

Colossians: 'rooted and built up in the faith'

Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae is a wonderful letter of exhortation. I think it highlights the need for Christian perseverance, in the context of heresies that seem remarkably relevant to our world today. It's central idea—in Colossians 2:6-7—must still resonate with us today.

At the heart of this perseverance, at the heart of the Christian life, is the truth about Jesus Christ—who he is and what he is done. It sounds like a truism but it really is the case with Colossians—Jesus is the Lord, that is enough, and this is the heart of who we are as God's people.

Colossians 1:1-4

1. Read Colossians 1:1-2.

Who wrote this letter?

To whom did they write?

Do we have any indications of when this letter was written?

Look more closely at the way in which each of the authors and recipients are described. Does anything stand out? Why?

Paul and Timothy seem to write Colossians when Paul is in prison (Col.4:10). The likelihood is that this is the imprisonment in Rome (AD 60-62). It is also when he probably wrote Philemon; indeed, most authors assume that both Colossians and Philemon were delivered as letters by the same messenger from Paul, Tychicus (Col.4:7), at the same time. Colossae was by now—after a period of greatness—a small rural town, renowned for its wool. It was cosmopolitan. We will come to the occasion of the letter later on, in chapter 2.

2. Read Colossians 1:3-8.

What does Paul do? (vs.3)

When does Paul do this? (vs.3)

Why does Paul pray this? (vs.4-5)

Where did they hear of this, and through whom?
(vs.5-7)

What has this Gospel been doing? (vs.5-6)

Who is Epaphras?

What is the 'fruit' in the life of the Colossians? (vs.4)

This opening section of Colossians divides into two sections on prayer, based on what Paul has heard about the Colossians. The first section is a prayer of thankfulness, based on what Paul has heard about the fruit borne in the lives of the Colossian Christians. Epaphras is the go-between, both the evangelist who gave birth to the Colossian church and the one who bears their growth in news back to Paul.

3. Read Colossians 1:9-14.

What is Paul referring to at the start of verse 9?

What does it lead to? (vs.9)

What is the main point of Paul's prayer? (vs.9-10a)

The substance of this prayer is explained in four participles—what are these? (vs.10-12)

What has God done for these people? (vs.13-14)

What is the name of this? (vs.4)

Paul's second prayer is one of request: he desires for God to fill these Christians with knowledge of God's will so that they can 'walk' ('live')—as Christians who are obedient. Then he unpacks this central idea in four phrases. The picture is of people who are transformed by understanding the good news of the Gospel—rescued from sin and now serving Jesus.

4. What do you think it means to have 'faith... and love... because of the hope'? (vs.4-5)

5. What does it mean to have 'knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding'? (vs.9)

6. What is the connection between 'knowledge' and 'behavior'?

7. What, if anything, strikes you about the description of God's work in verses 13-14?

8. How might Paul's prayer affect our prayer for other Christians?

9. How might the content of Paul's prayer affect our conduct as Christians?

Colossians 1:15-23

Paul begins his letter to the Colossian Christians by noting two types of prayers he prays for them: a prayer of thanksgiving and a prayer of request. The discussion of the prayer of request begins at 1:9 and, in the original, does not end until the end of 1:20—it is a long sentence!! But, more importantly, it helps us place 1:15-20 in the right context: this discussion of the nature of Jesus lies at the heart of Paul's prayer that the Colossians understand the will of God. Moreover, he then applies this (and expands on verses 13-14) in 1:21-23.

In many ways, any words that we offer at this point are inadequate to capture the majesty of what we are about to read. But, we will try to delve a little into the depths (and heights, to mix metaphors) of this 'hymn' to the nature of Jesus Christ.

1. Read verses 15-16.

Who is the 'he' in verse 15?

What do we already know about him?

What is Jesus in verse 15?

What is the evidence for this in verse 16?

What does this tell us about:

- how we can know God?
- the nature of all creation?
- the purpose of all creation?
- the reach of the rule of Jesus?

2. Read verses 17-18a.

What do we learn about Jesus here?

What do you think verse 17 tells us about how day-to-day life works?

What do you think verse 18a tells us about what the church should look like, and takes it lead from?

3. Read verses 18b-20.

Do you notice any repeated words from verses 15-16?

How are they used differently here?

How does Paul use 'firstborn' differently in these two instances?

What does the resurrection show?

What was God pleased to do, and what did God do through this?

How encompassing is this 'making peace'?

4. Read verses 21-23.

In what contrast is the effect of this 'making peace' shown? (cf. 1:13-14)

What do you think verse 23 means?

What is the content and significance of the Gospel for the Colossians?

5. List everything that rests on getting the identity of Jesus right?
6. How significant is the Gospel in this?
7. Take time to write a prayer to God about the Jesus you have just been thinking about...

Colossians 1:24-2:5

At the heart of the Gospel is Jesus Christ—who is Lord of all things and the way in which humans can be reconciled to God. Paul has already described himself as an ‘apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will’ (1:1). That is, Paul serves this Gospel. His job is to be sent by God to tell people this Gospel. Now, Paul has never met the Colossian Christians (2:1)—they were converted by Ephaphras (1:7). But, he lays out his concern and work for them, and why he does this on their behalf. Funnily enough, at the heart of it is... the Gospel.

1. Read Colossians 1:24-2:3.
2. How does Paul describe himself in 1:23?
3. What does Paul do in verse 24, and for whom?

What do you think this means?

4. Paul describes himself as a ‘minister’ of two different things in 1:23 and 1:25. What are they, and what is their connection?
5. Who is behind Paul’s job, and what is its purpose? (1:25)
6. What is ‘the mystery’? To whom is it to be made known? And how does Paul describe it? (1:26-27)

7. How is this mystery made known? And, why? (28)

Who do you think the 'everyone' is in verse 28?

What do you think being 'mature' looks like? (cf. 1:9-12)

8. How, and by what, does Paul labour? (1:29)

9. What is surprising about 2:1?

What does Paul desire in 2:2?

What is his assertion, and the assurance of the Colossians in 2:3?

10. Finally, in 2:4-5, we begin to get to the heart of Paul's chief concern in his letter. Why does Paul lay out his work and concern as an apostle? (2:4)
11. What can the Colossians be assured of in Paul's work? (2:5)

12. In many ways, this passage is hard to apply because we are not Paul, nor are we apostles. But, and here is the rub, we are their product by God's grace. In this sense, we carry on their work.

How does this passage help us understand maturity as God's people?

How does this passage help us understand our mission in the world?

How does this passage help us understand how we are to complete this mission in the world?

How does this passage help us understand our relationship with other Christians in the world?

Colossians 2:6-7

Paul is writing to a group of people he has not met. At the heart of his concern is the Gospel, which has as its centre the Lordship of Jesus. This is Paul's prayer for the Colossians, it is at the heart of his work ordained by God, and it is the reality of the universe. But, the Colossians face a danger—and Paul turns to that now...

1. Read Colossians 2:6-7.

What does the 'therefore' that starts verse 6 refer to?

What have the Colossians received, and what must they do with it?

What does this walk look like? (2:7)

Colossians 2:6-7 is really the heart of the letter. If Jesus Christ has been received as Lord then he is sufficient for life (give the supremacy of his lordship). There is nothing else a Christian should do, except to 'walk in him'. To do otherwise is to jeopardise the peace that Jesus has created for humans, with God (cf.1:20-23).

2. The key, I think, here is 'the faith'. It is a technical term, referring to the body of truth we know as 'the Gospel', and everything that flows out of it. How would you define 'the faith', and where might you go Scripturally to define it?

Colossians 2:8-15

Paul is now dealing with the guts of his concern: the issue of the false teaching that has come into the church in Colossae. He begins, as we saw in verses 6-7, with the reminder to the Colossians of who they are and what they must do: they are under the Lordship of Jesus and they must walk in this. Moreover, this is because they know that the Lordship of Jesus is enough—he is Lord because his life, death and resurrection has dealt with their sin. But, it seems, as we will see that these false teachers are sowing doubts about the sufficiency of Jesus' lordship...

1. Read Colossians 2:6-15.
2. What is Paul's warning (it is a command) in verse 8?

What is this false teaching based upon?

What is this false teaching NOT based upon?

Give what Paul has just said in verses 6-7, what is the problem with this false teaching and the life of the Christian?

Paul has issued a clear command: do not be sucked in ('kidnapped' is what the term means literally) by false teaching that has no foundation in the Lordship of Jesus. In essence, then, this false teaching casts doubts over whether the Lordship of Jesus is enough—it is offering an alternative that makes up for what is deficient (it is alleged) in the Lordship of Jesus.

3. In a series of propositions that revolve around two key phrases, Paul then shows what these Christians have 'in him/with him/ (that is, their Lord, Jesus):

| Phrase | What they have |
|---------------------|----------------|
| 'in him' Vs.9-10 | |
| 'in him' Vs.11 | |
| 'with him' Vs.12 | |
| 'with him' Vs.13 | |

4. What do you think 'in him' means?

How do we get 'in him'? (cf.2:5)

5. What do you think it means to be 'filled by him' (vs.10)?
6. What does Paul mean by the 'circumcision of Christ' (vs.11)?

7. What does it mean to be 'buried and raised with Jesus' (vs.12)?
8. What does it mean to be 'made alive with him' (vs.13)?
9. How do verses 14-15 help us understand verse 13?
10. On a slight tangent, how does verse 13 skewer the popular Christian image as Jesus as the 'lifesaver'?
11. List all that these people—and we as Christians—have in the Lordship of Jesus. Is it sufficient, enough?
12. Given how Paul outlines the basic false teaching in verse 8, which teaching seems most attractive? Why?
13. Brainstorm about the doubts we are tempted by when it comes to the sufficiency of the Lordship of Jesus, and the false teachings. In what ways do these ideas doubt the sufficiency of the Lordship of Jesus?
14. Spend some time in prayer, giving thanks for the sufficiency of the Lordship of Jesus.

Colossians 2:16-23

So far, Paul has been dealing with the false teaching in Colossae that has led people to doubt the Lordship of Jesus. Last week, in verses 8-15, he returned us to reality so that we could look at the facts: the Lordship of Jesus is enough. This week, he deals with the tendency to supplement the Lordship of Jesus with the things that we do. In essence, if Jesus is the Lord because of the cross, he has done it for us: what he did is sufficient.

1. Read Colossians 2:16-23.
2. What is Paul's first command here? (vs.16)

What reason does he give for this? (vs.17)

What do you think this means?

What is Paul warning against here?

3. What is Paul's second command here? (vs.18)

What reason does he give for this? (vs.18-19)

4. How are these two warnings dealing with things that doubt the sufficiency of Jesus' Lordship?

5. How does Paul sum up his warning in verse 20?

What is the problem with this type of behavior? (vs.21-23)

6. What is the best way to deal with 'fleshly indulgence'? (vs.23)

7. 'Jesus is Lord' is enough. He has dealt with our sin for us and so we do not have to deal with our sin by good behavior. This leads to two questions:

- What leads us to try to supplement Jesus' lordship with our good deeds?

- Has good behavior got any role in the life of the Christian?

