

“What A Difference Christ Makes!”

Text: Colossians 1:1-8

Series: Book of Colossians [#01]

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Theme: **Give Thanks That Christ Makes You Complete.**

Introduction

It seems everywhere we look there are new and different ideas—voices calling to us, sometimes mocking or attacking us. They say,

- “Christianity is fine, but how do you know it’s true?”
- “What about all the other religions and billions of people following them? Isn’t it arrogant to say that you know, that you have the truth and everyone else is wrong?”
- “All the religions and philosophies of the world are a tapestry of belief—they all are interwoven. They all are part of the same ultimate truth. They all are on the same path and lead to the same destination.”
- Or, from a different angle, some say, “We believe in Jesus Christ as you do, but to be complete you really need more.” For some, that means one or more special experiences. For others, it means a special understanding of truth, or a different *interpretation* about who Jesus is, who God is, who we are, and how we can relate to God.

You’ve heard the expression, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Despite all the changes, what we see and hear is really not different from what the people in the church at Colossae were hearing when Paul wrote to them in the year 60 or 61. Paul wrote his letter, which we call Colossians, to encourage and strengthen them as they faced a variety of false teaching from people around them. The trouble they faced came from a mixture of Jewish traditions and legalisms as well as Greek philosophies. The false teaching is not spelled out in detail, but we will see evidence of it as we move through the book. The people had not yielded to the false teaching, but God directed Paul to write to help them be steadfast.

The church in Colossae was probably started while Paul was working in Ephesus. Paul did not start the church, as 2:1 makes it clear he had not even seen them. The work was probably started by a man named Epaphras, who is mentioned here in chapter 1 in verse 7, again in 4:12, and also at the end of Paul’s letter to Philemon.

The city of Colossae doesn’t exist today, and hasn’t for over 1,500 years. It was located in western Turkey, about 120 miles east of Ephesus. Let’s check our maps. In your own Bible, at the back, one of the maps of Paul’s missionary journeys should show it. In the pew Bible, at the back, Map #9 (the page is not numbered), titled *The Missionary Journeys of Paul*. And we have one we will display on the screen.

The city reached its height in the 5th century B.C. Being on a major trade route went a long way to making it large and prosperous. One of the results of many people traveling through the city and many others from different places settling there, was that it became a diverse city—made up of many different nationalities, ethnic groups, religions and philosophies. When the trade route moved away from Colossae leaving it off the beaten path, it entered a steady decline. It was a small town even before Paul’s day.

One writer calls Colossians “one of Paul’s most exciting letters.” *Why would he say that?* Paul’s approach was not a heavy sledge hammer of demolishing the false teaching brick by brick, but a clear, inspiring construction of the truth. Paul leads us to great heights of seeing of who Jesus Christ is, what He has accomplished, and who we are in Him. Paul gives us a solid foundation of confidence for facing a world that says there is no certain, unchanging, universal truth, and that ridicules Christians for saying there is. Paul applies this truth practically to how we can and should live.

Paul’s theme throughout the book is *the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ*. He opens with a grand statement of thanksgiving in the first eight verses as he, in effect says, “*What A Difference Christ Makes!*” The main lesson for us in these verses is to *Give Thanks That Christ Makes You Complete*.

Christ Proves *The True Faith*.

Christ makes us complete, first of all because He proves *the true faith*. People constantly search for *the true faith*. We do this because we need to live by faith. To be able to live without faith would require knowing everything, being able to do anything and everything, being in control of everything. Since we can’t do that, we have to, we do live by trusting, having faith in what others tell us, in what people say works, that the light will come on when we throw the switch, that the moon isn’t going to crash into the earth, that the pew you are setting on won’t collapse.

Because faith involves trusting without having 100% verifiable proof, it can be subjective. When you listen to or read people discussing ...

- *relativism*—that there is no truth that is true for all people, all times and all places,
- or the *postmodern* concept of there being no truth, at least no truth which we can know, beyond our own experience at a given moment,
- or the meaning of living in a *pluralistic* society,

you might think this all is new. As we will see, the people of first century Colossae lived in a culture with Greek philosophy and relativism on the one hand and strict Jewish legalisms on the other. There is a constant need and search for *the true faith*.

Paul answers this need with the clear, free provision in Christ. God’s clear, direct, free, amazing provision of the true faith in Jesus Christ cuts across the complicated, twisted, dead-end mazes of man-made answers.

You can see it in Paul's positive, forceful statements:

- In verse 2 he addresses them as “the *saints* and faithful brethren *in Christ*.”
- In verse 4 he speaks of, “your *faith in Christ Jesus*,”
- and in verse 6, “the *grace* of God in *truth*.”

From the start of this letter Paul was taking them, is taking us back to the basics, to the truths Jesus gave us when He said,

“God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

(John 3:16)

And, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” (John 14:6)

Paul goes back to the truth he gave the church at Ephesus, “by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The Colossians did not have to add, or even tolerate the Jewish legalisms of diet and special days to make them full or real believers; nor Greek philosophies, some of which viewed the spiritual as good and the physical as evil; nor yet the call to *greater, deeper* truths open only to a select few followers who go through specific, detailed experiences or steps to gain that status or knowledge.

The true faith is God's gift in and through Jesus Christ. It is complete. It makes You complete. Give thanks that Christ makes you complete.

Christ Provides The *True* Fulfillment.

As well, Christ makes you complete by providing *the* true fulfillment. People continually search for true fulfillment just as they search for true faith. People try to find true fulfillment through religion, work, pleasure, family, other relationships and an encyclopedic list of other things. Since the 1970s self-fulfillment has been front and center for North Americans, being the focus of the majority. The old ethics of duty to family, community, God and work have been replaced by the duty to myself.

This duty to myself drives the search for fulfillment. We know about the “What's in it for me?” attitude that shows itself in every area of life, including faith and the church. There are a host of *experts* who have ideas and plans for churches to develop styles that will help them attract people and meet their desire for self-fulfillment.

True fulfillment has always been important—in our day and in Paul's day. For Paul, and for the Christian faith, true fulfillment is found in Christ. In these opening verses he does not give us a summary of the *quest* for fulfillment, but of the *results* of placing your faith in Christ, and living by faith in Him.

First, Christ provides the believer true fulfillment by enabling a life which is motivated by His own perfect love. This clearly was a trait of the Colossian believers. Note Paul's descriptions of them. In verse 4 he speaks of "the love which you have for all the saints." Then in verse 8 he writes that Epaphras had informed him of "your love in the Spirit."

This love was not sentimental nor a natural attraction, but the love of God—a committed, vibrant, warm caring for others and God's best for them. Just a few years before this letter, Paul wrote to the believers at Rome, reminding them that "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5).

Now we know from our own experience that while God pours out His love generously to the core of our being, we don't instantly live it out perfectly. This reality is met with another amazing work of God's grace in us. God keeps on developing His love in us. As verse 8 says, it is "love in the *Spirit*"—the Holy Spirit. And Galatians 5:22 tells us "the *fruit* of the Spirit is, among other things, love." A character and life of love is part of the result, the fruit of His work within us.

It is, however, not a passive growth from bud to blossom to fruit. We have a role to play. Turn ahead to chapter 3 here in Colossians. Paul tells the believers starting in verse 12,

"as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."

Then, note the next verse, verse 14, "Beyond all these things *put on love*, which is the perfect bond of unity."

This is not an elective or discretionary part of living with true faith in Jesus Christ. 1 John 5, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and *whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him*" (verse 1). I have never met a believer who is growing in God's love—love for God, love for others—who is not living with a sense of true fulfillment.

Secondly, Christ provides the believer true fulfillment by enabling a life which is characterized by productivity. Let's pick it up with the last words of verse 5,

"the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth."

The gospel bears fruit constantly in and through people.

- in bringing salvation;
- in spiritual growth—Paul says it has been "increasing" in them since they believed;
- in service for God—it has been constantly, continually bearing fruit.

God brings about this continual productivity of the gospel through people. People such as Paul, Timothy and Epaphras, and also people such as the believers in Colossae, and in Knox. Yes, Christ enables every believer to be productive. Remember, He gives each of us spiritual abilities for being productive.

- Romans 12:6, “Since *we have gifts* that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly.”
- 1 Corinthians 12:7, “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”
- Again, 1 Peter 4:10, “As *each one has received* a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

While we are His workers, Christ is the One who actually produces the results. Jesus tells us in John 15, verse 5, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” Then in verse 8, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear *much fruit*, and so prove to be My disciples.” Again, verse 16, “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain.”

Christ provides every believer true fulfillment by enabling a life which is characterized by *productivity*.

In addition to a life motivated by love and characterized by productivity, Christ provides every believer true fulfillment by enabling a life marked by thankfulness. The opening verses of this letter are Paul’s prayer of thankfulness for the Colossian believers. Verse 3, “We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you.” This thankfulness was not unique, but a regular pattern flowing from his heart, his character. For example,

- he wrote to the believers in Rome, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.” (1:8)
- To the church in Corinth, “I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Corinthians 1:4)
- To the believers in Ephesus, “...having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, [I] do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers.” (1:16)

- And to Philemon, “I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus

The man who once was “ravaging the church” (Acts 8:3) and “breathing threats and murder” against believers (Acts 9:1), now was teaching, encouraging and *giving thanks* for them! *What a transformation! “What A Difference Christ Makes!”* And what Christ did for Paul, He wants to do for every believer.

Christ Provides *The True Certainty*.

Christ provides *the* true faith, *the* true fulfillment, and also ... Christ provides *The True Certainty*. We need to start with the reality of this true, certain hope. Many people, most people have hope that is a sincere and, at times, even a desperate wish. When we lived in Oregon, a family moved into the house next to us. They had just moved to the city because the man had received a promotion. They quickly got busy with renovations inside and out. He told me once that his wife was moving the plants so often that they didn't have roots anymore, but moccasins.

Then, less than a year after they moved in, he was diagnosed with cancer and given just a few months to live. Shortly after he died, their son and daughter went out to see a movie and, driving on slippery streets, ended up in an accident. I went to the hospital with Donna. Her son had just a few bumps and bruises, but her daughter had suffered major head trauma and died.

As we talked over the next few hours and waited for some relatives to arrive, she told me, "We just *hope* the man upstairs knows what's best."

She was expressing her sincere, deep, desperate desire for a certain hope, but also the reality that she had no certainty.

The hope Christ provides is *true*. It is *certain*. It is the certainty of ...

- God knowing what is best, even when we cannot see let alone understand it.
- It is the certain "hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago" (Titus 1:2).
- It is the certain and "blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13).
- It is the certain "hope," verse 5 tells us here in Colossians 1, "laid up for [us] in heaven," where we will be forever with Christ.

Paul wrote in Romans 8:25, "... if we *hope* for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." *Why doe we wait eagerly for it?* We go back to Romans 5, "... *hope* does not disappoint *because* the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." God's confirmation is not just with His statements of universal and unchanging truth as indispensable as they are, but also with the depth and breadth, the warmth and power of His love which assures us and confirms our confidence in Him.

Paul, the other apostles, and many, many others since have known this true certainty as part of the fulfillment Christ gives, and so risked and gave their lives for Him.

Then let's think for a moment about the guarantee of the true, certain hope. In verse 2

Paul reminds us that we are “in Christ.” Paul used the phrase “in Christ” frequently in his letters, 38 times, and the three-word version of it, “in Christ Jesus” another 48 times. He used it with a variety of meanings. Overall it points to us belonging to and being united with Christ.

Here we see the specific emphasis as we look at the two phrases “in Christ” and “at Colossae.” The words “in” and “at” in these two phrases are the same. While it is used a bit differently in each phrase, the link gives us the emphasis. These believers were at Colossae—they lived in that city, they were located there. They also were in Christ, living in, being located in Christ spiritually.

Being in Christ was not a goal or future destination, they already *were there*, just as we are. Their possession of this standing and relationship was a guarantee of all they and we are promised in Christ for this life and eternity. In Christ...

- we have been forgiven, justified, redeemed and sanctified (*cf.* Romans 3:24, 1 Corinthians 1:12, 30);
- in Christ we are “sons of God” (Galatians 3:26);
- in Christ we have been “blessed ... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3);
- in Christ we have been raised up and seated in the heavenly places (*cf.* Ephesians 2:6).

All of these present realities are evidence of the guarantee that God “who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). Yes, as Paul tells us later in this chapter, Christ in us is the hope—the certain, guaranteed expectation—of glory (1:27).

Conclusion.

“*What A Difference Christ Makes!*” We who have placed our faith in Christ, who have experience the difference He makes can join Paul in “*Giving Thanks That Christ Makes Us Complete.*” Do that in a few moments when we spend some quiet time with God.

When John Wesley was a student he met a man who had a labor job at Wesley’s school and was provided accommodation there. On a cold winter night Wesley noticed the man’s coat was thin and worn. He suggested that the man wear a heavier coat for the winter. The man said, “This is the only coat I have in the world, and I thank God for it.”

Wesley asked if he had eaten that day. The man told him, “I have had nothing today but a drink of spring water, and I thank God for it.” Feeling a bit uncomfortable at this point (as we would), Wesley suggested that the man might want to go back to his room before everything was locked up and he would be locked out for the night. He asked, if that happened, “What would you have to thank God for?” The man replied, “Then I would thank Him that I have dry stones to lie upon.”

Wesley was impressed and humbled by this man's faith. He said, "You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat, no bed to lie on. I cannot see what you have to be thankful for." The man told him, "I thank God that he has given me life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him."

He was a man who experienced *the difference Christ makes*.

Question: Have you experienced that? Have you placed your faith in Christ to forgive you of your sins and make you one of His children, one of His *saints*— one of those who are set apart for Him? Christ can and will make you complete—He has fashioned and will put the missing pieces in place. You can do that in these next moments. If you do, or simply want to talk about this, speak with Pastor Tyler or myself right after we finish here.

Let's go to God now.

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