

**“Why Colossians?”**  
**Colossians 1:1-2**

**January 5, 2014**

**SI:** Happy New Year.

I think it's good to start the year studying something new.

So today, we're going to start a study of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

I've never preached on Colossians.

This sermon series will take us through the winter and right up to Easter.

I'm going to read the first two verses, Paul's opening salutation,  
and then focus on the question:

Why Colossians? Why this particular book?

What does it have for us that we need?

I hope this will pique your interest, stimulate your appetite,  
for this challenging little letter.

**INTRO:** This past Monday we went to Memphis to watch the Memphis Grizzlies play the Chicago Bulls. It was Will's birthday present—tickets to an NBA game.

Now one of my daughters, I won't tell you which one,  
but one of them has absolutely no interest in sports whatsoever.  
I was once at a football game with her and I looked over and she was just  
staring at her shoes. Moving one, then moving the other.  
Great things were happening on the field, but that meant nothing to her.

Well, she went with us to this Memphis game and was determined to get into the  
spirit of things. As we were walking into the arena she said:  
OK, I'm trying to understand basketball. Explain this to me.  
She asked a question and Will and Eliza explained it to her.  
She said, I wish basketball wasn't so complicated.

On the one hand, you want to say: It's not complicated. It's fun.  
Just watch the action. Don't worry about knowing everything.  
Anyone can see a good pass and a good shot.  
But on the other hand she's right, it is complicated.  
And anyone who really loves the game, the most devoted fans, understand  
the complexity. They know rules and strategy. They use all the terminology.

That depth of specialized knowledge gives them a deeper appreciation of the sport.  
It doesn't necessarily give them greater enjoyment than people who don't  
know as much, but it certainly gives them greater appreciation.  
They see things, they make connections that others don't. Able to talk, analyze.

Everything worth doing, every craft or skill or field of study can be enjoyed  
at a certain level. But when you get into it, realize it's more complicated.  
There is specialized terminology, there are rules, there are experts or famous  
practitioners who have broken new ground. As you learn those things, your  
appreciation grows, you become better, able to converse in more meaningful way.  
Whether it's sports or medicine, engineering, cooking or photography or whatever

Now, when we come to Colossians, on the one hand,  
this is a letter than can be understood and enjoyed simply.  
What's it about? What's the theme of Colossians?  
The theme of Colossians is the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the greatest. He's all you need for life and salvation.

You don't need to chase after anything else. You just have to know him.

He's the Lord of life and everything in your life finds fulfillment in him.

This is a book that simply lifts up Jesus, so that our view of him is expanded, so that we know him better and live for him more wholly.

But on the other hand, Colossians is a very complicated letter.

It has proved a challenge to Bible scholars over the centuries.

This is the challenge.

Paul wrote this letter in response to teachings or ideas that were undermining the supremacy of Christ.

Something was being taught that was luring the Colossian believers to do things and trust things that were pushing Jesus out of first place in their lives.

Not getting rid of Jesus completely, but adding extra things that were seen as necessary to complete and fulfill their experience of the Christian life.

But the problem is that Paul doesn't describe those teachings in detail.

He just refers to them in a kind of glancing way.

So the big question that scholars have wrestled with is: What was that teaching?

In scholarly circles it's called the question of the Colossian heresy.

Volumes have been written, and are still being written.

With these writings, all kinds of specialized terminology—

Gnosticism, Essenism, various Greek philosophies, asceticism, mysticism.

When you study Colossians in depth, as we will, have to cover some of this.

You might ask: Is this really important? Can't we just study Jesus?

Of course you can. Just like you can go to a basketball game and not know all the finer points and enjoy yourself fine.

But the reason this question of the Colossian heresy is important because it is the context for all these great things Paul writes about Jesus Christ.

Trying to understand it gives us a better understanding of Paul's teaching about Christ's supremacy.

And in very practical terms, it helps us apply our faith in Christ more effectively to the challenges that we face today. And there are many of them.

So with that background, and with these opening verses before us,

let's consider three reasons why the study of Colossians is beneficial.

I'll give them to you as we go.

**MP#1 We need to study Colossians because it gives us a strong dose of Paul.**

And we can never get enough Paul.

You know that famous Saturday Night Live skit where Christopher Walken says:

I gotta have more cowbell. We've gotta have more Paul.

As Christians, we can never get enough of the Apostle Paul's teachings.

Paul introduces self to Colossians as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

He did not know this church personally. He had never visited them.

The man who planted the church was Epaphras.

He came to Paul in Rome where Paul was in prison, and told him about the problem his church was having. In response to those concerns, Paul wrote this letter and sent it back with some other men.

So he was writing them as a stranger, but did so with the authority of an apostle.

The apostles were that unique group of men, commissioned and sent by Jesus Christ himself, as the founders of the church. They held a special office, never repeated.

They were Christ's spokesmen. They spoke with his authority.

So Paul's words are the authoritative words of Christ.

Of course all the authors of Scripture were inspired by God. All wrote God's word.

But there is something unique about Paul that deserves attention.

Paul was a man of uncommon intellectual brilliance and force.

His life and teachings have shaped the church for 2000 years and continue to shape our understanding of and experience of the Christian life even today.

The vast majority of people who the Lord calls to himself are ordinary people with ordinary abilities. But at key points in church history, God calls men with brilliant minds and formidable intellects to serve him.

He uses them to advance his kingdom in ways that ordinary men cannot.

Paul was one of those men. He's the kind of person glad to have on your team.

He spoke at least four languages.

He was widely read in Greek and Roman literature and philosophy.

He was also a highly trained Jewish theologian.

Look at the account in Acts 17 of his debate at the Areopagus in Athens.

He went toe to toe with the Greek philosophers.

He quoted their literature with ease in his presentation of Gospel.

And he was able to switch gears and argue Hebrew Scripture and theology before the Sanhedrin.

Paul's depth makes him hard to follow at times.

Remember even Peter says, in 2 Peter 3, that Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand. If Peter thought Paul was hard, then we know we are going to struggle with some things he has written.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones is considered by many to be the greatest expository preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He spent 13 years preaching through Romans, and finally had to quit several chapters from the end because of his health.

It is from Paul's letters that we get almost all of our language for talking about the Christian life and doctrine.

When we talk about original sin, election, predestination, justification, adoption, sanctification, the resurrection, the church as the body, being in Christ, walking with Christ, growing in grace, fighting the good fight—all Paul's terminology.

Someone has said:

“It is supremely Paul who has commanded the intellectual life of the Christian pulpit and academy, and through the church's preachers and theologians his understanding of the faith has come down to the saints.”

Usually, when a person is considering Christianity or has just become a Christian, the best advice is to start with the Gospel of John or one of the other Gospels.

You should probably not tell a new Christian to start with Romans, for example. But at the same time, as high and lofty as Paul is, he had a way with words that has captured the imaginations of ordinary believers.

At weddings, want 1 Cor 13, the love chapter. Romans 7, Romans 8, 1 Cor. 15, resurrection, Eph 5, marriage, family, Eph 6, spiritual warfare.

Furthermore, the rediscovery of Paul that has led to some of the great revivals.

Martin Luther said: “Paul's words are not dead words, they are living creatures with hands and feet.” Luther's study of Romans that led to Reformation.

J Wesley's conversion happened through reading Luther's Romans commentary.

Certainly the main reason Paul wrote with such power is that he himself was a man dramatically changed by the saving grace of God. His conversion from an enemy of Jesus Christ to Christ's champion was a spiritual earthquake.

We have the wisdom, the experience, the faith, the sanctified intellect of one of the greatest minds and greatest hearts in redemptive history.

It will be a privilege these weeks to try to think this man's thoughts after him.

And to watch him demolish this Colossian heresy and so teach us how to think and feel as Christians.

## **MP#2 We need to study Colossians because it helps us answer contemporary challenges to our faith.**

Over the past years, a number of our own college students have come to see me when they are home from college and they've asked me hard questions.

Is hell real? Does God really judge people?

How do we know the Bible is true?

Is Jesus really the only way?

What about other religions? What about Islam?

Does Christianity repress women?

Is homosexuality really wrong?

Good, hard, honest questions. I'm glad they've asked me.

In one sense, that's typical of college years.

You get out from under your parents and your home church, have to think for self.

But in another sense, these questions signify a sea change in American culture.

There have been several influential movements that have completely reshaped the moral, political, and spiritual landscape of our country.

I'm thinking of feminism, the sexual revolution, and what is commonly called post-modernism—the powerful concept that morality is a social construct, that what's right or wrong for you is not the same for me.

Just think for a minute of the way these movements have radically changed the way many ordinary Americans see the world.

For many, hetero and homosexual behavior are seen as morally equivalent.

Abortion and euthanasia are widely accepted.

Tolerance is defined as acceptance and celebration.

There have been several cases where public expressions of biblical morality by citizens have been actually been declared destructive to society by the high courts.

The New Mexico Supreme Court case this year against Christian photographer.

We are moving into very uncertain times for biblically oriented Christians.

Western culture sheltered Christianity for centuries.

But it has openly, and quickly, turned against many of our cherished convictions,

There are many moral positions that the vast majority of people in our country

held only twenty or thirty years ago, both Christians and non-Christians.

These have been swept away.

None of this should surprise us.

Western culture has been on this trajectory for a long time,  
away from the Judeo-Christian worldview and ethic.  
All great civilizations become corrupt and self-destruct.  
We're witnessing the self-destruction with our own eyes.  
Who knows what will happen. Will the Lord intervene?  
Will there be a revival that preserves things for another generation.  
Or will the slide downward become more pronounced?

But here's what we do know.  
As Christians, we have to be thoughtful and observant critics of ideas all around us.  
We have to be confident of the truth of our own positions.  
Even in a place like Cullman, wonderful Christian bubble that it is,  
we can't be caught flat-footed when it comes to the world's ideas.  
Colossians helps us become confident, thinking Christians.

I mentioned earlier how Bible scholars have debated the Colossian heresy.  
One theory is that it wasn't a particular set of teachings. But instead,  
what Paul was addressing was the general influence of the culture on church.  
The Colossians were struggling to answer the big ideas of the day that  
contradicted their Christian faith. Always hard respond from the inside.

In 2:4 Paul says that one reason he wrote this letter to the Colossians was  
"so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments."  
There are lots of fine-sounding arguments these days that have the power  
to deceive unwary Christians, as were then. And many Christians are deceived.  
How can this or that historic Christian teaching be true?  
It sounds so out of step with the spirit of the times, so judgmental,  
so sexist or homophobic or whatever.

And the greater danger is when there are teachers in the church who begin to  
subtly recast Christian teaching in a way that accommodates the culture.  
That was also apparently going on in the Colossian church.  
A form of Christian teaching that in one way or another,  
had accommodated the truth to the opinions and prejudices of the time.  
Paul was also on to that. He says in 2:8 that he is going to warn them about  
hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic  
principles of the world rather than on Christ.  
We need that careful outlook too. Colossians will help us get it.

### **MP#3 We need to study Colossians because it points us to the glorious sufficiency and supremacy of Jesus Christ.**

One of the questions that Bible scholars have asked as they have tried to get a feel for the Colossian heresy is: What was so appealing about it? Why were the Christians in the Colossian church attracted to it?

One of the hints, as you read Paul's words carefully, is that it seems to have offered them some kind of spiritual fullness. That's the term they apparently used. What Paul seems to do is co-opt that idea of fullness and use it for his own purposes. He applies it to Jesus Christ.

For example, he says in 1:19

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (that is, in Christ.)

In 2:9

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

Then he says: And you have been given the fullness of Christ.

So it seems that this teaching or this idea offered some kind of fullness.

This is what you need to be spiritually complete.

Simple faith in Christ, following him, trusting him, is not enough.

There are other things you must do to experience true fullness.

As we work our way through the letter in coming weeks, we read what some of those things were. They are mostly in chapter two.

As I've already said, we aren't given much detail.

Paul just barely mentions things, and the Colossians knew exactly what he was referring to. But we have to read between the lines.

One thing seem to have been religious rituals, having a particular kind of baptism or circumcision. That was one of the paths to fullness.

Also, eating was a big deal, what you eat or don't eat.

Also keeping or not keeping certain holy days.

And then stranger things like communication with or worship of angels.

But what strikes you when you read these things that were being floated around the church as promises of fullness, is how contemporary they are.

The same sort of things can be found in the American church today.

It's not enough to have faith in Christ, you have to have a special baptism, a baptism in our church or in a particular way.

Or it might be that you have to have a particular experience, speak in tongues.

What about the matter of food?

It's just amazing how food has taken on religious significance for many people.

Think of the name of the grocery store chain, Whole Foods.

Don't misunderstand me, nothing wrong with shopping there if you want to. But the connotation of the term Whole Foods goes deeper with many people than just granola and organic vegetables. It's about spiritual wholeness, fullness. It's food righteousness. What you eat or don't eat making you a better person.

That concept has made its way into the consciousness of Christians.

There are churches now that promote certain diets.

And of course, the argument is that this is just about health, not replacing faith, it's just about making you a better person.

But that sounds very much like the kind of thinking in the Colossian church.

We'll look at more of these examples later.

But Paul countered them all by saying: No, in Christ you have all fullness. Jesus is sufficient and supreme.

You don't need to chase after anything else. You have to know him.

He's the Lord of life and everything in your life finds fulfillment in him.

Paul shows how Christ is pre-eminent over creation—

both the physical realm and the spiritual realm.

He has made all things and he sustains all things.

Everything finds its purpose and completeness in him.

Then Paul takes that Christ-centered world view, and he works it out.

He shows how it answers the powerfully attractive spiritual movements of that day and age, specifically mysticism and asceticism.

Then he moves into the very practical and explains how the pre-eminence of Christ applies to the places we live every day, specifically the home and workplace.

And he applies the supremacy of Christ to many other areas of life as well—gratitude, prayer, reconciliation.

In other words, he shows us how the supremacy of Christ magnifies our humanity by purifying our relationships and making our callings clear.

Colossians lifts up Jesus, so that our view of him is expanded, so that we know him better and live for him more wholly, and through that, experience a life of fullness.

That's why we need this book. It's vision of the supremacy of Christ.

Colossians will be good for us.

As we wrestle with the writing of this great Apostle, our faith will be deepened.

We will hopefully become more thoughtful, discriminating believers, not carried along by the ideas and philosophies around us.

But men and women who recognize the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ, and who seek to bring his supremacy and sufficiency to bear on every area of our lives, every relationship, every calling.

Just one final quote to get you excited about Colossians.

Adolf Diessmann was a great German New Testament scholar

and he deeply loved the music of Bach. He once wrote this:

“When I open the chapel door of the Epistle to the Colossians, it is as if Johann Sebastian himself sat at the organ.”

Hopefully we too will delight in the rhythms and melodies of this Christ-centered letter in our coming weeks together.

Father, we give thanks for your Word.

Thank you for this little letter the apostle wrote to the church in Colossae.

Thank you for the way it unfolds the sufficiency of our Lord and Savior Christ.

We pray to be delivered from alien teaching, from the rags and tatters of things that are not true to the spirit of your revelation, from everything that detracts from your Son.

May we grow in grace together through our study, enjoying the fullness of Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen.