

Open your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1. Today is a big day. This is our first service. This is the beginning of a sermon series, as we preach straight through the book of Colossians. But for most people today is something else, it is the 10 year anniversary of 9/11, the day that America experienced tragedy and loss in a way that was very painful. And so, today is a day to think back to that day, remembering what we all felt, what we thought, as it all happened. I personally remember hearing about the attacks coming out of my early morning class in college, which ironically enough was a building structures course. I remember running back to my room to see what everyone was talking about, sure that there must be a mistake. If there is any word that I could use to describe the way I felt that morning ten years ago, it would probably be SURREAL.

And I was not the only one. As person after person echoed the sentiment that 'it just seemed like a movie.' It surprised all of us that something like this could happen. That it could happen here in America.

What has become evident in the last ten years is that the reason that the attacks of 9/11 are so powerfully burnt into our memories is because they tore right at the heart of what it means to be an American. They aimed their planes at the financial and military centers of our country, but I don't think that is what most of us relate to. That was the message that was sent, but the message that I received was a little bit different, but just as powerful: You aren't insulated from evil. Being an American does not guarantee life, liberty, or happiness. Which the time, this seemed like a totally justifiable position.

Rather than stare this reality in the face. Rather than recognize the fact that we are all guilty of looking to our great nation for some aspect of salvation. We instead ask questions like:

1. How could the USA be attacked?
2. Whose fault is?
3. How can we fix it so it never happens again?

4. How can we once again get to the point where we are safe?

September 11th, 2001, revealed that we bow to an idol of PROSPERITY and SECURITY, and it was aided by a god of power. As the most powerful nation on earth, it was hard to believe that anything or anyone would dare attack us. So we answered with power, with the reason for our false faith. But it has not been successful in recapturing that sense of assured blessing. Bin Laden is dead now, so are numerous other people who may or may not have had anything to do with 9/11.

Even though the nation bound together in a way that it had not in a long time, and the Yankees won the World Series, and they cut an awkward clip into Spiderman about messing with New Yorkers, it still failed to recapture the sense that national power could provide what we desired. As much as we wanted to believe it, September 11th showed us that the religion that we had set up had failed. It wasn't going to bring us the salvation we desired.

So we found a new way to pursue life, liberty, and happiness: PERSONAL PROSPERITY. And this new religion also had a god: the market. We decided that the best way to show the terrorist that they could not beat us, was to pretend like nothing had happened; to spend like there was no tomorrow. It was to get overpriced architects to design gaudy buildings that are taller and GREATER than what they tore down. The great kingdom of America had been wounded, but we can now each set up our own little kingdoms, complete with surround sound and an Iphone for every member. The last few years have shown that the market isn't much of a god either. It has failed us. And as this has happened, we can see that we have once again put our trust, our faith, in something other than God.

This isn't a political speech, as much as it may have sounded like it for a while. I am not trying to convince you that the military or the market or the government

is bad. I am saying that they are bad gods. I am saying that when we look to them to give us what only Jesus can provide, we will continually end up dissatisfied, frustrated, and depressed...even when they are giving us exactly what we ask them for.

And I can say this with a great deal of confidence, because this is what the book of Colossians was written about. And it was written in the midst of a great kingdom, an Empire that required nothing less than your full and undivided loyalty to it. It was written to remind a young church that there are a lot of 'truths' being offered to them, the greatest of those are the large ideological beliefs of the kingdom. The false truths that attempt to undercut the fact that Jesus is enough and tell us that what we need is JESUS+. The beliefs that permeate so deeply that you do not even recognize that they are beliefs. Colossians is written to remind us that there is ONE TRUTH and that this one truth is found only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So Paul begins his letter with this greeting, **Colossians 1.1-2**:

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Paul begins his introduction with a description of himself. This is common for Paul's letters, as it is common to see this writing style in letters from this period. Rather than a Dear _____, they begin with a description of who the letter is from. In other books we see such introductions as:

1. a servant of Christ Jesus (Romans)
2. a prisoner for Christ Jesus (Philemon)

But most often we see him referring to himself as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ (the rest of the letters). This does two things:

1. It sets up his authority (as an apostle)
2. It establishes his allegiance (to Christ Jesus)

Paul wants the people that he is writing to recognize who he is representing as well as the fact that he has the right to speak for Jesus Christ, having been called specifically by Jesus for this task.

But his identifier does not end at authority and allegiance. He also makes it very clear HOW he came to attain this authority: BY THE WILL OF GOD. Paul is about to lay out for the people a system of truth that is going to shock the established belief structure. He is about to knock them off their feet and show them the limitations of what they SEE and KNOW. And so he begins by reminding them how it was that he came to be the Apostle Paul.

1. He did not just wake up one morning and decide to be an apostle.
2. It was not voted on by a church and given to him as a gift (which is how many of today's apostle's are created).
3. He did not work really hard and learn a lot so that he could achieve the status of apostle.

Instead, he met Jesus. If we go back to Paul's life BC, we see that he wasn't looking for Jesus. He was a person of success and purpose. He didn't anything to gain, earthly speaking, from becoming a Christian.

Paul (or Saul) had studied under one of the highest ranking Rabbi's, Gamaliel, and been a great student of Jewish law. The worldview that he had developed through this learning process, led him to a conviction that the best way to root out false teaching was to kill those who believed it. Saul was an religious extremist. His job was to find people who had dedicated their life to Jesus Christ, and to kill or imprison them. And so on his way to Damascus, on his way to find more Christians, he was confronted by a new truth, one which conflicted with his previous belief system.

A bright light shone across the sky. And Jesus spoke to Paul. He said:

*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?”
And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city,
and you will be told what you are to do.*

Jesus did not try to persuade Paul of the truth; he is the truth. He just showed up and Paul's entire world got turned upside down. He got knocked off his horse, he went blind, but most importantly: he went from being a Christian killer to being a Christian. His entire life shifted from one identity to another. He had been Saul, the protector of the Jewish faith, the poster child for Judaism. And all of a sudden, none of that mattered. None of it held any weight when faced with the gospel. As Paul describes it in **Philippians 3**:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (4-8)

So Paul, the author of this letter, had already gone through this complete earth-altering process of coming face to face with Jesus. As he writes to the Colossian church he has positioned himself as an authority by the grace of God only. He recognizes fully the power of what he is about to unleash. The absolute counter-cultural revelation of God's plan. And He knows about it because he has already experienced it.

To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae

So imprisoned by the great Roman Empire, Paul pens a letter to the Colossian church that declares a greater, more complete kingdom. From prison, a position of ultimate weakness, Paul writes about power. And the people he is writing to can probably relate to this desire for strength.

Colossae was a rather unimportant city. At one time it had been great, but now it was simply a market stop along the way. Think of it as a mid-sized town between two much more important and culturally significant cities, we'll call them Seattle and Vancouver. It was located in the Lycus Valley, known for its agriculture. It was probably a city that was not much of a destination except during the fig festival. So this town really has much in common with where we live.

And this church was not one of the churches that Paul originally planted as he made his way through Asia Minor. This was actually a church plant off of a larger church in a more important location, the Ephesian church in Ephesus. Sound familiar?

The one bit of power that these people did have was the opportunity to be part of something bigger; their inclusion in the Roman Empire. And just as we have seen with a consolidated view of the idols that we are offered as being part of America, the people of Colossae were offered a great deal of short term satisfaction by selling their allegiance to the empire:

1. They could have a god to put their trust and hope in in the form of the emperor.
2. They could have a part in success, by being part of an empire that continued to expand.
3. They probably desired to have some of the prosperity that had been lost in the downfall of this once great city, that promise was made in being part of the great Roman Empire.

And so when Paul writes this letter to the Colossians, telling them not to get caught up in philosophy, empty deceit, and human tradition, he is poking right into the heart of everything that they have. He is really telling them not to trust the things that make sense to them. Not to trust the things that everything around them is telling them to trust. Not to look for salvation in the things the very things that are promising them salvation.

If you notice, Paul refers to these people as FATHFUL brothers, meaning that they have obviously been pushing back against these forces. At the same time, the fact that he writes the letter means that he is concerned with this faithfulness maintaining. Whether this is because Paul received news that they were struggling, or because he simply knows how easy it is for any and every person to be caught by the waves of ideological movement. And so Paul reminds them of the dangers that surround them.

Paul does not just tell them what to avoid, but he also gives them that which will satisfy. There is both the things we need to put off, but also what we need to put on. Because we can spend all day pointing out the problems, telling people what they need to stop doing, making really good rules and stipulations, but if we are not replacing the false gods with the real GOD, then its just a matter of time before there is a relapse. If we point people on what it means to be a Christian, how religion works, and what to do/not do, without actually introducing them to Christ, then their actions will be from a false heart. These 'good acts' will be out of a heart that it is still seeking prosperity and security, it is just now seeking them in religion rather than commerce and politics.

It is like the many diets that encourage you to eat little bits and count calories and ... Six months later you not only have given up, but you put on ten pounds because you were starving. The best way approach is simply to eat better. Give your body the things that it actually needs rather than the things that promise a lot in the moment, only to curse your hips in the next. You don't need to eat less,

YOU NEED TO FEAST ON THAT WHICH IS ACTUALLY GOOD. And the only thing that is truly satisfying, sufficient, and joyous is Jesus Christ.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

So the introduction ends with a greeting that points to this one TRUTH. It says, *Grace to you and peace from God our Father.* This is a greeting that it repeated over and over again by Paul, so much that we might think it as nothing more than a hello. But the implications of this little phrase in a world that thinks of itself as the answer is profound.

First, it promotes grace. Grace refers to the unmerited favor of God. It refers to the fact that we have received in Jesus Christ, a salvation that is undeserved. That when Jesus took the sins of the world to the cross, He did it not because of anything we have done, but entirely because of WHO HE IS. His goodness is the only reason we have the next breath, and His actions are the only reason we have hope.

So grace flies in the face of what we usually think of as prosperity. This desire that we have inside of us to achieve, to have, to collect and earn. To be part of something big, to have power, to be in control. To build up our kingdoms through our hard work and sacrifice. Grace knows nothing of this concept.

But God's grace does not call for us to pretend that these desires do not exist. Instead, grace fulfills them all.

1. We receive the greatest gift: a restored relationship with God.
2. We are part of something big: we are adopted into the family of God.
3. We are given a purpose and mission: to proclaim with joy what God has done in us.

God's grace brings us back to who we were created to be: Created beings worshipping our Creator.

And this restored relationship brings with it the second aspect of Paul's greeting: Peace. Those in the Roman Empire knew well the idea of peace, as they lived in the *Pax Romana*, the time of Roman peace. This security based on power was one of the greatest benefits of being part of the empire. The Roman army was so great, that simply being part of the empire meant that you were protected from the violence outside of it.

But the peace that Paul speaks of contrasts the Roman peace. **Phillipians 4** defines this peace:

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (5-7)

God's peace is not based on the circumstances of what is happening in our lives; our perception of events. It's not based on whether you had a good day, or a bad day. Our peace is based on Him. We have peace because the Lord is at hand, not because things are going the way we think that they are supposed to be going.

It is not based on any earthly power. See the Roman peace was upheld with the sword. Earthly power requires some way of managing the power, whether that is through a dominant ideology or a strong hand. The empire of Jesus was purchased by sacrifice. Jesus did not come down to rule with an iron fist. Instead, in the middle of Roman Empire, Jesus came as a humble servant. The God of the universe came down not to be served, but to serve. Jesus Christ choose to take the punishment of your sin and my sin on to Himself, purchasing for us PEACE. His act of service was freed us from our bondage to sin.

AND THIS IS FREEDOM. Not that we are free to create our identity, pursue our own gods, and do whatever we want. But we no longer have to worry that every decision, action, or affiliation in our lives is either going to make or break us. That we need somehow to make ourselves worthy or can do something stupid to make ourselves unworthy. We have been made worthy. We are now free to act, knowing that a LOVING, GOOD, and JUST God is in control of all things. Because the history of the world tells us that us in control creates nothing but Chaos.

And while on a day like today, it is easy to blame the chaos on some bad people out there who did bad things. Or believe that our lives are difficult because some guys created mortgage-backed securities and derivative products to make money that we are all paying for. Or that if only some other person was in some other position somewhere in the government, it would all be better. The reality is that the chaos stems from the fact that we have trusted in something more than Jesus. We have decided that something out there is going to satisfy us, going to give us the Prosperity and the Security that we desire.

So Colossians brings us back to the real thing. Colossians introduces us to Jesus, and shows us how the Good News of the Gospel plays out in the many areas of our lives.

For some of you, this may be the first time that you come face to face with Jesus. The first time that you have seen Him as more than just some guy who did stuff that your friends seem to overreact about. As we move forward, I pray that you allow the truth of what He has done to turn you from lovers of everything but Jesus, to lovers of Jesus.

Some of you have heard this time and time again and are wondering why we keep talking about the same thing. I pray that you see Jesus in a very new way. Much like the Colossian church were already faithful brothers and needed to be

reminded of why the gospel is all they need...we too need to come back to the gospel, come back to Jesus. We need to be reminded of the fact that what God offers is different from what the world offers. They offer momentary prosperity and security...Jesus offers us grace and peace. Prosperity and Security can be ruined by the actions of a few people, there is nothing anyone can do to alter the blessings of a faithful God. This is why the gospel is so important. In a world of constant change, it's the only thing that lasts.