

Complete: Why Colossians? – Colossians 1:1-2

I think almost all of you know the song Amazing Grace and know it was written by a man named John Newton. If you know anything else about Newton, you probably know that he lived in the late 1700's and was a slave trader until he came to faith in Christ and grace transformed him.

Most people don't know that during his day Newton was primarily known for his pastoral letters. He wrote multiple letters a day for years on end and these letters were read and reread and prized by those who received them. He wrote about the Christian life, about the beauty of Christ, and gave practical advice in these letters.

While Newton was known for his letters, letter writing was much more common in his time and continued to be common up until recently. I am currently reading a biography of Harry Truman, the 33rd president, and he wrote letters all the time, especially to his sisters and mother who lived back in Missouri.

Letter writing allows the writer to pause and reflect, to organize his or her thoughts and state them clearly. Letters can be read and reread and even passed on to others to read. When was the last time you hand wrote a letter to someone? Taking the time to describe your day, your experiences, the people you interacted with, and how you felt. Instead, you probably sent a text that said something like this, "Hey, where you at? I'll BRB, lol. Here's a selfie."

It's easy for us to forget that many of the "books" included in the NT are letters. They are short but carefully written and address circumstances unique to a particular local church in a time and place. Listen to Colossians 4:16.

On my first trip to Nepal in 2011 they sent me on a hike into the jungle with a group of Nepalis to visit a church plant in the next village up the mountain. The hike took us maybe an hour and while we hiked word got to the village that a group was coming to visit and this included an American pastor. When we arrived, people were gathered and waiting and they wanted me to speak to the church. I picture something similar happening here in the Colossian church. Word got around that a letter had come from Paul and the people quickly gathered together

at their meeting space and waited for this letter to be read, and then probably re-read to them.

So, why are we reading someone else's mail almost 2000 years later? Well, this is not like reading a letter from John Newton, although I do recommend those. This is a letter written by Paul but inspired by God. This letter communicates to us the authoritative truth of God and so we want to study it and know it. You can see on the screen that our title for today is Why Colossians? I simply want to give you **2 Reasons to Study Colossians** as we embark on this series in this letter today.

1. The Situation is Similar

Reading a letter is like listening to one side of a phone conversation. I know I've heard Bethany on the phone before and tried to make sense of what she's saying without hearing the other side. I sometimes will try to do that by asking, "Who are you talking to"? We want to do that this morning with this letter. Who was it written to and why? Who is on the other side of the phone call? As we begin to understand the Colossians and what they are facing, you will see some similarities to their cultural situation on our own.

Let's start by looking at 1:1-2. At a minimum we know it was written by the Apostle Paul and was written to the church at Colossae. Where in the world is that? Well, let's look at a map. This is modern day Turkey and probably the most well known city on this map for you is Ephesus. You can see this red arrow. This traces Paul's route on his third missionary journey. You can also see that the arrow bypasses our city of Colossae.

Paul never actually visited this city. Look with me at 2:1. Laodicea is pretty close to Colossae, and Colossae used to be the bigger city, but the main road going east to west that Paul was following was moved at some point from Colossae to Laodicea and this hurt Colossae economically and the population and influence dwindled.

So, if Paul never visited Colossae, how did this church begin and why is Paul writing to them? Those of you that were here for our study in Acts may remember that as Paul traveled through the Roman Empire and preached the gospel that he would stop in certain cities and sometimes remain in a city for months or even

years as the church was built and established. This is what happened in Ephesus, which was the most important city in this region, Asia, of the Empire. This would be like Chicago in Illinois or New York City in the Northeast. Listen to what happened when Paul landed in Ephesus. Acts 19:1-10.

Notice that last line. Again, look at the map. Now, look at Colossians 1:5-8. Apparently Epaphras was in Ephesus, maybe on business, heard the gospel and came to faith in Christ, and then took the message back to his hometown of Colossae and a church was born. Listen to 4:12. Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome, which is described at the end of Acts and sent it by the hand of Tychicus to them. 4:7.

So, why did he write it? This is where we get into their cultural situation. You can see in 4:12 that Epaphras wants them to stand fully mature and assured in the will of God. Paul says the same sort of things about firmness of faith and assurance. Why? Because they were facing some influential and dangerous false teaching. Listen to 2:4, 8, 16, 18, 23.

We will get more into the specifics of this as we go through the book, but the false teaching was a combination of Jewish law keeping and pagan spirituality. What does that mean? The specifics are not as important today, but the basic idea is that they were grabbing and pulling from different systems and sort of creating their own spirituality. This is called syncretism. Here's how one author put this: *On the other hand, syncretistic proposals...reflect the realities of life, in which most people do not hold a "pure" form of any religion or philosophy, but a set of beliefs drawn from an often bewildering variety of sources. People in Colossae, a cosmopolitan city exposed to a wide variety of religions and philosophies, were likely quite susceptible to these kinds of mixtures.* – Douglas Moo

Man, if this is not a description of what Americans do today, I don't know what is. We are a spiritual but not religious bunch. If you want to pull a bit from Eastern Mysticism and a bit from the Bible and a bit from American civil religion, that's good with us. That's how we do it. Pray in your own way. Worship the type of God you want. Curate your own faith. You can appreciate the Bible's teaching on money and family life and reject the heart of the Christian faith.

And so, while the exact teaching isn't what our culture is seduced by today, we are always tempted by the mashing together of elements of different beliefs into our own cocktail of spirituality. And Paul has a very clear and direct answer to that.

2. The Message Matters

Listen, it's nice that you want biblical morality and you like what the church offers. But you can dilute the message and pick and choose from multiple options so that you destroy the heart of the message. It's like mixing gasoline and water and ending up with something that doesn't run the engine properly.

So, what is the heart of Paul's answer to the syncretism and false teaching at Colossae? Look back to 2:1-3. Now look down to 2:6-7. This is the heart of the argument of the book, and the encouragement Paul gives to them. Now look down to 2:16-17. 3:1-2.

The answer to every spiritual issue or problem is Jesus. Paul returns to Christ repeatedly in this letter to direct the Colossians back to Him. He says, don't be deceived by anything else. No one else can offer what Christ offers. No one and nothing else can provide wisdom and knowledge. No one else can give you salvation and forgiveness. All you need is found in Him. Paul would certainly agree with Samuel Rutherford's words: *Acquaint yourself with Christ's love, and ye shall not miss to find new goldmines and treasures in Christ.* – Samuel Rutherford

So, Christ is the heart of this book, but what does Paul specifically say about Jesus and how does he say it? In other words, what is the argument of the book? Let's take the argument in 4 pieces that all build on each other.

Start with the character of Jesus. Who is He? When you understand who He is, you will see that He is the glorious, preeminent, Lord and King of all. He rules over all and everything is for Him. He's fully God and possesses all sufficiency. You see this most clearly in 1:15-20.

Second, because of who Jesus is, believers in Him now have all they need already in Christ. They have all wisdom and knowledge. They have all sufficiency for every spiritual need. Listen to 2:9-10.

Third, believers have access to Christ's sufficiency and benefits because they have been united to Christ by faith. You see this in the language of "in Him" used throughout the letter. We are connected to Jesus. It's a little like having your name on a bank account of an uncle worth 5 billion. He made the money; you get access to it. Listen to 2:11-14.

Fourth, because we are connected to Christ and have all spiritual benefits in Him, we don't look elsewhere and instead as our faith in Him grows, our behavior and lives change. So, for example, we don't look to man-made legalistic rules. 2:20-23. But, we lean into Christ and learn to trust Him and love Him more and this changes us. Listen to 3:5-11.

So, this is the argument of the book, and this message very much still matters today. We are tempted to look all sorts of places for spiritual sustenance, purpose, and joy. We are prone to get bored with Jesus and Scripture and turn elsewhere. Paul would tell you, stay rooted in Him. Walk in Him every day. Be established in the faith and you will find wisdom and knowledge in Christ.

The last thing I want to give you this morning to help you begin to read this book with understanding is an outline of the book.

1:3-23 – The Birth and Faith in Christ of the Colossian Church

1:24-2:7 – Paul's Ministry Goal to See Them Continue in Christ

2:8-3:4 – Don't be Deceived by False Teaching, Instead Look to Christ

3:5-4:6 – Your Desires & Behavior will Change as You Look to Christ

4:7-18 – Final Greetings and Encouragements to Fellow Believers

So read someone else's mail this week. Read it once a day and let your faith get rooted in Christ and come ready to begin next Sunday. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 2/22/26

- When was the last time you wrote a letter? Who was it too and how long was it?
- What are some of the advantages to writing a letter over e-mail or text messaging?
- In what ways is our cultural situation similar to the church at Colossae?
- What is Paul's relationship to the church at Colossae and how did it begin?
- What is syncretism and how do you see it in American life today?
- Describe the argument of the letter to the Colossians.
- What are some of the key doctrines taught about Christ in Colossians?
- Explain what Colossians 2:6 means when it says "as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him".
- What are some places we are tempted to look for spiritual sustenance and growth instead of to Christ?

- What questions do you currently have about Colossians that you would like to have answered as we study the book?

2 Reasons to Study Colossians

1. The Situation is Similar
2. The Message Matters

Outline of Colossians

1:3-23 – The Birth and Faith in Christ of the Colossian Church

1:24-2:7 – Paul's Ministry Goal to See Them Continue in Christ

2:8-3:4 – Don't be Deceived by False Teaching, Instead Look to Christ

3:5-4:6 – Your Desires & Behavior will Change as You Look to Christ

4:7-18 – Final Greetings and Encouragements to Fellow Believers