

January 28, 2007 by Steve Brandon



When This Letter Is Read Among You

Colossians 4:16

For the past nine months, we have been in a study of Paul's letter to the Colossians. We have gone through the entire book, verse-by-verse, phrase by phrase. This morning, we come one last time to this epistle, to consider the one last verse that we have not preached through (i.e. Colossians 4:16). There are many benefits to the approach that we have taken, in walking through a book of Scripture as we have done.

It gives us great vision. We know what is coming next. Rather than speaking on the topic of my choosing, I have let the Holy Spirit decide for us what we need to hear, as we have simply continued on to the next verse. This approach has also helped us regarding context. Week after week, we have seen Paul's logic in his argument throughout the book develop itself. We have seen how each passage builds upon the previous text and works itself into the whole. Furthermore, we have taken our journey slow enough to enable us to consider everything in this letter. There isn't anything in this epistle that we have skipped. There is no phrase that we haven't considered. In fact, each week as I have sought to decide how many verses that we should cover, much of it has been precisely with this in mind. I haven't wanted to go too quickly that we merely skim the surface. I have wanted for us to think about everything that Paul said.

Having said that, there is a danger in what we have done these past nine months as well. The danger is that we might miss the forest, due to our interest in the trees. The danger is that we might be so interested in the small details that we miss the whole. And so, this morning, I'm going to preach a message that covers the entire book in one sitting. I do believe that I have warrant for this approach. The warrant comes in chapter 4, and verse 16. In this verse, Paul writes, "When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16). When those in the church in Colossae first received this letter, it was Paul's desire that they read through the entire letter, publicly, out loud, and for all to hear. This is what I want to do for you this morning. At the end of my message this morning, I will read through the entire letter, without comment. When I finish the letter, it will be the capstone on my exposition through the letter to the Colossians. I'll pray, and then we'll close our service.

Now, reading through entire epistles might not be our practice at Rock Valley Bible Church, but it was the practice of the early church. Once this letter was read in Colossae, Paul instructed them to send it on to the church of the Laodiceans, which was only 10 miles to the west of Colossae, so that they might read it as well. Also, there was another letter that Paul had written to the church of Laodicea, which Paul wants to be read in Colossae as well. Look at the end of the verse, "and you, for your part, read my letter that is coming from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16). There is all sorts of discussion regarding this letter, trying to figure out the details about this letter. Some say that it was the letter that we call, "Ephesians." Others say that it was a letter written by the Laodiceans to Paul. Others say that it was a letter than Paul had written while in Laodicea. Others say that it was the letter that we call, "Philemon." Others say that it is "the Apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans" (which is really an collection of Pauline phrases strung together). Others say that it was a genuine letter of Paul that has since been lost. Bottom line is that we don't really know for sure what letter Paul was talking about. But, we do know that there was another letter that Paul wanted to be read in Colossae in addition to this letter addressed to them.

Though we don't know exactly what letter Paul was talking about, it does give us insight into the practice of the early church. They read entire letters to congregations out loud. They didn't have the Bible back then. There was a need for them to be guided in truth. Though we have the Bible today, it is good for us to read Scripture out loud in our services together. I have had people comment to me on several occasions about how long our Scripture readings are sometimes here at church. I'm not apologetic about this at all. I like to hear long portions of Scripture read. It is good for us. I believe that it honors the Lord and it helps us to hear it like the early church did. But, our Scripture readings usually aren't anything like Paul told those in Colossae to have. We have never read through four chapters as long as this book, ... until today. (It takes about twelve minutes to read through the book of Colossians).

Having said that as an introduction and as a justification for preaching a summary message on Colossians, let's step back and consider this book as a whole. As we read this letter, we are at a disadvantage from those in Colossae. We aren't living when they were. We aren't surrounded by the circumstances they were surrounded by. It's simple fact. There will be some things that Paul references that aren't immediately obvious to us, because we are removed from their situation, and not involved in their church on a daily basis. But, to those in Colossae, it would have made great sense. But, to us, it is a bit more difficult. And so, as we think about this letter, we need to know a bit about what was going on in the Church.

The history of the church began with a man named Epaphras. This man was a native of Colossae (Col. 4:12). At some point (probably in Ephesus) (i.e. Acts 19:10), he had heard Paul's preaching the gospel of Christ. He had come to faith and had returned to Colossae and began to preach the gospel that he had heard, in all its simplicity, and in all its power.

The message to those in Colossae would have been clear. "Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus Christ is the Jewish Messiah. But, He came to save more than the Jewish people. He came to save all who would put their hope and trust in Him. And so, confess your sins, and repent from them. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." As a result of his preaching, there were some in Colossae who came to believe in God's grace extended to them. Through faith in Christ, they were forgiven of their sins and became faithful followers of Jesus. We don't know how many there were. Perhaps there were several hundred. Perhaps there were only twenty. But, there was enough to form a church in Colossae, with Epaphras as their pastor.

After a period of time, the church faced some danger from some false teachers who had come into the church and had sought to persuade the believers away from their faith. It's not so much that they denied the truth about Christ. Rather, it's that they began to add to the truth about Christ.

Some came in from a **Jewish perspective**, seeking to encourage the people of Colossae to return once again to the law. They said, "*Jesus is good, but you need more*. You need the Old Testament feasts and festivals. You need to follow the diets and days of the Old Testament. The Old Testament tells you what you should and shouldn't eat. The Old Testament tells you which days of the year to celebrate. The Old Testament tells you to keep the Sabbath days. You need to follow all of these things. Then, (and only then) will you be truly spiritual" (Col. 2:16-17).

Others came with an **experiential perspective**, encouraging those of Colossae to seek the spiritual, religious experience as the key to Christian living. They said, "Yes, *Jesus is good, but you need more*. You need to have an experience. Look into the heavenly realms. Worship the angels. Seek for visions and dreams. Let God speak to you personally. Then, (and only then) will you be truly spiritual" (Col. 2:18-19).

Others came from an **ascetic perspective**, telling those in Colossae to submit themselves to the rigors of self-discipline. They said, "*Jesus is good, but you need more*. You need to beat your body into submission. You need to stay away from these foods. You shouldn't be involved with these particular activities. You should guard against fleshly indulgence, by punishing yourself when you do wrong. Sleep on the hard floor. Don't bathe for weeks. Fast until you feel the pain and really show your commitment to follow the Lord. Then, (and only then) will you be truly spiritual" (Col. 2:20-23).

Others may have come with some type of combination of these teachings, taking some from the Jewish perspective and a bit from the experiential perspective and a bit from the ascetic perspective. They may have laid stress on the Jewish dietary laws, but not on the need for the festivals, focusing rather upon experiencing God through diet and self-discipline. They may have stressed the keeping oneself from all worldly temptations, but lessened the importance of having spiritual experiences.

The common theme in all of these false teachers is a tolerance for Jesus, but an insistence that you need more. They never denied Jesus with as many words. They simply emphasized that you needed to do more. You need to seek some type of religious experience on top of your faith in Christ, which just wasn't enough. Those in Colossae would have been very familiar with these teachings. Perhaps, they were even confused. Paul's letter was to deal with the confusion.

It was because of this that Paul wrote the letter to the Colossian believers. Paul found out about these false teaching when he met Epaphras in prison. Paul had been imprisoned in Rome for the sake of the gospel. It was probably the case that Epaphras had been imprisoned as well for the same reason. As Epaphras told Paul of what was happening to his beloved flock in Colossae, Paul sought to do what he could by writing this letter. So, Paul sought to address the false teaching by showing how deficient it was. Paul sought to point them to the solution to their problems. He wanted to show them the way to walk righteously, and the way to please God. In the first two chapters of Colossians, Paul explains how it is in looking to Jesus Christ alone (1) that you are made righteous before God; (2) that you learn true righteous living; and (3) that you can truly please God. In the following two chapters, Paul then sought to address the issue of practical righteousness by answering the question of how one's faith in Christ work itself out in daily practice

Let's begin walking through Paul's letter to catch his flow of thought. Consider the first chapter. After a brief introduction in the first two verses, Paul speaks about His joy in hearing what the Lord did in Colossae. He said (in verse 3), "We give thanks to God, ... praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints" (Col. 1:3-4). According to verse 6, we discover that their faith was "constantly bearing fruit and increasing ... since the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth." Paul heard about these things through Epaphras, who had told Paul of what took place in Colossae (verses 7-8). For these things, Paul expresses his thanks to God.

In fact, Paul's joy is so great that he again tells these believers of how great is his passion to pray for them. Look at verse 9, "For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you." Already twice in the first 9 verses, Paul puts forth his huge heart for these people. He can't be with them, because he's confined in jail. But, he can pray for them. Paul says that he is always praying for them. These words affirm and demonstrate his great love and care and concern for those in Colossae. This isn't a cold theological treatise. No, this is a warm-hearted letter of concern and help.

What a great point of application comes here. I have often heard it said, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." You may indeed hold the solution to their problem in your hands. But, if they aren't convinced that you care for them, they won't take your solution, they won't take your counsel. They won't take your advice. Paul understood this. Before he began to instruct them in any way, he first affirmed to them of how much he cared for them. His words are impressive, "since the day we heard of [your faith] we have not ceased to pray for you" (verse 9). Oh, let that sink in. Let his care and love for these people sink in. He'll come back to his care for them a bit later in this letter. It's a theme throughout the epistle. It is a love we should have for others.

In verse 9, Paul continues on to tell them of how he is praying for them, ...

Colossians 1:9-12

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

Paul is praying that they might live a life the fully knows and understands God's will for them. He's praying that they might walk worthy of the gospel of Christ. He's praying that they would be pleasing to the Lord in all ways, (1) by bringing forth fruit, (2) by increasing in the knowledge of God, (3) by being strengthened to live a steady life, and (4) by giving thanks to God, who has qualified us for heaven. In other words, he's praying for their spiritual maturity and stability. This is what they were seeking. This is what the false teachers were seeking. This is what everyone is seeking. We all want to stand firm in our knowledge of God and be equipped and ready to tackle the difficulties of life. And that's what made some of this false teaching attractive. It came under the guise of helping you grow in your spiritual maturity. But, rather than following the ways of the false teachers, the way to do this is to trust in Christ and in Him alone.

In verses 13-23, Paul puts forth a description of Jesus that is absolutely stunning. He is the One who rescued us from darkness and delivered us into His kingdom (verse 13). He is the One who has redeemed us (verse 14). He is the One who has forgiven us (verse 14). He is the image of God (verse 15). He is the firstborn of all creation (verse 15). He is the creator of the universe (verse 16). He is the reason why the universe was created (verse 16). He is the sustainer of the universe (verse 17). He is the head of the church (verse 18). It is all summed up in verse 18, "He Himself will come to have first place in everything." By these words, Paul is preparing for the argument of his letter: Jesus is so great and so glorious and has done so much for you, that it doesn't make any sense at all to seek anything else.

Again, this is a great point of application for us this morning. The solution to all of your problems in life is Jesus. It doesn't matter what the exact details of the problems you have experienced in your life, Jesus, the creator, sustainer, Lord of the universe, is fully capable of saving you from your sins, which is ultimately your greatest problem. In a very real sense, it matters not whether you were abused as a child, whether you had no relationship with your father, whether you are addicted to pornography, whether you are gluttonous, whether you have financial struggles, whether your kids are out of control, or whether you have bouts with depression. The solution to dealing with all of these problems is by trusting in Christ Jesus alone to help you through these things.

I love the way that D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it. He was trained as a physician, but later became a preacher. He writes, ...

Having spent the first part of my adult life as a physician in medicine I have often been interested in the difference between the work of the physician and the work of the preacher. Of course there are many similarities, but there is one essential difference which comes out in this way. How does the physician deal with his patient? Well, the first thing he does is to ask the patient to give an account of his symptoms and his troubles -- his aches and pains, where it is, how long he has had it, how it began, has it varied, etc. All this has to be gone into great detail. The doctor takes a careful history of the case and then enquires as to the patient's previous history from childhood onwards. Having done that he takes the family history from childhood onwards. Having done that he takes the family history, for that may throw considerable light upon this particular ailment. There are hereditary and familial diseases, and familial predispositions to disease, so the family history is most important. Having ascertained these facts he then proceeds to make his physical examination of the patient. Now with this detailed, specific, special personal knowledge of the patient the physician cannot do his work; and it is at this point, I say, that there is such a striking contrast between the work of the physician and that of the preacher. The preacher does not need to know these personal facts concerning his congregation. ... The preacher does not need to know these detail. Why not? Because he knows that all the people in front of him are suffering from the same disease, which is sin -- every one of them. Their symptoms may vary tremendously from case to case, but the business of the preacher is not to medicate symptoms, it is to treat the disease. ... He knows the problem of the factory worker, he knows the problem of the professional man; because it is ultimately precisely the same. One may get drunk on beer and the other on wine, as it were, but the point is that they both get drunk; One may sin in rags and the other in evening dress but they both sin. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "There is none righteous, no not one." "The whole world is guilty before God." [\[1\]](#)

In every case, the solution is the same: "Look to the all-sufficient Christ." He is the only one who is able to save. This is where Paul goes in verses 21-23. He recalls their salvation their salvation. He reminds them, "You were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach." It's not these other things that you add to Christ that will make you holy before God. It's Jesus who can.

Paul ends chapter 1 on this theme and continues it on through the first half of chapter 2. Look at verse 27, the great glorious mystery among the Gentiles is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). Jesus Christ, the sovereign-reigning-ruling One in us! Purifying us, cleansing us, empowering us, that we might stand complete in Him. Everything that Paul labored for was this: "to present every man complete in Christ" (according to verse 28). It's not complete in religious works or spiritual experience or self-discipline, it's complete in Christ. In chapter 2, verse 2, Paul says that "God's mystery is Christ, Himself, .. in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Everything that we need is in Christ Jesus! In chapter 2, verse 10, it is summarized beautifully. Paul writes, "In Him you have been made complete." This verse could easily be identified as the theme verse of this entire epistle. Jesus is fully sufficient to make you complete in every way. Jesus is able to make you stand complete before God.

Look at what surrounds this phrase. Beginning in verse 9, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority." You don't have to question the power of Jesus. He is God in the flesh. You don't have to question the authority of Jesus. He rules over all. You don't have to question the sufficiency of Jesus. He alone makes you complete. Again and again, Paul tells those in Colossae, don't be persuaded into any other philosophy. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. It's in Jesus and in Him alone that you are made complete.

Paul was concerned that those in Colossae would be sucked away from this core truth. He writes, "I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument" (Col. 2:4). Don't be taken in by some other teaching. A few verses later, Paul writes, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). Any other way of thinking is contrary to the gospel. It's deceiving and man-centered. It is Christ Jesus and He alone that will make you perfect before the Lord.

Later, Paul reminds them of how complete and sufficient their salvation is. "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled our the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

Perhaps the center of his exhortations to those in Colossae are found in verses 6 and 7, "therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude." How did those in Colossae receive Christ Jesus? It was by faith. And, as they received Jesus by faith, so they were to continue their lives living by faith in Him, being rooted in Him, being built up in Him, being established in their faith -- not looking to other things, and overflowing with gratitude. These are the things that they were taught. These are the things that they need to maintain and hold. Faith in Christ is how you are saved from your sins. Faith in Christ is how you should live your life. There's nothing more that you need to add to your life to make you more mature and stable.

Having laid the foundation of sufficiency of our faith in Christ, Paul then addresses head on the three major strands of heresy being pushed in Colossae (Judaism, mysticism, asceticism). Paying attention to Jewish foods and festivals is missing the point, because these things are mere shadows, and not the substance (verses 16-17). Paying attention to mystic experiences misses the point, because these things inflate the fleshly mind, and fail to hold onto Christ (verses 18-19). Paying attention to ascetic commands, like "do not handle, do not taste, do not touch," misses the point, because they "are of no value against fleshly indulgence." It may look good on the outside, but it cannot control the sinful appetites on the inside (verses 20-23), which is precisely where Paul heads in chapter 3.

Lest anyone think that Paul is advocating a gospel that it all pie-in-the-sky, without any practical application, he applies all his teaching in the last half of his epistle. He gives command after command by way of application to the gospel that he was presenting. The simple fact is that faith in Christ will make an impact upon your life. But, it's important to see how this impact is made. It's made from the inside out, and not from the outside in. Not from outward pressure, but from grace-motivated love to Christ.

Look at verses 1-2, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." In other words, think of the realities of your faith in Christ. Let your mind dwell on what's right. Let your mind dwell on what's true. As you do that, your life will "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord" (Col. 1:10), which is precisely what Paul said that he was seeking for his friends in Colossae.

Throughout chapter 3, the application that Paul gives falls into several categories. The first of which deals with matters of self-control (in verses 5-11), like sexual immorality and evil desire and greed and anger and slander, and abusive speech. The second deals with the matters of attitude of the heart (in verses 12-17), like compassion and kindness and forbearance and love and thankfulness. The third deals with the matters of relating to others properly (in verses 18-4:1): husbands and wives; children and parents; slaves and masters. The fourth deals with matters of communication (in chapter 4, verses 2): prayer to God and evangelism toward others.

Throughout these applications, Paul uses a word picture of how we dress. He talks about putting off sinful behavior, as you would take off a garment at the end of the day (verses 8, 9). You take a garment off at the end of the day, because it is dirty and sweaty and stinky. You do not want it on anymore. So you take it off. He also talks about putting on righteous behavior, as you would put on a garment at the beginning of the day (verses 10, 12). You put on what is appropriate for your work. These are all natural expressions of how we should live, as believers in Christ.

Notice how Paul's applications are so different than the applications of the false teachers. They focused their attention upon religious ceremonies (2:16-17), and mystical experiences (2:18-19), and beating your body into submission (2:20-23). But, Paul's approach is rather to let the fullness of the truth of the gospel have full impact in your life. Think of the realities of your all-sufficient savior. Think of how glorious he is. Think of how pure and lovely and holy He is. Think of how He has saved you from your sin. He has forgiven us all our transgression (Col. 2:13). As you think on these things, so live your life appropriately.

Paul then concludes the letter with some very practical instructions for ten people: Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nympha, and Archippus. Some of these people were with Paul in Colossae (Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas). Others were in Colossae with the people at the church (Nympha and Archippus). Others were being sent from Paul's presence be with those in Colossae (Tychicus, and Onesimus). But to all of them, Paul gave some practical advice.

And then, a final word of instruction, "Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you" (Col. 4:18). In effect, Paul says, "Remember to pray for me. May God bless you."

So, there is Colossians. It begins with an expression of thankfulness to God for what He did among the Colossian believers, and an expression of love for the people in Colossae in their constant prayers to God for them. Paul continues by lifting high the person and work of Jesus Christ, showing him to be all-sufficient in all things (1:15-18). Paul then demonstrates how in Him we are made complete (2:9). Paul then addresses the errors that they were being taught (2:16-23). He then speaks of proper applications of faith in Christ. He closes up with some final administrative details for those he loves. Now, I want to read it for you. May Paul's words sink deep into your hearts. ^[2]

[1] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and preaching*, pp. 133-135.

[2] At this point in my message, I read through the entire epistle of Colossians out loud. It took me 11 minutes and 46 seconds (as I was told later by my daughter who timed me on her watch). Perhaps you might consider doing so as well. The entire text of the epistle can be found here: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Colossians%201-4;&version=49>;