

Series: The Letter to the Colossians

Title: In Christ Alone

Text: Colossians 1:1-2

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Verse 1

Colossians 1:1 began Paul's introduction to his letter. The verse said, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother...." Paul's intent in verse 1 was to identify himself as author. At the time the letter was written, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. See Colossians 4:3 and 18 for references to Paul's imprisonment. Along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon, Colossians is regarded as one of Paul's "Prison Epistles." Though Paul's words certainly constituted a customary greeting that one might find in a first-century letter, they were also intentionally used to convey critical Christian truth.

Paul's reference to his standing as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will" was significant. The Greek word for "apostle" was *apóstolos*. Our English term is a transliteration, not a translation, of the term. Roughly translated, the word meant "one who is sent." It was often used in the ancient world of special envoys, delegations, or representatives who were sent to deliver news from official sources. It was customary for kings or rulers to dispatch "apostles" for royal business.

Used within the church, the term was applied to a special group of people — the Twelve apostles whom the Lord ordained to be His special messengers and representatives of His truth (Matthew 10:2; Acts 1:2). Before one considers the official role of the apostles within the church, it is first important to consider the generalized use of the word "apostle" in the New Testament. At times, the earthly authors of Scripture applied the word to individuals who were not of the twelve official apostles. On such occasions, it is best to see the term as referring to one who functioned informally as a "messenger" on behalf of Christ. See 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Philippians 2:25 for such uses of the term *apóstolos*.

Scripture indicates that there were only twelve official apostles for all time within the church. In Revelation 21:14, we read of how the eternal state will bear witness to the ministry of Christ's twelve official messengers: "And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." Though the word *apóstolos* was sometimes used in a generalized sense to refer to messengers of Christ, it was primarily used in an official sense to speak of those twelve apostles the Lord used to establish His church and gospel message. Those who try to apply the moniker to themselves, grasping for supposed apostolic authority, are guilty of abusing the term. Their ministry is not the same as the one Paul had.

The original twelve apostles were sent by Jesus to proclaim his message and to further his ministry. Paul made reference to such in Colossians 1:1 by referring to Himself as "an apostle of *Christ Jesus*." It was Jesus Himself who called the original disciples to follow Him (Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-17). He then commissioned them to minister on His behalf (Mark 3:13-19). Prior to His crucifixion, He told them that He would use them as specially-appointed vessels to deliver His truth (John 16:12-15) and to build His church (Matthew 16:17-20).

In his other writings, Paul made much of apostolic ministry. When writing to the church at Ephesus, he explained that the Twelve had a unique role in the establishment of the church. He said the church was "...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). Notice two groups of people from Ephesians 2:20 — "the apostles and prophets." Whereas apostles were the Lord's instruments of revelation in the New Testament, prophets were His means of revelation in the Old Testament. As God's specially ordained means of revelation, both groups together were used to establish the Lord's church. They each prophesied and preached in order that the Lord's covenant of redemption might be fulfilled, and in order that the Lord might establish a covenant people for Himself. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul would also give witness to this by saying, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12).

In introducing his letter to the Colossians, Paul was intentional to present his apostleship as being from the Lord. He said he was "...an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will." Questions often arise concerning which men actually make up the official group of twelve apostles? It is commonly accepted that Judas is no longer considered as a part of the group. His betrayal of Jesus and subsequent suicide disqualify him from the group. But what about one named Matthias? The book of Acts describes the way the other eleven original disciples appointed him as Judas' replacement?

A cursory reading of the book of Acts gives the impression that the selection of Matthias was both ill-timed and unadvised. The man was appointed outside of the will of God. It is for this reason that Luke detailed the selection of Matthias in Acts 1:15-26, immediately before his account of the events related to Pentecost in Acts 2:1-47. The author's intent in the narrative concerning Matthias was to show the disciples striving in the power of the flesh, attempting to build the church in their strength without the aid of the Holy Spirit. Remember, the book of Acts was intended to be a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke. At the end of that gospel, the Lord had told the original eleven, "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

If the eleven would have waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit, they would not have hastily appointed Matthias as Judas' replacement. They would have perceived the need to wait for the Lord to provide a replacement in accordance with His will. The book of Acts makes it clear that Paul was God's chosen twelfth apostle. The account of Paul's conversion and call to ministry in Acts 9:1-25 provided a background for his inclusion in the apostolic ministry.

Paul gave testimony to his place as an apostle in 1 Corinthians 15. In writing about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, he said, "Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Corinthians 15:6-8). The Greek word rendered "born at the wrong time" is one that was used of a pregnant woman

miscarrying her child in the first-century world.¹ As used by Paul, the term implied that Paul's inclusion into the apostolic ministry occurred at a different time than the other apostles. Some believe the term also implied that no other apostles were to be added after Paul.²

When Paul wrote letters to first-century churches, he was frank in professing his role as an apostle. He never wanted to boast beyond measure (2 Corinthians 10:12-18); however, he wasn't timid in mentioning his God-given role when necessary. In writing to the church at Corinth, he appealed to his special status as a reason for the church to listen to his instruction, saying, "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?" (1 Corinthians 9:1). Paul knew that he had authority from the Lord to deliver God's truth and to build God's church. He was an apostle "by the will of God." It is for this reason that he often appealed to his status as an apostle when he sent letters to first-century churches, especially when he had to deal with pertinent doctrinal matters (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1).

Today we don't have apostles amongst us. However, the truth delivered by the apostles lives on through the pages of Holy Scripture. If we want to know what Jesus' specially appointed messengers would say about a matter related to the faith, we only need to look to the Bible. One has remarked on what is often called "apostolic succession" by saying it, "...is not the mystical Episcopalian notion of an unbroken line of laying on of hands through bishops traced back to the apostles themselves; but, rather, the faithful care and handling of the canon of Scripture from generation to generation."³

Paul's reference to his apostleship was important for his original readers. They needed to hear and take heed to what he said because of his special role in the church. False teaching was making them lose confidence in the person and work of Christ. They needed to repent and reorient themselves with the teaching delivered by the apostles. Strength and sufficiency would be found in Christ and in Christ alone.

Paul's reference to his apostleship is also important for us. All of our beliefs and practices as Christians should be in alignment with the witness of the apostles. Jesus faithfully raised up twelve men to build His church and deliver His truth. His Holy Spirit inspired them to write and record His Word for His people (1 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21). We now have Jesus' truth from His apostles in a book we call the Bible. By hearing and taking heed to what Jesus' has delivered to us via His special messengers, we can be spiritually strong, we can have wisdom from God, and our lives can grow into fruitful witnesses for Christ.

Paul not only made mention of himself in verse 1. He also referenced one he referred to as "Timothy our brother." The individual is now well-known to believers

¹ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), 557.

² Grosheide, F.W. *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 352.

³ Johnston, G. Mark. The Sacred Trust. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: 713*. (Edinburgh, U.K: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2023), 3-4.

because of the two canonical letters Paul addressed to the man (1 & 2 Timothy). The book of Acts tells of the way Timothy was recruited to join Paul in ministry while Paul ministered in Lystra during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-5). At the time of Paul's writing, the younger man served as one of Paul's chief ministry assistants and partners.

It is worth asking why Paul mentioned Timothy in the introduction to his letter. The younger minister apparently had visited the apostle in prison. Interestingly, one of Paul's subsequent epistles to Timothy would contain a request for the man to visit the apostle in prison before the apostle's death (2 Timothy 4:9-10). As Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians from a Roman jail cell, Timothy's presence was undoubtedly an encouragement. However, it seems that Paul's mention of the man had something to do with the actual content of his letter.

Words found later in Colossians seem to indicate that Timothy penned the epistle. In the last verse of the epistle, Paul said, "I, Paul, am writing this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you" (Colossians 4:18). Apparently, Paul dictated to Timothy who wrote the letter. The apostle then signed the letter after verifying that all of Timothy's transcription was correct. All along, the Holy Spirit guided the writing promise to ensure that the words of God were delivered to God's people.

Verse 2

After introducing himself and Timothy, Paul turned to addressing his audience. He said, "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father" (Colossians 1:2). The word "saints" was a special one that was often used for the people of God within the early church. Later use of the term by some professing Christians has obscured its meaning for many modern believers. It is important to note that the word is never used of a special class of super-spiritual and super-holy believers, as some would assume. Instead, the term is used over and over again to refer to believers in general. If one is a Christian, one is regarded as a "saint."

As early as Acts 9:13, the New Testament depicts the early church as referring to believers as "saints." Paul used the term frequently in his epistles to speak of God's people (Romans 1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 15:25-26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:1-2; 14:33; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:12; Ephesians 1:1, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:18; 4:12; Philippians 1:1; 4:21, 22; Colossians 1:4, 12, 26; 3:12; Philemon 5, 7; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 Timothy 5:10). Applied to God's people, the term represents the standing believers have in Christ. Because of imputed righteousness, God sees his children as being as holy as His Son.

Paul spoke of the saints who received who received his letter as being "in Christ." The phrase "in Christ" was a significant one in the apostle's theology. He used it repeatedly in his writings to speak of the believer's relationship to Christ (Romans 8:1; 12:5; 16:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 30; 15:18, 22; 2 Corinthians 1:21; 5:17; Galatians 1:22; 3:26; Ephesians 1:1; 2:6, 13; Philippians 1:1; 4:21; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 1 Timothy 1:14; 2 Timothy 1:1; 2:10; Hebrews 3:14). Paul told the Romans "So, you too consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). The words "in Christ" highlight a Christian doctrine known as "union with Christ." One has defined the doctrine as "believers' unity with Jesus Christ on the

basis of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 2:20).” Through the new birth (John 3:3), believers actually become one with Christ because of the indwelling presence of Christ’s Spirit in their souls (Galatians 3:2). Such union leads to great fellowship with Christ (1 John 1:3) and great spiritual fruit in one’s life (Galatians 5:22-23).

Paul made mention of the physical location of his readership by saying “at Colossae.” The apostle’s reference to a specific location reveals that his letter was intended for a specific audience. From what we read in the Bible, it seems unlikely that Paul had ever visited the city in person. Later in Colossians, we will learn that one named Epaphras was the pastor of the church at Colossae (Colossians 1:7; 4:12). The man was likely the one who planted the church. Perhaps he came to faith through Paul’s ministry in Ephesus (Acts 18:19-41). Acts 19:10 mentioned how “...all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” It is likely that Epaphras and others from Colossians were included with the people mentioned in that verse. Perhaps Epaphras returned to his hometown and planted a church after having been converted through Paul’s preaching.⁴

Colossae was located in modern day Turkey. During its prime, it was a significant city. It was located within a wealthy region. The city enjoyed friendly relations with the nearby cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea. Together the three cities formed a triangle on a map. The region around Colossae was known for rich mineral deposits and fertile pastures.⁵ By the time of Paul’s writing, the city had experienced a decline from its previous glory. Notice that Paul spoke of his readers as being “in Christ” before He spoke of them being “at Colossae.” He saw their spiritual location as being more important than their physical location.

Though the city wasn’t as significant as it once was, Paul wanted his readers to know that they had riches in Christ. Affixing a customary address to his letter, he called his readers “faithful brothers.” The original Greek does not contain a word for “sisters.” It only uses a word for “brothers.” Many modern translations have added “sisters” to the text in an attempt to be gender inclusive. It is important to note that the word “brothers” wasn’t intended as a label for men alone. In the first-century world, the term was used as a metonym to express a sense of camaraderie or community amongst a group of people. Individuals from the same nation might speak of themselves as being fellow countrymen or “brothers” (Romans 9:3). The apostles often applied the term to believers within the church in order to express the family-like love that exists amongst the body of Christ (Mark 3:31-35). Because of the union believers experience with Christ, they have communion with one another. Throughout life, they receive encouragement and edification from their family of faith.

Paul regarded the “brothers” in Colossae as being “faithful.” The adjective could have either referred to the trustworthiness of the individuals in view, or it could have been intended to depict them as ones who were trusting and believing in the truth of Christ. That is, Paul either meant to say the brothers were either “believing” or

⁴ Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 3.

⁵ Walvoord, John F. and Roy B. Zuck. Eds. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty, Old Testament*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1983), 668.

“faithful.”⁶ Most believe that the former interpretation is correct. However, we could say that faithfulness is built upon a strong faith. In our text, Paul probably used the term in reference to those members at the church of Colossae who were remaining faithful to the true truth of God’s Word. In every congregation, there are those who exhibit a high regard for God’s truth and those who neglect God’s truth (Matthew 13:24-30; Acts 20:29-30). At Colossae, some were diminishing the importance of Christ, but a faithful remnant was clinging to Christ. Paul’s letter was primarily addressed to the faithful. He wanted them to discern the deception in their midst.

Before transitioning to the heart of his letter, Paul offered a benediction upon his readers. He said, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father.” While most first-century letters customarily contained a blessing in the greeting, Paul did not offer his blessing in an empty mechanical matter. His well-wishes were uttered by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16) and they were chock-full of glorious Christian doctrine. “Grace...and peace” are part and parcel of the believer’s experience in Christ. The apostle wanted his readers to experience the blessing of both virtues, but they needed to retain a full-fledged devotion to the person and work of Christ in order to do so.

“Grace” is that virtue of God whereby He extends his unmerited love toward humanity. The Lord has given a basic form of grace — “common grace” — to all creation. However, there is a special type of grace for God’s people. Paul told the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). The faithful of Colossal knew of God’s special, soul-saving kindness. They had experienced it for themselves. Paul noted this in Colossians 1:6.

However, some at Colossae perhaps weren’t drawing on continual grace from Christ in order to receive strength and sufficiency for Christian living. Many believers fall prey to the same failure. They overlook the fact that there is “more grace” after salvation (James 4:6), grace that is available to help with the process of sanctification (2 Peter 3:18). Paul referenced this reality on multiple occasions in his letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:6, 18). In Colossians 3:16 he said, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” The word translated “gratitude” at the end of Colossians 3:16 is the same one rendered “grace” in our current text. Paul wanted his readers to experience the grace that sustains a believer throughout the Christian life.

In reference to how such grace impacts daily, Christian living, one has defined grace as, “The exceptional effects produced by God’s favor.”⁷ Without God’s grace, there would be no salvation (Ephesians 2:8), but there would also be little hope of being or doing anything of any consequence for God’s Kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:10). Individual believers and corporate body of believers must depend on the lovingkindness of God. They must learn to grow in their experience of this virtue,

⁶ Rogers Jr. Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 459.

⁷ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 407.

incorporating it by faith into their daily lives (2 Peter 3:18). Grace is the thing that strengthens us for holy living (Titus 2:11-13) and empowers us for Christian service (Acts 1:8; Romans 12:6-8).

Paul also wished for his readers to experience the peace of God. The experience of such a virtue in the life of a believers can be thought of in two ways — positionally and practically. Positionally, believers experience “peace” with God at salvation (Romans 5:1). Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, believers obtain a standing with God in which previous hostilities because of sin are removed.

On top of such positional peace, Christians have the benefit of experiencing practical peace. This is the inner-tranquility that is produced by Christ’s indwelling presence. Through life’s crises, valleys, and storms, God’s children can have inner-calm and assurance. Paul knew that his readers at Colossae needed a reminder of this. False doctrine and the demands of daily life were robbing many of God’s peace. In Colossians 3:15, Paul said, “And let the peace of the Messiah, to which you were also called in one body, control your hearts. Be thankful.” It’s easy for anyone, even a born-again believer, to allow his or heart to become filled with worry. However, Christians have a refuge from worry. Through faithful filled trust in Christ worry can be vanquished by spiritual truth. God can give His children “...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding...” (Philippians 4:7).