles and who have been recognized by the church are called “saints.”

In the New Testament anyone who has trusted in Jesus as his or her Savior qualifies as a saint. The literal translation of the Greek word means “holy one.” “Holy” means “set apart for a special use.” In the Bible saints are people who are set aside by God to Him. Every Christian has reason to be encouraged because he or she has been set aside by God as a holy one.

Second, Paul in v. 2 calls the Christians in Colossae “faithful.” Probably it has more of the idea of “believing.” These people have a special status because they have believed

something. They have believed the gospel. They have believed that Jesus was God who became man, that He died on the cross and rose from the dead and that by trusting in Him they can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The same is true of us who have trusted in Jesus.

Third, Paul calls these Christians “brothers.” Trusting in Jesus makes one part of the family of God. It means that God becomes our spiritual Father. It means that we have a relationship as brothers and sisters to other Christians. We are family.

The common denominator is Christ. Paul calls the Colossians “faithful brothers in Christ.” Archaeologists have discovered many nameless tombs in the catacombs of Rome. On some of the tombstones appear only the Latin words “in Christo,” “in Christ.” The names of the deceased may be unknown to us. But they are identified as Christians.

One time in Connecticut after a doctor’s appointment Suzy and I stopped at a restaurant for a late lunch. The parking lot was pretty full, but there was one space next to a van. So we pulled into the space. There was a woman sitting in the van with the side door open. She asked if we happened to have jumper cables. I did. The battery of the van was dead. There were also two young men outside the van who were trying to figure out what to do.

So we got the car started, and in the process discovered that the three of them were chaplains from Brooklyn who had just come from a chaplaincy conference with the Civil Air Patrol. They had prayed that somebody would come along to help them, and there we were. Before we left, we joined hands and prayed for each other. I never saw these people before. I never saw them again. But we were family. We shared an identity as fellow Christians, and our presence together was a cause of spiritual encouragement that day for all of us.

Fellow Christians may bug us. They may mistreat us. They may slight us. They may reject us. But we have an obligation to treat them as family. We have a special identity because of who we are. We need to encourage one another.

Sometimes we ourselves get discouraged because of our own shortcomings. We get depressed because of our failures. We get depressed because of our circumstances. In those situations we need to also remember that we are important. God has called us saints, believing ones, and members of His family.

B.

The second cause for encouragement is OUR FAITH. (II. A. B. OUR FAITH) After encouraging the Colossian Christians because of their identity he proceeds to encourage them for their faith. In v. 3 he says, “**We [apparently Paul and Timothy] always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...**” Clearly the apostle is speaking about the saving faith which marks out every true believer in Jesus.

People in our society speak generally of keeping the faith. Some use expressions like “you gotta have faith,” or “you gotta believe.” The thinking of many in our culture is that faith alone is good. The important thing is believing in something.

In reality that is foolishness. It is the object of our faith that is essential. People believe in foolish and ridiculous things. In the middle of the winter I may head out across a pond that is covered with ice. I may have all kinds of faith that the ice will hold me up. But if it is only a quarter of an inch thick, all of my faith will be of little help. I will end up in the water. I may end up dead. The object of Paul’s faith, and the faith of the people to whom he is writing is the sovereign Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The fascinating thing to consider here is that Paul had never visited this church. He did not know these Christians directly and personally. Yet he cared about the people there. He demonstrated that care by praying for them in some kind of regular way.

A little less than twenty percent of the money that we contribute to the church goes to the work of world missions. A couple of the missionaries whom we support work in countries where there is considerable persecution of Christians. Our missions committee is hoping to have a couple of our missionaries visit with us this year. Rob produces an update each month which gives us the latest news about our missionaries and their prayer requests. [CF CANNONS] Perhaps you might want to consider following the example of the Apostle Paul and tuning into one of these missionary families or individuals and praying for them and the people among whom they work in some kind of regular way.

C.

In v. 4 Paul also speaks of a third basis for spiritual encouragement. He talks about OUR LOVE. (II. B. C. OUR LOVE) At the end of v. 4 he mentions **“the love which you have for all the saints...”** So he is not talking about love for God, which is also a good thing. He is speaking about the love for fellow believers which should always characterize Christians. This is not just love for Christian friends. It is love for rich Christians, for poor Christians, for carnal Christians, for difficult Christians, for Christians from different ethnic backgrounds.

The source of this love, according to v. 8, is the Holy Spirit. You will notice at the end of that verse that Paul speaks of “your love in the Spirit.”

The particular form which this love for the saints took in Colossae is not described. But we know from other parts of the Scriptures what real love looks like. Jesus on the night of the Lord’s Supper took on the role of the household servant and went around washing the dirty feet of His disciples. That was love. We are going to remember the important tradition which He established that evening in just a few moments.

Love for the saints is meeting the needs of fellow Christians. It is showing up at the hospital or nursing home to visit people, when that is allowed again. It is helping fellow

believers to move. It is sending notes of encouragement. It is providing anonymous financial gifts to people in need. It is calling up people who are isolated because of this pandemic. It is listening to people who need to talk.

D.

The fourth basis for encouragement is identified in vv. 5-8. It is OUR HOPE. (II. C. D. OUR HOPE) Beginning in v. 5 Paul speaks 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 increasing— 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.”** Notice that the gospel is described as “the grace of God in truth.” The gospel is rooted in truth, in reality. It is also characterized as grace. It is nothing which we can earn or merit.

Notice in particular the reference to hope. Last week I argued that part of the hope that we have as Christians is a future participation in the rule of Christ on earth. But here hope is related to heaven. This hope is pictured as a treasure which is set aside for us in heaven. It is an eternal reward which motivates us to be faithful and loving.

In 1 Peter #1 vv. 3 & 4 (1 PETER 1:3-4) the Apostle Peter wrote, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...”** It is this future inheritance which is presented as the hope for the Colossian Christians.

One of the advertising themes of our culture is “Buy now and pay later.” (PROJECTOR OFF) The majority of people with credit cards buy into this philosophy because they keep an unpaid balance in their account. The federal government is operating on the basis of this principle.

The philosophy which Paul is supporting is “Pay now and receive later.” The Colossian Christians were making sacrifices to follow Jesus. We don’t know the exact situation in Colossae. But we know generally that in the first century when people became Christians, they often suffered a fair amount of persecution. They sometimes lost their jobs. They sometimes were rejected by their families. Jewish believers in Jesus were kicked out of the synagogue. They endured this oppression because they believed that there was some kind of future, eternal benefit that they could expect.

Because of the materialistic culture in which we live, we face pressure to experience our rewards here. Our culture tells us that we deserve a break today. We deserve to have a new car or two new cars. We deserve to be able to buy a house with no money down. We deserve to be able to sleep in on Sunday morning. We deserve to have the



government take care of our needs. We deserve to have a happy and healthy and prosperous life here and now.

That isn't the attitude that Biblical hope takes. Biblical hope says that I will serve and love and sacrifice to do what is right, to help others, to promote the cause of Christ because I am expecting my real reward in the life to come. This present earthly life is just a speck in the sea of eternity. So I will live for eternity.

The Colossians learned of this hope from the gospel, which, according to v. 6, was continuing to spread and increase in its impact. Verse 7 tells us that the Colossians themselves heard it through Epaphras, who had come to Paul now for advice. As v. 8 says, Epaphras had also told Paul about the good things going on in Colossae.

Faith, love and hope. Does the mention of these virtues in the same context sound familiar? They appear a number of times together in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians #13 he says, **“Now abides faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.”** These are three characteristics that should be distinctive of Christians. They are qualities that should be cultivated. They are virtues that should be recognized and encouraged in others.

Thus Paul begins his letter with encouragement. The basis of his encouragement of the Colossians is their status as fellow believers and their behavior. Our churches have more than enough critics and gossips and pessimists. We need encouragers. We need to work at being encouragers ourselves.

Commentator William Barclay observes, **“One of the highest of human duties is the duty of encouragement. It is easy to laugh at men's ideals; it is easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise of thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet. Blessed is the man who speaks such a word.”** (Barclay, *Letter to the Hebrews*)

There are some things that we cannot do as a small church in a smaller community. But we can be effective at creating a positive atmosphere that is recognized for its love and grace and mutual encouragement.

At the same time we need to remember the kinds of behaviors that God finds as a cause for being encouraged about us. We need to work at developing our faith, our hope, and our love. The basis for doing that, as we shall see in coming weeks, is the cultivation of an inner conviction that Jesus Christ is truly sovereign over all of life.