**Identity, Hallmarks and Good News of Christianity**
**Colossians 1:1-8**

I spent my teenage years in a town on the South Coast of England called Bognor Regis. And Bognor was once a thriving seaside resort – even the royal family used to visit it – but not now. Now it's all a bit run-down. So, when I was growing up, we used to say that we came from the nearby Chichester, because Chichester was so much posher than Bognor.

And today we're starting a new series in Paul's letter to the Colossians. And Colossae was a bit like Bognor. It sat on a major trade route and was once the chief city of its region in what's now Turkey. But it had fallen on harder times and now the place to be was nearby Laodicea.

Which begs the question: why does Paul write a letter to a church in a decaying, backwater city, a city he'd never even been to?

Well, a guy from Colossae, called Epaphras, had become a Christian during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, 100 miles away. And he'd gone back to Colossae and started the church there. But like anywhere, Epaphras wasn't the only influence on those young Christians. Today, we get exposed to just about everything through films or the internet. Back then new ideas came when new people passed through your town. And Colossae sat at the meeting point of east and west, on this trade route, so they were exposed to the full spectrum of religious and philosophical ideas.

And it seems that ideas had begun to creep in that in some way Christ wasn't enough to really give you fullness of life; that he wasn't enough to protect you from the challenges of life, or the dark powers around you; that Jesus was good, but you needed something more, something extra if you really wanted to thrive and go to the next level. And that something extra might be some special knowledge, or religious ritual, or spiritual experience, or self-denial. But whatever it was, the cultural, philosophical, spiritual pressures of the world were squeezing these young Christians. Sure Jesus is great… but he's not quite enough for the kind of life you really want.

Which is why this letter is so relevant for us. Because whether it's the temptation to go for a pick and mix spirituality, or the awkwardness of believing that Jesus is the only way to God, or the different voices you hear that *this* is what you really need to enjoy a rich, spiritual life, the message that Jesus is sufficient and supreme is one we all still need to hear.

So, around 60AD, from prison in Rome, Paul writes to them, and to us.

**Colossians 1:1-8**

**A Sure Identity**
Now, the way Paul introduces himself tells us a whole load about how he sees himself. Verse 1: 'Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.' And that word *apostle* means an ambassador, a representative, one who was sent by a king, to represent him. So when Paul says he's an apostle of *Christ* Jesus – and

Christ means Messiah, God's anointed king – he's saying, I'm writing to you as one sent by King Jesus.

Now, imagine that a friend is facing a tricky situation at work and they ask you for advice, how would you reply? You might say something like, 'Well, if you're asking my advice, this would be my opinion, but it's up to you whether you take it or not.' But that's not what Paul's saying, is it? He's not saying 'hey this is just my own personal opinion and it's on the same level as all the other life advice you're getting.' No, he's saying, 'look, I'm Jesus's representative to you and I'm telling you what God has told me to say.'

And that means that as we read this letter, we get to hear God's voice speaking to us. That when Paul says in v2, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father', he's not just saying 'hi! How ya all doing?' he's actually a channel of God's grace and peace to us through this letter. That you get to hear the voice of your Father speaking life to you. And no other source could possibly offer them, or you, that.

But there's something else as well. You see, when Paul says he's an apostle of Christ Jesus, v1, 'by the will of God', he's not joking is he? I mean, Paul didn't exactly see a vacancy on a would-be apostles careers website and think, that looks right up my street, I think I'll apply, did he? The truth is that the risen Jesus literally knocked him off his feet whilst he was persecuting Christians, and told him the job was his. And so far from God choosing Paul because he was so good, God chose him because he was so bad, so that in the life of this man who so obviously didn't deserve it, God's love and grace might be put on public display.

And Paul saw all of life through that lens – the lens of knowing that God had his hand on his life and that he was where he was and what he was by the will of God. And that gave him a rock solid security in his life. Now don't you wish you could say the same? Don't you wish you could say like Paul, I know God has his hand on me, I know I'm where I am and who I am by the will of God?

Well, the point is, you can! You see, how does he describe these Christians he's writing to? Verse 2, 'To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.' Now, what image does the word *saint* conjure up for you? Someone who looks like they've been sucking too many lemons? Well, that's not what the Bible has in mind. When the Bible talks about saints it doesn't mean a special class of people, who've reached some extra-special plane, above the likes of us. To be a saint is to be someone whom God has chosen and set apart as a member of his people, and not because of anything in you, but because of his loving, undeserved grace to you. Which means, that just like Paul, if you're a Christian you can say, God has laid his hand on me and called me into his people, and I am what I am by God's will, he's chosen me – that's who I am. And it doesn't matter what others are saying, or how my circumstances are going – I belong to him.

But think about what our culture offers as an alternative. How does it tell you that you can feel secure in who you are, or good about yourself? 'I am what I have' – I'm defined by how much I make or possess. Or, 'I am what I do' – it's my job, my career that makes me. Or, 'I am what other people say or think of me' –

I'm ok if other people say I'm ok. But Paul could look at his life and the life of any Christian and say, I am who I am because God has chosen me and called me – that's the rock on which I stand.

But again our current culture will say, 'no, you don't want God, who doesn't even exist, choosing for you - your significance comes from you being able to choose and decide for yourself who or what you are.' But listen, if there is no God, no ultimate, higher purpose to life, then in reality your choices have no meaning. And your very existence is just a chance event, you have no meaning, you're just a collection of atoms, destined for the scrap heap.

But which of those options makes more sense of what you know and feel deep down? Which of those can answer your inner hunger for meaning and making sense of life? That life is meaningless and your identity is based on transient, unreliable stuff and the opinion of others, or that it's God who gives you purpose and meaning, and he calls you and puts his hand on you and sets you apart to be a member of his people?

And not just his people, but his family. You see, look at the second way he describes these Colossians: v2 'faithful brothers.' Now, we all want to belong somewhere, don't we? We're all trying to find our way back to our Father. And Paul says, your Father has come out to find you and brought you back into his family. And he's a Father who has his eye on the sparrow, who cares for you and rejoices over you with singing. That's whose family you now belong to.

But the third way Paul describes them is that they are saints and faithful brothers, v2, 'In Christ at Colossae.' Now, if you had to introduce yourself to a bunch of people who didn't know you, what would you say? You'd probably say, 'well, I'm currently living in this city, and this is what I do for a living.' And in describing them, Paul does something similar. He says that just like you live here in Switzerland, they live in Colossae. But as they do that, they live out their lives *in Christ*. Because when you're a Christian you're a citizen of a different world, yes you're in Coloassae, but you're also in Christ, and being *in Christ* is going to radically shape how you live in Colossae.

You see, whether you're working or relaxing – you're in Christ. Whether you're feeling up, or down, – you're in Christ. Whether life's going great, or everything's crumbling - you're in Christ. And it's being in him, that that's your identity, that's who defines you, that will influence everything you do.

So to a bunch of people tempted to think that there might be something better out there, and to us, Paul says, no, you're saints, family, in Christ – your identity is rock-solid, secure in him.

But he also tells them they were the real deal.

**Genuine Hallmarks**

Now, if someone does something kind for you, who do you thank? Maybe your friend cooks you a really nice dinner, do you run outside, find a total stranger on

the street and say 'that dinner was delicious, thank you so much!' No! We thank the person who did it.

And Paul begins his letter by saying, v3, 'We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.' Interesting isn't it... he doesn't write them a letter congratulating them on their vibrant Christian faith, instead he thanks God, because he knows that it's God who's at work among them, and that tells him they're the real deal.

You see, imagine you inherit an antique, and you want to know whether it's really made of silver or not – what do you look for? You look for the hallmarks, those little symbols imprinted on the metal that tell you this is genuine. And so when Paul looks at these Christians in Colossae, he does the same, he looks for the hallmarks that God is genuinely doing stuff among them. And he sees them – and those Christian hallmarks are faith, hope and love – except here he changes the order: v3-5, 'We always thank God… 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.'

So just as they're being made to question, 'are we really Christians, or should we be experiencing something more?' Paul tells them, you're the real deal, God's at work among you, firstly because of your faith in Christ Jesus.

Now, have you heard someone describe themselves as being 'spiritual, but not religious'? Or someone being described as 'a person of faith', without it really being clear what their faith is in? But Paul doesn't leave faith floating like some ethereal cloud of mush. He pins it down, because faith has to be faith in something, doesn't it. And Paul knows that God is really at work among them because their faith is in Christ Jesus, Messiah Jesus, King Jesus, risen from the dead Jesus. That's who they're leaning all their weight on.

But that's not all he saw – he also saw their love for all the saints. You see, genuine faith in Christ Jesus is not about having your theology all nailed down, and knowing the Bible inside out and then using that to trample over others. Genuine faith in Christ is always worked out in love for his people. As Jesus himself said, *the* mark of true disciples is their love for one another.

But by nature, we bend in on ourselves, don't we? By nature we're self-focused and self-centred. But when God begins his work in us, he begins to bend us outward, in love for others, and especially to our fellow Christians. That's why Paul says of them in v8, that it's 'your love in the Spirit' that he's heard about – because only God's Spirit can work this in us. And it's a love, Paul says in v4, that's for '*all* the saints.' I mean, when God's at work in your life,you just can't have a petty, party spirited mentality, can you – he's going to work a love in your heart for *all* his people, not just those you naturally gravitate to.

And before you become a Christian, you start off thinking Christians are weird. But then you become one – you put your faith in Christ Jesus and, weirdly, you

begin to like and love and serve his weird people. It's the hallmark that he's at work in your life.

But the third hallmark is hope: v5, 'the hope laid up for you in heaven.' And fascinatingly, Paul says that your faith in Christ, your total leaning on him, and your love for his people, are because of, they flow from your heavenly hope. That it's what God has planned and stored up for you in eternity that becomes the wellspring of faith and love now.

Now think about that. You see, you might think that living for your eternal hope, fixed on the life to come, will create an escapist mentality, that you can be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. But Paul says otherwise, he says your eternal hope becomes the fuel for faith and love in the now. You see, when you know that this life isn't it: that money and position and status aren't the true riches, and this life isn't the final judgement – but that judgement is to come, and Christ and never-ending communion with him and never-ending joy and justice and righteousness, in and for eternity, are the reward, then it frees you to live and love and risk down here, including how you treat others.

You see, if your hope is on earth, and you think this is it, you'll likely use people. And you'll only really mix with, and help, and love those who love you or who can help you get ahead, and achieve your dream. But when your hope is in heaven you can love and serve others even when it costs you.

So, Paul can thank God for his work in these men and women, because he knows that to really thrive in life isn't a matter of adding this thing or that experience to your life. It comes when God does his faith, hope, and love work in your life.

But how does he do that?

**The Good News That Makes It All Possible**

When you're faced with other voices suggesting that what you've heard and experienced isn't really enough, it must have been tempting to wonder whether Epaphras had sold them short: was what he told them really right?

So Paul tells them, v5, 'Of this [their eternal hope and the faith and love that flow from it] you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel.'

And that's how God has been working among them. Not through a technique of self-improvement, but through the message of truth – because, ultimately, we all live by what we really believe to be true, don't we? What you believe to be true fundamentally affects how you live and what you worship, doesn't it?.

But the problem is that we're often much less concerned about what's really true and much more concerned about whether or not it works for me: does it make my life better? Does it make me feel happier? Will it help me find a parking spot? But when it starts requiring something of me, then I'm not so interested. As John Ortberg says, we want God to be useful, we don't want him to be a nuisance.

But Paul says the way God works in your life is through the truth of the gospel. Through the one great, life-transforming story of the good news of all that God has done for us in Jesus' life and death and resurrection. It's why Paul says in v6, that they 'understood the grace of God in truth.' Because the gospel is all about God's grace. It's not about what we do for God but what he has done for us; it's not about our commitment to him but his commitment to us. It's not about what we must give up for him, but what Christ gave up for us, and emptied himself, that we might be filled. And he does it all so that our sins can be forgiven, and our shame wiped away; that now we can call God, *Abba, Father* and his Spirit fills us, and he takes hold of us and gives us a hope and a future.

And it's through that good news that faith, love and hope are worked into your life, Paul says.

And that's not just good news for you, it's good news for everyone. As Paul says in v6 'in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing.' Now, if these Colossians had people coming from east and west telling them that if they really wanted to be enlightened, or saved, or filled, what they really needed was this or that, they might wonder 'well, if it works for them, who am I to say otherwise?' And today, when your neighbour is a Muslim, and your work colleague's a Hindu, the idea of universal truth has a hard time gaining traction doesn't? And besides, to say 'this is the truth and Jesus is the only way' makes you sound so intolerant. And yet Paul says, across the world the good news is growing. And it still is.

You see, of all world views, the Christian gospel is arguably less destructive and more flexible to different cultures than anything else on offer – including secularism, because it has the power to both critique and put down roots in multiple different cultures. If you think about it, both Hinduism and Buddhism largely remain rooted in a certain culture, and in Islam you can only really hear the true words of Allah if you can read Arabic. But as Lamin Sanneh, a former muslim and Gambian African theologian at Yale University has said, the first language of Christianity wasn't Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic, it was *translation*. And of Christianity's spread in Africa he writes, 'Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans, not re-made Europeans' – because it understood their need for an invincible saviour, and the reality of the supernatural and spiritual evil. Stuff secularism can never understand. But along with that, the gospel gave them the insight and the power to challenge their own cultures and traditions without removing them from them.

And so Paul could say then, and we can say now, that across the world, the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing – because it's truth and good news for everyone. And they learned it from Epaphras, and others learned it from Paul, or Peter, and I first heard it from Mike Gouldstone, my physics teacher when I was 17, and you learned it from whoever you learned it.

But whoever you learned it from: it's God's message of grace in the Lord Jesus. And it's through that that you can know a depth of life, of faith and love and hope, and an identity, beyond anything the world can offer.