

Colossians 1:1-14

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me back in your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1, where we'll be looking at verses 1-14 this evening. Now, when I was about five, a group of local churches in my area decided to set up a Christian bookshop.

They had this mission in mind, a really honourable mission, that Christians in our area didn't know enough about God. So they needed to read more Christian literature. So they started a bookshop stocking Bibles and commentaries and Christian books about theology, useful things for people to learn so that they could grow in their faith.

I remember distinctly the proud moment when I walked home from there at the age of seven with my first Good News Bible, yellow with those slightly frightening pictures with no faces. It was a real joy to go to that shop. But I also remember going back to it, returning from university. I needed to prepare a Bible study and I needed a commentary. And I went there to find a commentary.

And they weren't there anymore. I went back to the shop and where the commentaries used to be was a row of books on healing. And where the Bibles were, were gift cards.

[1 : 14] And the bookshop had been taken over, it seemed, by other interests. There were books on angels and on healing, biographies of all sorts of weird and wonderful people who'd done wonderful things.

But there wasn't any literature on the Bible anymore. And I spoke to the shopkeeper about this. And he said, well, we can order in your commentary if you want. But this is just market economics. We're selling what people want to buy.

People don't want your dusty commentary. They want to learn about angels. And that's pretty much the problem in the Colossian church that Paul finds. You see, the people in Colossae, they definitely heard the gospel.

They definitely heard it. Did you notice in verse 6 and 7, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. They had definitely heard the gospel from a missionary called Epaphras. But they started to lose interest. See, other teachers had come to them, offering all sorts of weird and wonderful things, promising to initiate them into mysteries that they couldn't even comprehend.

[2 : 21] There's a little list in chapter 2. Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or new moon or Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come.

And let no one disqualify you insisting on asceticism or worship of angels, going on in details about visions, puffed up without reason. These people have got all sorts of other wonderful things that are far more interesting to intrigue the Colossians with.

Epaphras gave them the gospel, but now these new people have got more stuff. Angels, visions, deeper mysteries. And they're at risk of losing sight of the gospel altogether.

That's the context that Paul's writing to here. And really, all he wants to say throughout this whole book is, hold on, these new teachers, these people who are coming to you with new messages, well they're con men.

There's nothing more to have. If you've got Jesus, if you've got the gospel which Epaphras taught you, then there's nothing more to be had. You don't need these extras.

[3 : 24] You've got everything you need. And Paul's letter here is urgent. It's really urgent. But something striking about it is how gentle it is. He doesn't come to them with any kind of rebuke.

He doesn't start off by telling them off. He actually begins by letting them into his prayer life. He starts to explain to them what he's been praying for them. And that's what we're going to look at tonight in really two parts.

Firstly, we're going to look broadly in verses 3 to 5. His prayer of thanksgiving. The things Paul prays, gives praise to God for about this church in Colossae. And then from verse 9 to broadly verse 12.

We'll be seeing his prayer for growth. The things he desires for these people in Colossae. So firstly, his prayer for thanksgiving.

Do you notice how Paul starts here in verse 3? We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. We always thank God. You can imagine Epaphras looking over his shoulder as he's writing.

[4 : 27] And shaking him. Come on, Paul, what are you doing? These people are in trouble. They're losing their way. What are you doing? Starting off by thanking God. But Paul insists on starting this way. He insists on starting this way.

Because actually, whatever's gone wrong in the church of Colossae, he's just delighted that they're alive. He's delighted that they show the signs of life. You see, this passage is a bit like a scene from Casualty or ER or one of those hospital dramas.

You've got the child who's had some completely improbable but somehow painfully obvious accident that you saw coming a mile off. They've been rushed into hospital.

Some doctors have said all sorts of words that probably don't mean anything at all. And the mother rushes in, expecting to see the worst. And the child sitting there, surrounded by beeping machines and a leg in one of those casts that hold it in the air, really looks a mess.

But the mum doesn't say, oh, your face looks terrible, does she? She says, I'm just glad you're alive. I'm just glad you're alive. And that's really what Paul's saying at the beginning of this letter.

[5 : 33] It's not, oh, you're in such a terrible state. It's, look, you may be in a mess, but I'm just glad you're alive. We always give thanks. 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. You see, they may be in a mess, but they show the vital signs of Christian love.

They've got faith. They've got love. And they've got hope. Those three things come together so often in the New Testament. But John Calvin refers to them as a brief summary of true Christianity. If you've got these three things, faith, love and hope. Okay, other things might be in a mess, but you've got the signs of life. Now, these are really back to basics things.

But I thought it might be useful for us tonight just to start by looking at them. Breaking down what Paul means when he says that these are the signs of life. If they're the signs of life, then we ought to know what they are. Firstly, we've got faith.

[6 : 35] Faith. Now, there's nothing unusual about faith in itself, is there? It's just trust. We have faith in all sorts of things all the time. Right now, you have faith in your chair. You trust it will hold you up, or at least I hope you do.

You will look quite comfortable, so I hope you do. When we're ill, we trust in the doctor, don't we? When we need to get to work on time, we trust in the bus or the train, perhaps misadvisedly, but we do.

We trust in all sorts of things and all sorts of situations. But the faith Paul's concerned about is very specific, isn't it? And it's for a very specific situation. It's faith in Christ.

It's faith in that ultimate situation when we're before God. Effectively, it's the faith we'll have when God judges us. Who will you trust in when God judges you?

There's nothing at all special about faith. But the Christian has a specific faith, doesn't he? Faith in Christ. Children have been going through the Westminster Catechism in the evenings, haven't you?

[7 : 33] And you've been hearing from the Catechism what faith is, haven't you? It's a resting and receiving in Jesus Christ as Saviour. Resting in Him and trusting in Him as our only Saviour.

Faith is just that. And that's the faith, the vital sign which Paul is looking at here. Who are we going to trust when it comes to our soul? Who are we going to trust when it comes to our salvation?

Who can save us ultimately? Faith has become a bit of a taboo word, hasn't it, in recent years? It seems to be bandied around as the alternative to science.

You have faith and science, faith and reason. There's a bit of a problem there though, isn't there? Because as far as I can see, faith in Christ is about the most logical thing you can possibly have in that situation.

Who are you going to trust when faced with God? Who are you going to trust when God judges you? Well, there's no one better than Christ, is there? Look at yourself and really you know you've got your own flaws.

[8 : 37] You know there are all sorts of things that you get wrong. You know you don't live up to God's standards. Faith in yourself is foolishness. You can trust in other people, but really, hasn't most other people let you down at some point?

However good your mother or your father, your minister, your best friend is, ultimately they're not going to be good enough to trust him at that point.

There's nothing we can trust in better than Christ at that point. Did you notice in the call to worship in Psalm 146, the psalmist uses that logic. Now put not your trust in princes, in a son of man in whom there is no salvation.

When his breath departs, he returns to the earth. On that very day his plans perish. Other people are just as frail as us. There's no point in trusting in them. Blessed is he whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever.

There's someone we can trust. There's someone who we can truly trust in that ultimate situation. So there's the first sign we have. Faith in Jesus Christ. Secondly, there's love, isn't there?

[9 : 48] Since we have heard your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints. There's a kind of logic here, isn't there? Paul's saying, well if you're connected to Jesus, and if other people are connected to Jesus, then you and those other people, you and the church, are connected to one another, aren't you?

It's the logic of family, isn't it? If you and I have the same parents, then we'd be brother and sister. In the same way, if you and I have the same saviour, then we're brothers and sisters in him, aren't we?

If we're connected to Christ by faith, then we must be connected to each other in love. There's a simple logic to it, isn't there? And do you notice the extent to which Paul goes?

It's a love for all the saints. It's not just a love for those in your house group, or perhaps the person sitting next to you, although it is a love for those people. It's not just a love for the people we agree with, or the people we like.

It's a love for all the saints. It's not just a love for the ones we know. It's all the saints, throughout all time, throughout all history, and throughout the whole world.

[10 : 59] Paul doesn't allow us to ask him, well, who's my neighbour here? It's everyone. It's all the saints. Do you notice Paul's actually living this out in his letter here?

If we read in chapter 2, Paul groups the Colossians with the Laodiceans, as people who have not seen him face to face.

Paul's never actually met these people he's writing to. And at the time he's writing, Paul's in prison. And yet still he takes the time to write to them. They're believers, they're in trouble, and he wants to write to them because he loves them.

He doesn't just write to them because they've got everything right. In fact, quite the opposite. They're in a muddle, and he still loves them, and wants to make them know the truth better.

I don't know about you, but I feel there's a challenge here. It's easy to love the people we know well, but do we really love all the saints? Are we really concerned for all God's people?

[12 : 00] Perhaps there's the churches down the road who don't agree with exactly the same things with us. They like to do things differently. But would we give thanks for them as Paul gives thanks for the Colossians?

Perhaps there's churches that are persecuted in the world. We hear of them all the time on the news, don't we? The Nigerian church, the Korean church, the Syrian church. Do we pray for them? Paul would. Paul would. That's his second vital sign of Christian life. It's love for all the saints.

There's faith in Jesus Christ.

Love for all the saints. And thirdly, a hope. Because of the hope laid up for you. In heaven. Now hope, as Graham was saying this morning, is a particularly rubbish word in English.

It basically means wishful thinking, doesn't it? Hope is what we have when England goes to the World Cup. It's pitiful. If they go to the World Cup and we get our flags out, and they'll get knocked out immediately.

[12:58] There is absolutely no point in it. It's just wishful thinking. When you go out and you leave the washing on the line, you hope it won't rain. It's just wishful thinking. It's going to. But in Greek, the word, which, help is, I can only remember it because it sounds like help is at hand.

In Greek, the word is much more concrete than that. Much more real, tangible. It's an expectation. The Greek word for hope is an expectation of a certain future.

It's not just vague, wishful thinking. It's not just a kind of pie in the sky when you die. It's a concrete and certain future. Something you can trust in.

That's definitely what's in Paul's mind in this passage. Do you notice the words he uses to cement this? It's a hope made up for you. It's stored. It's been stowed away.

It's the kind of word you'd use if you'd put something in a safe. No one's going to get at it. It's in a good place. It's secure. And where is it stowed up? Well, it's laid up for you in heaven.

[14:03] There's nowhere safer, is it? Your hope is laid up for you. It's stored away in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroy. Or thieves get in. There's no chance of this hope ever giving out.

You have a certain future if you're a Christian. A certain future with God in eternity. And do you notice the priority here? Hope comes last in Paul's list here.

But it actually underpins the other two. Since we've 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.

It's this hope that enables the Colossian Christians to have faith in Jesus Christ and love for the saints. You see, there's a kind of balancing act going on here, isn't there?

I've never been any good at gymnastics or anything like it. My forward rolls go sideways, which is horrible. But when I was at school, I was taught by a very helpful PE teacher that if you need to balance on one leg, the best thing to do is find a fixed point in the middle distance and focus on it.

[15:11] Just look at that one point and then you won't fall over. And really, what Paul's saying here is being a Christian is just like balancing on one leg. It's not easy to remain faithful in a faithless world, is it?

It's not easy to love people who sometimes can be frankly unlovely. It's not easy to love people when we get tired and grouchy. But the balancing act is to look forward to that hope, isn't it?

The hope laid up for us in heaven. And that's Paul's third vital sign of Christian life. You see, he can give thanks to this church, however much of a mess it's in, because they have faith, they have love, and they have hope.

They're alive in Christ. They might look a bit bruised, they might look a bit confused, but they're alive. And I think sometimes we can miss this very obvious point, can't we?

Forget the rest. Do we have these things? We can get worried about details, important details, but we can get worried about them, can't we? We worry about whether we've understood the difficult things, whether we've understood predestination, whether we've got to the bottom of who Melchizedek was.

[16:23] All these vital truths. But we forget the point, don't we? Do we have faith? Do we have love? Do we have hope in him? If we do, then we can be sure we're alive in Christ.

But I think there's a word of warning here as well. Well, when we think of these things, we can often be tempted to kind of draw in on ourselves, can't we? We might be tempted to say, well, do I have these vital signs?

And become introspective, to look into ourselves and become all consumed with how many frailties and failings we have, which we all do. But do you notice that all of these things have a direction?

All of these things have a direction, and it's outwards. The faith is in Jesus Christ. The love is for all the saints. And the hope is in the future with Christ in heaven.

All of these things look away from ourselves, not to us. Paul doesn't want us to become introspective, to beat ourselves up, to get frustrated with ourselves. No, he says, well, actually, if you're a Christian, look up to Jesus.

[17:30] Don't look him. And look out to other believers. Look out to the church. And look forward. Look forward to the eternity you have with him. So that's why Paul can give thanks.

That's why he can give thanks for this church in Colossae. But what does he pray for them? You can imagine the Colossians, the first time this is preached, they've got rid of their regular preacher, the one who told them all sorts of exciting things last week about angels that they'd never heard before.

And they've got someone to read out Paul's letter to them. And so far, Paul's told them absolutely nothing they didn't already know. Oh, come on, Paul. We know about faith and love and hope. What are you going to give us that's new? How can we grow? We want knowledge of these deep mysteries. We want power to do things that currently we can't do.

And Paul's very cunning in this second section, really, from verse 9. He actually borrows the language of the false teachers and turns it back on them. And he says, well, actually, I do pray for you.

[18 : 36] I do pray you'd grow. And I pray you'd grow in knowledge. And I pray you'd grow in power. But they're absolutely nothing like the knowledge and power that your false teachers are trying to give.

So let's look at these briefly. Firstly, we see knowledge. You see in verse 9, And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with knowledge of his will. In all spiritual wisdom and understanding, serves 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.

There's something about knowledge that can make us feel very smug, isn't there? We love to be able to say, I know something you don't know. We love to be the one in the know. And it creates cliques, doesn't it?

You get the people who know the gossip and the people who are left out. Knowledge can really puff us up, can't it? It can make us proud. And actually, if you look in the Bible, it seems like knowledge was at the heart of the very first sin.

[19 : 41] Do you notice the fruit that Adam and Eve took from the tree? What was it? It was the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. And in taking it, they were saying, we want to be like God.

We want to know what good and evil is so we can make up our own mind. See, knowledge isn't always a good thing, is it? Sometimes it can just be to puff us up, and sometimes it can make us something we're not.

Adam and Eve took knowledge, and they tried to make up themselves God. Actually, you see that so often in our own culture, don't we? We see when people come to the Bible, or when people come to questions of ethics and morality, we don't say, what does God say?

But we actually judge God by our standards. And we say, well, what do I think? And can God match this? Does God live up to what I think? Most of the time, our knowledge is arrogant.

And actually, the kind of knowledge which the Colossians want is an arrogant knowledge. They want to be brought into these secret mysteries so that they can be part of the super-spiritual elite.

[20 : 45] So they can say to the other Christians around them, perhaps they're allowed to see us, oh, actually, we know something you don't know. But Paul won't have any of that, will he? Do you notice this knowledge is humble knowledge?

We've not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. The spiritual wisdom and understanding that he wants them to have, the knowledge he wants them to have, is the knowledge of God's will.

It's not arrogant. It doesn't put itself over God. It doesn't make itself God. But it submits to him.

That's the knowledge that Paul prays that Colossians would grow into. I think that's important for us to know, isn't it?

So often, we find ourselves being competitive almost, don't we? You get Bible studies sometimes when you feel yourself holding back because you just want to jump in and say, ah, well, I heard once.

But that's not the kind of knowledge which Paul encourages, is it? It's a knowledge that submits to God's will, that learns what he wants from us so that we can serve him better.

[21 : 51] And do you notice, secondly, this isn't just a theoretical knowledge. The knowledge that we need to grow in is intrinsically practical. It's a knowledge that allows us 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.

I don't know if you watch University Challenge, but it kind of brings out two feelings in me. The first one is amazement. Anyone knows so much stuff.

It's ridiculous that whoever it is, break weight from Claire, can say this absurd thing and can know everything about every possible subject in the world.

But actually, the second thing, after the kind of awe and admiration, the second thing it brings out to me is a kind of bemusement. What is the point in it?

What does that knowledge do? The answer, I'm afraid, and I wouldn't probably say this to Jeremy Paxman, but the answer is probably absolutely nothing. It's useless knowledge. It's useless knowledge because it has no application.

[22 : 59] And Paul's very wary of us thinking that we can just learn facts about the Bible. He's not interested in that. He doesn't want us to learn facts about God's will. He wants us to learn about God's will so that we can be changed.

So that we can be changed. He wants us to learn so that we can 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.

This is fundamental to what Paul understands of teaching. He says elsewhere in the Bible that teaching, good teaching, is going to be sound or healthy.

It's not just correct, but it creates a healthy lifestyle. It leads to fruit. It's practical. And again, I think this is a useful thing for us to hear.

Do we really think about what we're trying to achieve when we hear the Bible talk? Do we think about what we're trying to achieve when we study the Bible? We know we're meant to read it, but what are we doing when we're reading?

[24 : 03] Are we looking for just ways to inflate our knowledge? Is it just an academic exercise? Are we learning how to be the person who can answer all the university-challenged questions on the Reformation?

Because Paul would have no interest in that at all. Absolutely no interest. He wants us to have the kind of knowledge that changes the way we live. Great, we can learn facts, but will those facts change how we live?

I don't know about you, but I hope that thought might change the way I study the Bible. Rather than remembering what I've learned, I'd be changed by what I've been learning.

So there's the knowledge Paul prays for. Radically different from anything the teachers in Colossae were offering. It's humble knowledge, and it's practical knowledge. But you notice secondly, and I think the Colossians would have been really excited about this, secondly, Paul prays they would have power.

May you be strengthened, this is verse 11, may you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance. May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might.

[25 : 15] In Greek that's literally, may you be empowered with all power. It's incredible this. And you look at the scale as well, it's not just a little bit of power. This is power according to God's great might.

Do you notice he could have said, out of God's great might, just a little bit, from God's power. But he doesn't. He's saying, may you be empowered according to God's great might, in proportion with God's great might.

May you be empowered in a way that's representative of who your God is. Effectively, he's saying, I pray that you would be superheroes, spiritual superheroes.

The Colossians would be delighted by this until they read on. What is this power for? It's not so they can perform miracles. It's not so they can commune with angels.

It's not for visions. No. 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.

[26 : 24] Do you notice how quiet this power is? It's a power that helps us to endure, isn't it? When there's hard things in life. When perhaps we lose our jobs, when we get sick.

When things look tough. When we get persecuted or people are offended that we're a Christian. It's a power to endure. And it's a power to be patient too, isn't it?

I think first and foremost, it's a power to be patient waiting for God's kingdom. It doesn't look very much. Like God's kingdom's coming, does it? But the Christian is given that power to endure, to be patient.

To wait for his kingdom. And perhaps also we could think of it as the power to be patient when our prayers aren't answered. And to keep on praying. That persistent patience.

But do you notice, perhaps most remarkably, that this isn't just stoicism. There are lots of religions that have taught people to endure and to be patient. There are lots of religions about that.

[27 : 28] But Paul prays that they wouldn't just be enduring, but they'd be patient with joy, giving thanks to the Father. This isn't just power to grin and bear it. Power to put up with pain.

No. This is power to rejoice in God, regardless of what's going on. That's the power that Paul wants. It's supernatural, isn't it? When we were at a church in Cheltenham, a couple of our friends always supported a church in Kenya.

In Nairobi, I believe they were. And they gave a great deal of money to this church, who were building their own building. They'd never had a building. They'd always met at the tent. And they spent ages building this building.

And one week, they had their huge, they had a celebration, a gathering to celebrate that they'd got this building, to give thanks to God for this building. But the problem they had was that their church was in a slum area, where very few people had connections to electricity.

So shortly, within the first week of having it open, people had attached their cables onto the church's cables, kind of stealing the electricity from it.

[28 : 36] I don't quite understand how technically that works, but they were. And apparently, that's quite a dangerous thing to do. And within the week, the church had burnt down. So they had their celebration on one week, and the next week, they had no church to even meet in.

It must have looked a bit silly to the people around them. Where's your God now? What did they do? Well, they had another celebration. They went to the place where their brand new church used to be, and they gave thanks to God again.

It looks weak in the eyes of the world, doesn't it? I'd imagine, to their friends in the area around them, they looked a bit silly. But that's actually the power of God, isn't it? The power to give thanks, in spite of things looking, frankly, rubbish at times.

The power to endure, to be patient, and at the same time, to give thanks. I don't know if you've ever looked around the church, perhaps tonight even, and thought, well, actually, this doesn't look very powerful.

You think, well, if God meets with his people, if God's here, when his people are gathered together, frankly, this is a bit lame. This isn't power. But if you look at what Paul's saying, God's power is eminently present, if we are patiently enduring, if we're holding on to his gospel, if there are people among us who are sick, or tired from work, or frustrated with things, and yet give thanks to him.

[30 : 05] We don't need to be doing miracles, we don't need to have excitement around, for it to be evident that God's power's at work, if we're giving thanks to him. So you see, we've had Paul's prayer of thanks, and it was all about the vital signs, it was about that faith in Jesus Christ, the love for all the saints, and the hope they have in heaven.

And then we see, he prays for them, that they would grow in knowledge and in power. But none of this, none of this, is what the Colossians are going to be wanting. You can imagine, they're just feeling at the end of verse 12, a little bit disappointed.

They're wondering whether it's time to disclose the letter. Actually, Paul's not going to offer them what they want. And Paul's pre-empting that moment, in verses 13 and 14. They've got no reason to be disappointed at all.

Let's read them. 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.

God's done everything for you already. Whatever these people are offering you, whatever you think you might want, God's given you far more than you can imagine already. You don't need it.

[31 : 22] These people are offering you power, that looks far more impressive than what I'm giving you. It doesn't look like endurance, but it looks far more impressive. They're offering you knowledge, that makes you feel important.

Well, actually, you don't need these things. God's given you far more already. He's already delivered you, from the domain of darkness. He's already transferred you, to the kingdom of his beloved son.

You already have redemption. You already have the forgiveness of sins. What more do you want? What more can you be given? There's a minister, Thomas Brooks, a Puritan minister, who writes about a story, which I hope is true, of a conquistador, in South America, who wants to impress the locals.

And he goes to the locals, and says to them, look at this, look at what's in my chest, and shows them a chest full of gold. And the Incans laugh at him. And they say, well, we've got a mine of that. We've got two or three mines filled with that. What do we need your chest for? And you get the feeling that Paul's doing the same thing here. He's saying, these people are coming to you with just a chest of gold.

[32 : 30] Yeah, it looks flash, it's kind of impressive. You don't need it. You're living on top of a gold mine already. What do you need these extra things for? You don't need anything more.

If you've got faith in Jesus Christ, if you've got love for all the saints, if you've got a hope in heaven, you don't need anything else. You already have been delivered. You've already got everything. So grow in power, power to endure and hold on. So grow in knowledge of his will so that you'll live in a way pleasing to him. But you don't need anything more.

Effectively, the message of these verses is the message of the whole book of Colossians. Just as you've received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing in thankfulness.

There's nothing more to have if you have it all ready.