

I. Colossians
The Preeminence and Prominence of Jesus Christ
“Church Health”
Colossians 1:1–8
Rev. Benny Parks
June 18, 2023 • Sunday Evening Sermon

We are starting a series on Colossians which will be broken up into ten studies with this first study looking at Colossians 1:1-8. I'd like to start off with a baseball analogy. There will be ten different pastors who will bring these studies to you and I was told I was going to be the leadoff hitter. There is always the hope that the leadoff batter gets on base. He just needs to get on base and he can even get hit by the pitch and then he gets on base. So, any way that he can get on base, that's good. That's positive. That means he's done something well. So in this study the idea is hopefully I'll get a hit and that means that you will learn something from God's Word. Then we have two other guys coming right afterwards, Jay Shaw and Stephen King, and then we have the cleanup batter who is Ike Reeder. The idea is if the three of us get a hit, say something of value to you, then Ike comes up as he hits a grand slam home run and then we're really off to a great start in the book of Colossians.

Actually, though, the analogy in the study for Colossians is we have Ike batting cleanup because he has to clean up the mess that the first three guys make. He has been trained the most by Pastor Reeder. He has grown up with him and so he's learned from him. Ike is the Briarwood Theological Seminary president, so he ought to be able to come in and straighten out anything that we might say that's not particularly accurate. So that's where we are. We're excited to go through the book. Obviously, that was just an analogy, a poor attempt at humor, and none of us that'll be preaching have any trust in ourself to bring anything of value to you other than to open up God's Word and let His Spirit speak to you for His Word is settled in the heavens, and so we want it to be settled in our hearts.

Pastor Reeder has taught through Colossians a few times, and one of the things that I love about what he says about the book is he says 'it is all about the sovereign and sufficient Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer over all things.' That's what we want to see as we open this incredible book each week in our study of Colossians. I would encourage you in some practical things as we go through this study on this book and one is, to read the whole book of Colossians at least once. You could do it a couple of times. That would be great. It's a short book. It doesn't take that long. You can listen to it if you have the Bible on your phone. I love listening to the Word on my phone. Then you look at and study ahead of time whatever section that we'll be doing.

We will be in Colossians 1 for several studies so you won't go wrong reading that several times and then you might want to get a commentary. There are many great commentaries on the book of Colossians. I'll give you three that are possibilities and they are different levels of difficulty, with most all of them being accessible in terms of reading. One is that what's called the Bible Speaks Today series by a man named Dick Lucas, who does the work on Colossians and Philemon in this series. It's edited by John Stott. Then there's the Preaching of the Word series on Colossians and Philemon, by Kent Hughes. It's a great commentary and then finally is the Baker Exegetical commentary on Colossians and Philemon by G.K. Beale. It's a much more robust commentary, but all of those are good.

As we began to study the book of Colossians, in the time that Colossians was written is very similar to what we deal with today. There were heresies, theological error, problems in the

church of low living and not holy living and a lack of love for the saints. As we think about what was going on in Colossians, we think that it's not a new perspective that we need on life and it's not an old perspective on things of how we've been stuck in the past, but it's all of life in Biblical perspective. That's what we want to see in the book of Colossians, because as we look at life and what was going on then and what will help us now in Biblical perspective that transcends the present, it illuminates the past and it shows us the way forward in the future. We're faithful as we look to God's Word, we're faithful to what J.C. Ryle called the old paths. J.C. Ryle commenting on Jeremiah 6:16, says the old paths are where the good way is and Jeremiah tells us to walk in those paths. In this study of Colossians, we want to bring to light the idea of the old paths in Biblical perspective.

In this study I will give you a little bit of overview of the book of Colossians and some key points from this section. I want you to think of four words for this study – greetings, gratitude, glory and Gospel. The first section of Colossians 1:1-8 deals with greetings and that is covered in verses 1 and 2. Colossians 1:1-2 says *[1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, [2] To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Paul is an Apostle of Jesus Christ who came to the Lord on the way to Damascus where He the resurrected Christ. The Bible says that the church was founded on the Apostles and the Prophets. Paul did not choose his apostleship, God chose him to be an Apostle by His will and Timothy. Paul and Timothy together worked on the letter to the Colossians. Do you feel like a saint? I don't often feel very saintly, but the idea of saints is set apart by God, through Christ, according to the Scripture. A saint is not a designation so much about how we are living, but how God looks at each one of us as saints set apart for the glory of Christ through Christ Jesus, our Lord where He has called us to Himself. It is our hope and desire as believers that we would be faithful to Christ, not perfect but faithful in seeking to follow Him.

Here is a little background on the book of Colossians that may help as we go through our study. A good study Bible like the Reformation study Bible and the ESV study Bible will also give you all kinds of great details on the book of Colossians but we'll go over a few things in this study. You can also go to the Briarwood Presbyterian website and listen to Pastor Reeder's series on Colossians and his series from 2013 titled Travelling Route 66 where he gave an overview on every book of the Bible.

Paul was in Ephesus around 50 A.D. and planted a church there around 52 to 54 A.D. He stayed in Ephesus for three years to strengthen the believers at Ephesus. During that time, we know from the book of Colossians and another place in the New Testament, there was a man named Epaphras who actually lived in Colossae but had traveled 100 miles to Ephesus. We don't know why he was there; if he was coming to hear from Paul or if he just happened to be doing business there. Also, a man named Philemon came to Ephesus and both men were converted under the ministry of Paul. Ephesus was about a hundred miles east of Colossae. That would be like going from Birmingham to Auburn, Alabama. After Epaphras and Philemon become Christians in Ephesus, they then go back to Colossae, which was in now today, modern day Turkey, and they plant a church in Colossae. They actually plant three churches within a ten mile radius; one in Colossae, one in Laodicea and one in Hierapolis and they're growing and doing well. There are four prison epistles that Paul wrote when he was in prison; Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. When Epaphras and Philemon go back to Colossae, one of the churches is planted in Philemon's house.

Now move forward about seven or eight years, around 62 or 64 A.D. and Paul is now in prison in Rome, a thousand miles from both Ephesus and Colossae. This is just a few years before he's martyred for his faith, before he dies. While he's in prison in Rome, Epaphras comes back to meet with Paul. We don't know if he actually was thrown in prison with Paul. It appears that that's the case, but Epaphras is telling him what's going on in the church at Colossae that was formed. Paul had never been to Colossae as far as we know, but he made a great impact on that church just by his letter to them and his impact on Epaphras and Philemon. Epaphras told Paul how good it was going, all the great things that were happening in the church at Colossae but he also told him about a number of dangers and problems that they were having.

Some theologians speak about the Colossian heresy, and we don't know exactly what that was, but we know that there were a number of aspects to it. It seemed to be a combination of Jewish thought, Jewish ceremonialism about laws and we'll learn more about that as we go through the book. There was also Greek thought, too, though, and a lot of different aspects that were going on in Colossians. As Paul hears about these problems, he writes a letter to the Colossians and he sends it back with a man named Tychicus and with Onesimus who was a runaway slave. He was a runaway slave for Philemon. So Tychicus and Onesimus are there with Paul and Epaphras, and they go back and take the letter of Colossians to those in Colossae. That's how we begin our study of Colossians and you will see just how similar these problems are to the ones that we deal with today as believers.

Colossians 1:2 ends with 'Grace and peace be with you through God our Father. We can only experience grace and peace through the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is God's own unmerited favor that we receive because of God's love for us, and then peace that we all need in this difficult world. Paul says in Ephesians 2:14, [14] *For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.* So that's what we have in Christ from God, the Father; grace and peace.

As we get further in this study, we'll also start to see the importance of the difference between error and heresy. Pastor Reeder used to talk a lot about theological error and heresy. We all live to some degree with theological error. None of us are perfect. We all see dimly through a glass and we can get certain aspects in the Bible wrong as believers or differ on things and still have sweet fellowship with one another. Not everything is equally important. For instance, we believe in infant baptism and our good brothers in the Baptist church do not, and yet we can still have sweet fellowship, but those are theological errors. We both can't be right. We both could be wrong or we may not just see things exactly the same way or clearly, which we will see one day in heaven.

Heresy is different because heresy is something that if you believe it damns your soul to hell, means you will not go to heaven if you believe these things and we're going to see some of both in the book of Colossians, but we will see heretical things being taught. If we go back to baptism, you can differ on whether or not you believe there's infant baptism and that won't send you to hell. If you believe you have to keep the law and you have to be baptized to be saved, then that'll damn you to hell, because that's adding something to the Gospel that isn't there because we're saved by grace alone through Christ alone by faith alone. Essentially there was an inaccurate view and an incomplete view, therefore a false view of the person work of Jesus Christ; who Jesus was, His deity, His humanity and then His work of grace. Let's look further in the text to the second word – gratitude, toward the Colossians.

Colossians 1:3 says [3] *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.* In the next study you will hear about the content of this prayer but what we see

here is the idea of thanksgiving in our prayers and that we should always be giving thanks. We should always have a thankful mindset in prayer, particularly when we're praying for others. Paul said in I Thessalonians 5:17-18, *[17] pray without ceasing, [18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* So, our idea is to have a thankful mindset; gratitude for our brothers and sisters in Christ when we pray for them. That should mark all of our prayers as we pray regularly for one another. The prayers of the saints for the saints is precious in God's sight. Many of you have told the Reeder family and the staff that you're praying for us since the passing of our senior pastor, Harry Reeder and we're praying for you, but how important that is during this time to lift one another up. That is precious in God's sight and it's what God calls us to do with great gratitude for each one of us and to pray for the brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's think about the third word which is glory. This is the hope of eternal glory. We're talking about heaven and we'll see this theme repeated over and over in Colossians; the hope of glory, the hope of heaven, keeping our eyes on Christ, seeking the things above. Colossians 1:4-5a says *[4] since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, [5a] because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.* That's the hope of glory, laid up in heaven.

Here are three familiar words where we hear Paul repeat these in a number of places and most prominently in I Corinthians 13:13 which says *[13] So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.* Here we have a little bit different order, but he's talking about the same things – faith in Jesus Christ, believing on Him, resting in Jesus Christ alone to save us, trusting Him and then love for all of the saints. A very important theme that we'll see in the book of Colossians is to love all of the saints, even those Baptists who don't understand baptism correctly. Right? Pastor Reeder used to love this little rhyme that says; 'to dwell above with the saints we love, O, that will be glory, but to dwell below with the saints we know, well, now that's a different story.' We laugh, but that's so often true that we do not have the love for one another that we should and that we should demonstrate in the body of Christ.

When I was going into about the sixth grade, I learned to play the guitar and my first song that I ever learned to play was 'We Are One in the Spirit' and there were just three chords which were E minor, A minor and C. So, I learned to strum that song. The words are so simple. It says, "We are God's people. We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord" and it repeats that three times. Then it says "And we pray that our unity may one day be restored, and they will know we are Christians by our love." That is what Francis Schaeffer called the mark of a Christian. Schaeffer said 'the world has a right to judge whether or not Jesus Christ really came in the flesh on the basis of the love that they see between Christians and other Christians.' I believe it's one of the reasons that we have such a poor example and testimony in the world is because we don't love one another that way. Oh, that we would pray that our unity would be restored and that the world once again would say 'they know we are Christians by our love for one another, our deep care for one another.'

The book that I taught back in Men in the Covenant this past spring was The Bruised Reed by Richard Sibbes, and he talks about the sorrowful state of the church when we are not showing love to one another. He says 'Because we are heirs of mercy, because we received mercy, we should show it to our brothers and sisters in Christ. The poor state of the church should cause deep sorrow in the lives of believers. The mercy of Christ should also move us to sorrow over the state of the poor church torn by enemies without and rending itself by divisions at home. What a joyful spectacle this is to Satan and all of his demons to see those that are

separated from the world, who fall in pieces among themselves. Our discord is our enemy's melody.' Our enemy sings and rejoices when he sees the church divided and not loving one another, not committed to one another. They will know we're Christians by our love. We need to pursue that.

We see this in the last part where it talks about the hope we have, the hope laid up in heaven. This is not wishful thinking. This is a confident expectation of what God is going to do and we see it throughout the book of Colossians. Colossians 1:26-27, says *[26] the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. [27] To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* Colossians 3:2-4 says *[2] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. [3] For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. [4] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.* This is the hope of glory, the hope of eternal life. That's what God is doing in each of our hearts. That's where we find the greatest joy as we keep our eyes fixed above. The more we hope in heaven, the more effective we're going to be here on this earth.

I'm always struck by Jonathan Edwards in his book, Charity and Its Fruits, where he discusses the whole idea of the saint's happiness and holiness. He talks about that in terms of twisting those two together. He says in this book, "Who are the happiest saints alive? The happiest saints alive are those who are in heaven because they are the most holy, they are perfect in holiness and the more we pursue the holiness of Christ, the more we seek to follow Him to kill sin" as we will learn in a later study to be focused on Christ who is above and that strengthens our holiness and it contributes to the saint's happiness. That's the hope of heaven.

Let's look finally at the final word which is Gospel. Colossians 1:5b-8 says, *[5b] Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, [6] 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, [7] just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf [8] and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

The Gospel here that we see is always bearing fruit and increasing. Sometimes when you become a Christian, it increases so fast you grow like crazy. Other times it's slow, like when you've been a Christian longer, where it tends to ebb and flow, but it's God's truth – the Gospel that the Holy Spirit uses to transform our lives, His Holy Word. I loved what Rob Pacienza said "The church doesn't need a winsome word, but it needs God's Word." It's the word of truth that is used through His Holy Spirit to transform our lives. Paul, talks here about how we've learned it from others. If you've been a Christian a long time or just short, think about those who have taught the Word to you, those you have learned the Word from and thank them for what they've done. I know of men and women in my life years ago when I became a Christian that I want them to just know how grateful I am for their faithful love for Christ as they shared the Word of God with me. Keep listening to the faithful teachers of God's Word and what He has to say in it. Paul expresses this idea of love in the spirit. He concludes that section again, of making known the love in the Spirit.

As we wrap up this study, I want us to remember that Paul is saying to us a very vital thing, and that is Christ is all in all (Colossians 3:11). He combats heresy and falsehoods with the truth of God's Word, the love that we find in the Holy Spirit and the Gospel of grace, faith, hope and love.

You might be thinking right now “Benny has not said one word about church health. He's given a whole sermon. What does this section have to do with church health? What does the book of Colossians have to do with church health?” It has everything to do with church health. Jesus Christ is the head of the church, His body, and everything that we're going to learn in Colossians and what we've talked about in this study goes right with what Christ says at the end of this chapter – it's Christ in you, the hope of glory, it's Christ in us. Christ is all in all. Pastor Reeder would always say, ‘It's not about church growth, it's about church health. You can have a small church and it not be healthy. You can have a large church and it not be healthy. It's about church health.’ You can have a large church that loses members and that's healthy for we know that there are times that that's the case. Bigger is not always better.

I remember years ago when I was over the youth ministry, we used to take students to Gatlinburg every year and we grew and grew and grew. We were using three different hotels. We had over 400 students going and we had done that for almost 20 years. All of a sudden the general manager of the three hotels who was not a believer, hardened guy told us we couldn't come back anymore. He went on to say “It's just too difficult. This old hotel, it's been paid for. We can make more money just getting ready for New Years by renting rooms to people coming off the street. We just don't really need you anymore so you're done.” We were discouraged. We walked up and down Gatlinburg trying to find a place, couldn't find one. We finally found a hotel across the street from where we'd been going for 20 something years. We cut a deal with them, and it was going to be almost twice as much as we'd been paying this other hotel.

We go back to the guy one last time. Now, the hotel that we were going to start using was a whole lot better than the one we were in, but that one we were in, it just really fit. It was just good for us. We went back to the general manager and said, “We're getting ready to pay twice as much as what we paid you. We would like to pay you that same amount, but here's what we will do. We will knock off one day of the conference” because that was always bothering him that we came for four nights. “We'll knock off one night, we'll only come for three nights. We will bring our own custodial crew to help clean up, to get the hotel turned around and we will cut back to one hotel. That's all that we're going to fill up. So, we'll cut about 125 students out of going from then on.” He looked at us, rubbed his bald head, shook his head, and said, “That's incredible. You got a deal.” So, we cut the numbers, cut the nights, and went back to that hotel for another several years and kids came to know Christ and grew in Him. We learned the truth that bigger is not always better. Narrowing it down made it a much more healthy trip. We were able to manage and minister better. We need to learn that bigger is not always better.

God has blessed Briarwood with a large church – a small community, a small town, but that's not what makes the church healthy. It's Christ all in all and that's what we're going to learn and be committed in the rest of our study in Colossians. Christ is the head of the church. I remember years ago we were doing a high school membership class for students. I asked the question to them “Who is the head of the church?” Immediately one of the kids said, “Frank Barker.” I said, ‘No, it is not Frank Barker. Who is the head of church?’ They just looked blind. I mean, that was the only answer they had. I started to say the word that started with a J and one of them blurted out “John Calvin!” I said, “No, it's not John Calvin.” I was glad they knew that John Calvin had something to do with Presbyterians. Finally, one of them said ‘Jesus.’

I realized then we had a lot of work to do with our membership plans for teenagers back then, but Jesus is the King and head of the church, and He is the one that we look to in our study and that we fall in love with. My prayer is that we would dive deeply into God's Word here in Colossians, that we would love Jesus again, that we would see Him as all in all, as our head, that

we would focus on the preeminence and prominence of Jesus Christ, His supremacy, His sovereignty and His sufficiency, because He is all in all, and He is more than enough than what we need in life. So, let's keep our eyes fixed completely on Jesus Christ and the grace, love and mercy that He brings to us. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I do thank You for loving us. Thank You for our time together. Thank You for Your Word. We pray, Father, that You would use it by Your Holy Spirit to transform our lives, that we would depend upon Your Holy Word, which is true, settled and, Father, it never passes away. So, help us to believe Your Word, to trust Your Word, and to rely on Your Holy Spirit to apply it to our lives. We pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.