

Colossians 1:1-14
Life Changing Prayer
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7-13-14

There is a parable once told of the Duck Church. Each Sunday, a community of ducks waddled off to Duck Church to hear the duck preacher. The duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given the ducks wings with which to fly. With these wings, there was nowhere the ducks could not go, there was no God-given task the ducks could not accomplish. With those wings, they could soar into the presence of God. Shouts of "Amen" were quacked throughout the duck congregation. At the conclusion of the service, the ducks left, commenting on what a wonderful message they had heard -- and waddled back home.

Ducks, as it were, aren't meant to waddle and walk. Ducks have wings with which to fly. But discovering their wings means each duck has to have the courage to step outside the nest, or in some cases, pushed against their will. It is only in taking the brave first step that they begin to realize their true God-given purpose.

This morning, we begin a new series of messages that will, Lord-willing, step us to the edge, if not push us out of the nest of safe discipleship. The book of Colossians is a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a church to help them realize the fullness of what the Holy Spirit meant to do as they, together, endeavored to follow Jesus. For the next few weeks, we are going to walk expositionally through the book of Colossians. I've entitled this series: *Becoming the Kind of Community Jesus Intends*. Only when we are fully aware and given direction from our head can our body and our wings take us where Christ intends for us to go.

But before we begin, I invite you to join me in prayer as we look to God for guidance from God's Word. Let's pray together.

Lead us, Lord Christ, to the edge of our safety. Draw us to the place where we either step off the edge and learn to soar, or slink back into safe and predictable life. For you came not to offer predictability, but abundance in faith and boldness by your Spirit. So as we begin this look at Paul's great letter to the Colossians, be our teacher. Hide me behind the Cross, and may any word that is not of you vanish from our memory, leaving only the purified refined precious Word of God. Amen.

I invite you to reach for your copy of Scripture, either the one we've made available to you in the pew racks in front of you, or your own copy and open to the book of Colossians. It's one of the short letters of the New Testament. It comes right after Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. If you are following along in the red pew Bible, it is on page 184. Let's listen to the Word of the Lord.

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.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. And may the same Holy Spirit that inspired the Writing and Preservation of these Words inspire them now in our hearing as well. Amen, and you may be seated.

Why a letter to the church in Colossae? It's not a terribly important city in this day in age. In fact, it's not even one of the primary cities Paul traveled to in the first place. Colossae is a small town in Turkey situated among some more prominent cities in the Roman Empire, not unlike, say Wabash in relation to Fort Wayne or Indianapolis. Big things can happen in small towns, and that is true of Colossae.

We know about this in Wabash. Big things are happening in this small town. Because of the work that is being done with the Wabash County Promise, this program has become nationally recognized. In fact, recently a group from the YMCA met with the state treasurers from all around the country to tell them about what is happening through the Promise. And it started in a small town.

But also like many small towns that are set apart from the major hubs of commerce and thought, good things can happen, and also some not so good things. And this Paul wants to address: Greek philosophy that emphasized the ability of the self was beginning to take hold, so that the Colossians thought that true faith was “Christ and...” Christ and the individual...Christ and Plato...Christ and Dr Phil or Oprah...Christ and the right career...Christ and my stock portfolio... This is what Paul aims to address, that for you and me, and for our Hope in this world, Jesus is sufficient.

So Paul writes the letter to the Colossians from his jail cell in Rome, and gives it to his friend Tychicus to deliver. But Tychicus is not alone in delivering this letter.

There is something really interesting that we learn if we skip ahead to the end of Colossians about the occasion for sending the letter. Tychicus is going to Colossae, but he's not alone. Chapter 4 tells us that there is another man who will be traveling with him whose name is Onesimus. Onesimus is a runaway slave—which in that day, runaway slave lives were not worth anything. Tychicus and Paul met Onesimus and he became a Christian, and now they are sending him back to his master, as a new Christian. And along with him, they send another letter to deliver to Onesimus' master. That man is named Philemon, and Philemon lives in Colossae. That is probably the occasion for Paul to write this letter to the Colossians, to deliver along with the shortest of all his letters, the letter to Philemon.

Paul has a lot to be encouraged about for the Colossians. This little church is for the most part thriving. So Paul makes a point of expressing his gratitude and satisfaction for how well they get it. And he follows each of his encouragements with a prayer for them for their future life together.

Have you ever had someone tell you that they were praying for you? Not just in a general sense, but to have someone come up and ask: “Hey, how can I pray for you?” It's a powerful thing to know that someone else is, in their prayer life, lifting you up.

Amy and I have a friend named Barbara who was a missionary in Africa and has also taught grade school in South Bend. When she taught school, she would keep a prayer journal for every one of her students. Then at the end of the year, she would give each of her students a scarf she made, as well as this collection of prayers she wrote for them throughout the year. Periodically, she sends us homemade postcards with her prayers and scripture verses. We keep every one of them and will often have them stuck to our refrigerator. These prayers are so meaningful to us, because we know that Barbara is really interceding for us.

Paul is thankful for the Colossians, particularly because of three traits that are taking root in them, and these traits are a Pauline focus: faith in Christ Jesus; the love you have for the saints, and the hope that makes these first two possible. But Paul is intently practical in that every time he offers a theological or doctrinal statement, he always follows up with a practical or ethical implication. Theology for Paul is never a disconnected practice; it always has grounding in everyday life.

Faith and Knowledge

When Paul prays for the Colossians, he prays that three qualities would grow and abound, beginning with their past. **We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.** This, Paul follows in verse 9, is what they received when God filled them with the knowledge of his will. Faith begins with knowledge. It begins by hearing something and having a hunch that it might be true of you. Faith doesn't begin necessarily with an emotion or an experience; faith begins with hearing.

More than anything the gospel is an announcement, a proclamation to you and me, that the world is different, your life is different, your family can be different, and the power of that announcement doesn't lie in how it makes you feel—because as we know, feelings fade. Rather the power of the proclamation is in the truth and validity of the statement.

There are times in my week when the silence of being a solo pastor is deafening. Contrary to popular belief, I don't work one hour a week, nor am I out on an 18 hole group counseling session. But there are times when I am with you all, and times when I am alone. In that alone time, there are moments, and maybe you've had them yourself, where a little word of doubt creeps in, that discouragement from last week's sermon, or the fact that my life is not all together, and my home life is not perfect. And what happens in that moment is, I wonder, "God, am I chasing after wind, am I just fooling myself?" And it's in these moments where emotions and feelings are all over the map, that the only thing that I can lean on is a statement, a proclamation. Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the Good Shepherd. I am living water." You see, faith in the validity, the value, the veracity of life doesn't begin with an emotion—emotions deceive. Faith begins with proclamation.

So Paul is praying that the Colossians would lean into faith.

Love and Worthy Life

The second thing he prays for is the byproduct of faith and that is love, and more specifically as he says in verse 10, **a walk that is worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.**

It's interesting that the word "worthy" Paul uses is one that he will use in Philippians as well as Ephesians, and the Greek root is the word *axius*, which means congruent. Paul's prayer is that they would grow in congruity with the Gospel. Paul recognizes that gospel maturity doesn't happen overnight. For us to be mature in Christ, it takes time. Every time I've led a small group, I've always said that for the first year, getting together is going to sometimes feel like a chore. But something happens after a year. All of a sudden you can't live without it. That's because your maturity is growing, it doesn't happen overnight. So as the Colossians grow in grace, they grow more congruent, more mature in Christ.

Hope and Endurance

Finally, Paul's third prayer is that their hope would be strengthened through endurance. This word "endurance" is one that Paul loves to use. It's the word *hypomeno*, it means hang in there, endure. May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

There is joy that comes with endurance. Did you know that? When you can look back and see all the growth that has taken place, that you can't see as it happens incrementally, that's a joyful thing.

Back in 2004, I ran the Twin Cities Marathon, and do you know what the most joyful part of that race was? Getting in the car to go home. You're joyful because you endured, you're joyful because you made it. And that is how Paul closes this opening section of his letter. Enduring with Christ enables us to see how we are transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Let's pray together.