

Key idea: Paul's opening to Colossians – two prayers – draws our attention to the Gospel of Christ Jesus, which transforms and transfers people everywhere.

FCF:

Application:

1. What do you do...?

Patrick Sang and Lee Troop are both coaches of marathon runners. Sang, a Kenyan, coaches a large group of runners but his star is Eliud Kipchoge, the greatest marathon runner ever – the holder of the world record, the Olympic gold medalist in Rio, the only man to run a marathon under 2 hours. Troop, an Australian, coaches in America. His best athlete is Jake Riley. As an unsponsored athlete, coming off years of heartbreak and near-misses, Riley placed second in the America Olympic marathon trials (one of the hardest trials in the world).

Both of them were asked what they did with their athletes after a successful race. Both of them said they always went back to what had worked, and reapplied it, but better, each time.

It was an answer that surprised many when they both said it. After all, with success, you can afford to change and adjust and try new things. But these coaches both emphasized this truth – don't stray from the basics!

Paul says exactly the same thing as he starts his letter to God's people in Colossae.

PRAY...

2. Get the basics right... (vs.1-2)

Just as grasping the genre of the Psalms was important, so too here – these are obviously letters, from the time of the early church. **Look at verses 1-2... READ.**

The authors are clear – Paul and Timothy.

Paul is an ‘apostle’. We know from Matthew’s biography of Jesus that this means he is an eyewitness of Jesus Christ, and he is sent to tell others about this Jesus.

Paul did not choose this role in life – it was ‘by the will of God’. Acts 9 recounts the intervention of God in Paul’s life – a moment when the persecutor of Jesus’ followers met Jesus as Lord, and was completely transformed by the reality of his resurrection.

Paul’s life, now, is about representing Jesus – he is an ‘apostle of Christ Jesus – as the one who has lived, died and risen, as God’s promised one to deal with the broken state of the world.

Timothy is his ‘brother’, a co-worker.

They are writing to ‘the saints and faithful brothers in Christ in Colossae’.

The recipients have a physical postcode – they live ‘in Colossae’. Colossae is near Ephesus, in the region of Asia. It was a small rural town which had, in the previous hundred years, been a lot

larger. It was cosmopolitan. It was renowned for its purple wool. It was devastated in AD61 by a massive earthquake.

The recipients have a spiritual postcode – they are ‘in Christ’. This is one of Paul’s favourite descriptions of Christians: their whole identity is bound up with the fact that they are ‘in Christ’ – they have been joined, somehow, to Jesus and what he has done. Everything about them is to be driven by this fact.

This spiritual postcode means that they are able to call God ‘Father’. They have been joined to other like-defined people, who call God ‘our Father’. And, they have been granted life – ‘grace... and peace’ – in a way that they were designed for, but did not deserve.

Put simply, Paul and Timothy are writing to a bunch of Christians living in a small town in what is probably modern-day Turkey.

2. A prayer of thanksgiving (vs.3-8)

Paul has a pretty standard opening section for all his letters (except for Galatians) – he opens with prayer. In the letter to Colossae, he follows this tradition, but he has two prayers – the first begins in **verse 3 – READ...**

Paul and Timothy are praying a prayer of thanksgiving because they have heard something about the Colossian Christians. They pray this prayer to God, who is their Father – it is a recognition of the ultimate mover in what is being recognised.

Look at verses 4-5... READ.

They thank God for two things that the Colossians exhibit – they display ‘faith in Christ Jesus’ and ‘love... for all the saints’. These are part of the Colossian Christian lifestyle because they have a ‘hope reserved for (them) in heaven’.

It is worth pausing and unpacking what is going on here. The Colossians, it seems, have had a change of future – they now face the future with a ‘hope’ – not an airy-fairy thing, but something certain that has defined their future. This has been displayed in their lives now in a relationship with a person and a group of people. On the one hand, this future is connected to their trust in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, this future is displayed in how they relate to all the other people who have the same future hope, same relationship with Jesus.

On every level, these Christians seem to be travelling pretty well. A report has been carried to Paul – and we will see how soon – and it drives him to thanksgiving for these people we will see soon he has never met. I mean, what a testament to how well this mob are doing as Christians.

This is not how the Colossians have always been – did you see that there in verse 5?

There was a time when they had NOT heard something, and then a time they HAD heard something – **look again at verses 5-6... READ.**

The key to the change in the Colossian Christians is something that was spoken to them, something that was taught them, something that has transformed the known world.

They had heard the 'message of truth, the gospel'. This had taken hold of them. This had changed them. They had come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ, and trusted him. They had been brought into a community, whom they loved. They had been given a hope, when all their lives had looked like ending in death.

At the heart of this gospel, this good news, is 'God's grace' – do you see that there in verse 6?

From the way Paul and Timothy speak, this was something that they had NOT known nor had recognised. Something happened, and now they did know this grace. What is 'God's grace'?

We will see in a moment a fuller statement of this, but simply it means God giving these people something they did not deserve, at the very moment they deserved something else.

This transformation was not limited to just this corner of the Mediterranean. It is a message that has been transforming the world, and transforming the people of the world – did you see that there in verse 6? It has transformed, changed, and grown the people who have held onto it in Colossae – and it is doing the same right throughout the world.

This message was not proclaimed to them by Paul and Timothy – did you notice that there in verse 7? It was proclaimed to them by

a man called Epaphras, a local. In fact, Paul has never been to Colossae. It is likely that Epaphras heard about the Gospel in the town of Ephesus when Paul spent about three years there (Acts 19). He then seems to have gone back to his home-town (Col.4:12) and shared the good news of God's grace with the town.

Epaphras has then shared with Paul the nature of the change in Colossae. It seems that Paul has received a visit from Epaphras. Epaphras shared some details about this church with Paul. So, he writes this letter. Paul does so whilst in jail (Col.4:10), which probably places him in Rome around 60-61 AD.

At the heart of this prayer of thanksgiving by Paul and Timothy for the Christians in Colossae is the good news of God's grace – it has utterly transformed this mob. At this point, the change is remarkable and the news of it has spread – this mob are doing well!

3. A prayer for transformation (vs.9-14)

Paul and Timothy's prayer of thanksgiving for the Colossian Christians gives immediate rise to a prayer for transformation, a petition – **look at verse 9... READ the start.** The consistently echoed phrases in both prayers is striking – and seems to be a reminder from Paul and Timothy to the Colossian Christians to continue as they started.

Here is a church going great guns, with much to recommend it, and obviously growing as a community under Jesus as Lord – and

because of this, Paul keeps praying for them. What does Paul now pray for them, in light of this thanksgiving?

Look at verses 9-12... READ...

Paul has one major request – it is there in **verse 9**: that these people – who are already doing so well as Christians – might grow in their knowledge of God's will – that they might grow in the Gospel.

Paul prays this one request for one result – it is there in **verse 10**: so that they may walk (or, live) in a manner worthy of God.

Paul then helps his readers understand what this looks like – it is there in a string of statements in **verses 10-12**: bearing fruit, growing in knowledge of God, being strengthened by God, and giving thanks to God.

That structure is very clear, but it is worth spending time pulling apart through a series of observations.

First, Paul's desire is for these people to grow in their knowledge of God's will. He wants them to spend time in such a way that they will better understand God's plans and purposes in the world – the Gospel. In fact, it is not just a period of time spent in this, but their whole lives. Their lives as people with Jesus as Lord are to be lives that grow in their knowledge of God.

Second, that growth in knowledge will be through the Gospel and through the fellowship with others who know the Gospel. In our

modern-day terms, growth in understanding God's will is through Bible-reading and church. But, I want you to recognise that their Bible was not our Bible. They had the message that Epaphras brought them – the Gospel (and we will look at that in a moment) – which Paul had given him – and this slab of truth was the revelation of God's will. Their growth in knowing God was through this! In fact, as we read Colossians, we will see that Paul tells them never to leave this truth for a moment. Moreover, Paul seems to assume that his readers in Colossae – without the Bible as we know it – can understand and apply his words – his writing was not too hard for them!

Third, this growth in knowledge was to be the foundation for behaviour. It was out of this growth in knowing God's will that their lives would be lived so that God was pleased with their living. In fact, they would live more worthily of the one who was already their boss, their Lord. Theology – because that is what this knowledge is – is inseparable from application. More specifically, there is no application without theology.

Fourth, this life worthy of God is spelled out in four statements:

- It is to bear fruit in good deeds. A fruit tree is always known by its fruit. Someone who claims to have Jesus as Lord is always known by their behaviour. The good deeds are deeds done because Jesus is Lord, in any and every way.
- It is to grow in knowledge of God. This is a practical application of theology – to grow more in knowing who God is. Notice that, alongside bearing fruit,

these two are an image of inexorable and inevitable growth. Someone with Jesus as Lord is always growing, at least in what they know of their God.

- It is to be strengthened by God's power so that endurance and patience are the result. Like growing in knowledge, this is invisible – how do you know someone is strengthened by God's power until after the fact? But it is to express a trust and reliance upon what God has done that instils a patient endurance in the life of someone who has Jesus as Lord.
- It is to be joyfully giving thanks – always! It is to approach life – in every facet (and remember this is written by a man imprisoned) – with an attitude of gratitude to God. It is to fulfil acts of Christian service with joy, not with an attitude of begrudging obedience. It is to approach life with thankfulness and joy, not lamenting the latest thing God has developed in life.

I want to pause at this moment and take a brief digression. One day when I was helping a mate pack his house in preparation for Bible college, another fella who was helping made a gibe about ministers being impractical because they studied theology, and only farmers being practical. This stands alongside the numerous times I have heard the lament after a sermon, 'Just tell me what to do!!' It seems to me that this creates a false dichotomy between theology and application. Moreover, it drives a wedge between what we know of God and what we do as God's people. And, even more, it fundamentally misunderstands what practical

application of theology looks like. Theology is inseparable from application, but we must know God before we know how to live worthily of God. Furthermore, a valid and Biblical application of theology need not be something 'to do'. Look again at what Paul has said there in verses 10-12... A valid application of knowing God's will is to grow in knowing God. A valid application of knowing God's will is to be strengthened by God's might. A valid application of knowing God's will is to approach life with thankfulness and joy. None of those are 'doing things' – they are, in most ways, invisible attitudes and ways of thinking.

Even though the Colossians are doing well as God's people, Paul prays that they grow more in their knowledge of the Gospel – God's will – so that they live worthily of God.

4. Back to basics (vs.13-14)

Throughout this opening section, it is hard to miss the fact that the Colossian Christians are doing well. To borrow from the opening illustration, these people have run a great race, and are running a great race. Paul and Timothy recognize this – they give thanks to God for them. And yet, they pray a prayer of request for transformation for these Christians going so well. What is at the heart of this request?

Well, in case you have missed it, at the heart of both prayers is a clear statement of the Gospel as central – look at verses 5-6, and verse 12. In fact, in **verses 13-14** we are given a very clear introduction to this Gospel – **READ...**

This definition is developed more fully by Paul throughout the letter. But, we can say that the Gospel is:

- A message about God. Did you notice that the heart of what Paul says here revolves around the work of God? God is the one who does everything in the Gospel. It is his action that lies at the heart of the Gospel.
- A message of rescue. Paul describes God's actions as actions of rescue. It is something that God has done in the past – 'he has rescued us'
- A message that applies to humans. God's action was, and is, on behalf of people, people like Paul and the people he is writing to.
- A message of transfer. Paul's description of God's action on behalf of humans focusses on movement from one kingdom to another kingdom. This is the rescue that Paul describes – God does something so that humans can move from 'the domain of darkness' into the kingdom of God's Son. All humans naturally live in the 'domain of darkness' – they are the enemies of God, and the servants of the devil. But, God does something that changes this – and can move humans into the kingdom ruled by God's Son. That is reflected in the combination of 'postcodes' in verse 1!
- A message of lordship. Paul's description of the Gospel rescue turns on the movement between lordship – who our boss is! The movement into the kingdom of Jesus is the movement to having him as our lord, our boss.
- A message of forgiveness. At the heart of this movement is the dealing with human enmity towards God: the dealing

with human sin. This sin needs forgiveness by God, who is offended by it. In some way – and we will see next week – Jesus deals with human sin, enabling forgiveness for humans. This enables humans to move from the domain of the devil into the kingdom of Jesus – and he is now their Lord!

- A message of hope. The result of all this is that humans now in Jesus' kingdom, with him as Lord, have the hope of sharing in his kingdom forever!

This is the Gospel – and it lies at the heart of Paul and Timothy's opening prayers in Colossians, and at the very heart of the letter itself. It is God's will – his plan and purpose – for the benefit of humans and the establishment of his Son as Lord.

This is what this community of Christians, travelling so well, already saved and transformed and with a reputation of love and faith and hope, needs to hold onto. Put simply, it seems that Paul and Timothy are stating their intentions up-front: you continue as God's mob the very same you started, by holding onto the good news of Jesus Christ (REPEAT). The good news of Jesus Christ which transferred you into the kingdom of God's Son is the same means by which you will be transformed as one of God's mob for the rest of your life.

We need to hear this because we are part of a Christian community that, on face-value, seems to be doing well. We are a large Christian community, with numerous formal and informal ministries. We cover many demographics. We have existed here for many years. And we need to be reminded that at the heart of

who we are, and at the heart what we offer, and at the heart of how we are changed – at the heart of everything we do – is the Gospel: the good news of Christ Jesus who has dealt with our sin!

So, let me close with four simple questions for us:

(i) Do you know the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ?

(ii) If you do know the Gospel, is it at the heart of who you are as one of God's people, always?

(iii) Is the Gospel our culture – the good news about Christ Jesus, who has dealt with our sin, transferred us under the lordship of Jesus, and given us grace?

(iv) Is the Gospel what we are on about, in all our Christian community, all of our ministries (formal and informal), all of what we do and how we do them?