

All Saints Talk for Sunday 06 August 2023 by Dave Phillips

From our series: **'Full-on faith'**

**"Christ In You, The Hope Of Glory" Colossians Chapter 1:**

As something of an introduction into this new mini-series, I thought it might be helpful for us to put Paul's entire letter to the Colossians into context by giving a little background information, before we go on to look at chapter one in particular.

Paul wrote four letters whilst under house arrest in Rome, probably around 60 – 62AD: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and a very short personal letter to his close friend, Philemon, who we now understand to have been a wealthy member **of** the Colossian church.

Colossae itself lies around 100 miles east of Ephesus, approximately 350 miles south of Istanbul in modern Turkey. If you were to visit there today, you'll find that it's mostly historic ruins as the city was largely destroyed by an earthquake in the first century; not long at all after Paul had written this letter.

As we know, most of the letters Paul writes are addressed to churches he himself has planted but this is not the case here. The church in Colossae hadn't been started directly by Paul; in fact, it's evident in chapter 2, verse 1, that he'd never even been there: He says, *"I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally".*

Evidently, if we recall what we've heard in chapter 1, verse 7, the church had been started by someone called Epaphras. So it appears as though Epaphras is the founder and minister of this church. Epaphras is mentioned again in chapter 4 and the only other time we hear of Epaphras is in Paul's short letter to Philemon, which is interesting because, in Philemon verse 23, Paul describes Epaphras as my *fellow prisoner in Christ*, so it could be that Epaphras goes to visit Paul in Rome for reasons we'll come to presently and while he's there he also ends up being incarcerated for his faith. I say this because, in response to Epaphras's visit, we see that Paul sends this letter back to Colossae not via Epaphras but by two other chaps mentioned in this letter; Tychicus and Onesimus.

So why did Epaphras come to visit Paul?

Well, Paul was a highly respected apostle and if you're looking for some sound biblical counsel, you're unlikely to find anyone more qualified than Paul!

So, evidently Epaphras needed some advice with his fledgling church as it was in danger of being infiltrated by some heresy. This heresy was the dilution of Christian doctrine with a combination of several philosophies, or we could say, several 'isms':

There are four 'isms' we can reference from chapter 2. I don't want to spend too long describing each one here as I'm in danger of encroaching upon someone else's territory as this series unfolds, but a very brief outline of each one might be helpful as it gives us a better understanding of the issues that Paul was addressing throughout this letter.

So, firstly we have: **Humanism** – Teaches that man is at the centre of our universe, not God. Humanism was influenced by Greek philosophy and is still popular in the world today: Mankind is at the centre of our destiny and mankind is at the centre of the solution to whatever problems we are having to face.

Secondly, we find **legalism**, which is largely influenced by the Jews. Jewish thinking was that we need to obey certain rules to keep in God's good books. Salvation could only be earned by faithfully adhering to certain regulations, traditions, feasts and festivals.

Then there's **mysticism**, this has an Eastern influence and the emphasis with mysticism is very much centred around the supernatural. So much so that in chapter 2 verses 18-19 Paul warns the Colossians against the danger of worshipping angels.

Then finally, there's **aceticism**, which is all about depriving yourself of anything at all that is pleasurable. The belief was that if you're having a good time, you aren't following God.

No to pleasure; no to joy; yes to self-flagellation. Sounds a bit like an evening at the gym!

Whenever Paul wrote a letter, you can be pretty sure that it was written to convey thanksgiving, encouragement and instruction and particularly in this mini series, we'll see how Paul seeks to affirm the absolute supremacy of Jesus as the head over every power and authority and, as such, faith in Jesus alone is sufficient for our salvation, without the need for anything to be added or taken away.

And, it has to be said that for us today, we are bombarded by so many suggestions on how we can be more happy, less busy, more contented, less anxious, better organised, less messy; in other words, by subscribing to whatever scheme is on offer on any particular day, we can all be super-human! To be fair, there are seasons in life where many of these ideas on offer can be effective but, as we all know, our lives aren't always blue sky and warm sunshine, (as those of us who camped at New Wine last week will readily testify), and without the solid foundation of Christ underpinning our lives, we are vulnerable and can so easily lose our way during the storms of life. It's what Jesus is speaking of in his parable explaining the differences between building houses on rock and building houses on sand. It would be great to stand here and report that the letter had had the desired effect, with the whole community taking heed of Paul's instruction and that Christ was, and still is, universally acknowledged as the way the truth and the life. Well maybe for a while at least it did. Maybe for a while there was a moving of the spirit and the church was united in faith in nothing apart from Jesus. But, I rather suspect this not to be the case!

Living a life worthy of the Lord, as we've read in verse 10, requires endurance and patience and, if we're being completely honest, despite good intentions, these things aren't always in plentiful supply which is why Paul says in verse 9 that *"since the day we heard about you, we haven't stopped praying for you"*.

It's good for us to follow Paul's example here and ensure that we encourage and support one another in prayer as there are so many obstacles which can prevent us from reaching full spiritual maturity.

Perhaps, contentiously, one could argue that there are even more obstacles for us today in our comfortable lives, so full of material distractions than for the first century Christians this letter was initially addressed to. Might it be just a little hypocritical of us not to have some sympathy for them when we hear that, as a result of their being subjected to unhealthy influences and incorrect teaching the gospel was in danger of becoming somewhat diluted?

It's easy for us to worship God in this beautiful place, surrounded by beautiful people with our beautiful music. But we leave here and are instantly exposed to the adverts enticing us to spend our money on things we don't really need because we are assured that these are the things which bring us happiness and contentment.

We can throw another 'ism' into the mix; that is **consumerism**. One obvious and prevalent danger here, of course is that we're lured into spending what we can't really afford on something we probably don't really need. The happiness in our acquisition is short-lived and we become at best disillusioned or worse, our mental health is affected as we not only remain dissatisfied but we now also have the worry about how we are going to make ends meet whilst we pay for all our stuff!

But Paul tells us clearly that this is not the way; this is not the life we were created to live.

From our passage this morning, verse 13, *"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves"*.

There will always be an emptiness in our hearts until it is filled by Christ living within us. The moment we put our faith in him, he comes to live within us by his spirit. We experience the glorious riches of this mystery and, praise God, we have the **hope of eternal glory**.

In his death and resurrection, Jesus has revealed to us God's 'rescue' plan for his fallen created world. His own risen life is the source of hope for all of us. Death has been defeated and is no longer the end but the beginning of a new life with him in all his glory. Jesus has gone before and extends an invitation for us all to take our share in the inheritance of his kingdom. It is a confident expectant knowledge that we are being changed by God and will one day see Christ face to face, having been conformed to his image. Each individual Christian carries this hope inside because the spirit of Jesus came to dwell in us the very moment we opened our hearts and put him in the driving seat of our lives.

If we recognise ourselves as subscribing to the values of the world; allowing ourselves to be distracted and tempted by material excesses; if the strength of our faith is dependent upon our material comfort or personal circumstances, maybe Jesus is still just our passenger and we might need to switch seats. The only foundation upon which we should build our lives is the solid rock of Jesus Christ.

Verse 17: *"He is before all things and in him all things hold together"*. We don't need anything else.

Jumping back to the opening few verses of this chapter, through Paul's initial overtures of encouragement, we encounter all the qualities which are in evidence

in the life of a Christian: Faith, Thanks, Love, Hope, Grace, Endurance, Patience, Forgiveness, Wisdom and Understanding.

Paul prays that the Colossians may hold on to all these qualities in order that they may, in verse 10, *“Live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work”*.

So, in acknowledging them as a faithful and holy people, there’s some encouragement here for the Colossians and also, of course, the message is still valid for us today. There’s recognition from Paul that fundamentally, they are on the right track in their faith and he **prays** that they’ll continue to live in accordance with his teaching; going on as we’ve already noted this morning to emphasise the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of Christ alone without the need for embellishments.

Verses 15 and 16 give us one of the strongest statements about the divine nature of Jesus anywhere in the Bible. *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him”*.

So it’s clear from these two verses that Jesus is not only equal to God; he is God; as the image of the invisible God, he is the exact representation of God. He not only reflects God, but he **reveals** God to us. The deity of Jesus is a central truth upon which our Christian faith is founded and we have an absolute assurance that if we stay rooted in Christ and committed to him alone we have our eternal hope.

But, sometimes we need help, don’t we? We’re all in the world and we’re all subject to the unhealthy influences that can knock us off track.

This is why we come to church!

Church is where we put Jesus Christ at the centre of all our teaching and preaching and pastoral care. We get a great example of Paul’s model for discipleship and mentoring in verses 28 and 29: *“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ”*.

Paul is driven to see each believer mature spiritually and be complete in their relationship in Christ which, as a church fellowship is nothing more than our own desire for one another, isn’t it?

Paul goes on to say, “I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me”. This isn’t a grammatical error; Paul didn’t say I labour, struggling with all my energy. He was labouring, struggling, he was in prison, he describes himself as a servant to the church; the poor chap would have been completely exhausted!

But Paul’s mission is fueled by ‘His’ energy. It’s the power of the Holy Spirit, and with Christ in us, we can be thankful that we don’t have to rely on our own strength to face all that we have to endure, or fulfill all that we feel called to do. We can bring everything to Christ and rely on him to sustain and resource us. *“Now to him”,* Paul says in Ephesians 3:20, *“who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us”.*

And, finally, from verse 9, Paul gives us a prime example of something we can all do to encourage and nurture one another as we continue to live out our Christian calling:

*“For this reason, since the day we heard about you we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding”.*

*“We have not stopped praying for you.....”*

Let’s finish by putting this into practice right now:

Heavenly Father,

Thank you that you enrich our lives immeasurably and in you we need nothing else. Lord help us as we seek to put you boldly and confidently into the driving seat of our lives and strengthen our resolve when we find ourselves being distracted by the things which can so easily put distance between us and you. Thank you that, because you died for us and rose again, we have the hope of an eternal inheritance with you in glory.

Thank you, Lord,

In Jesus’ name,

Amen