

# TALK 1.

## INTRODUCTION - OVERVIEW OF THE LETTER

### Anniversary reminders

Marriage pledges renewed

Christian believers and anniversary reminders

Sometimes we need “anniversary” reminders of our vows to the Lord (and of the Lord’s vows to us).

Paul’s letter to Colossians is a kind of ten year ‘anniversary card’

In the 10 years since the Colossians first heard the gospel, they had begun to add beliefs and practices to ‘improve’ their faith (Col 2:16ff):

1. Doctrines about ‘elemental spiritual forces:’ mystical experiences to enhance worship
2. Time-honored traditions: Jewish food laws / festivals
3. Rigorous moral regimes designed to make them more focused / disciplined.

When Paul heard about these additions, he wrote to the Colossians, calling them back to basics by restating Christ’s vows to them, and calling on them to reciprocate.

### **If the fullness of God is in Christ, all who have Him are full to overflowing**

The Colossians (and today’s Christians) don’t need more doctrine, traditions, mystical experiences or moral regimes. They just need the One proclaimed in the Gospel.

The connection between God’s fullness in Christ and our fullness in Him is a golden thread through the letter (1:9, 1:19, 1:25, 2:2, 2:9, 4:12).

As Paul puts it in Col 3:9-11 “new self being renewed in image of its Creator”

- Humanity is intended for God’s glory
- Humanity has fallen short of God’s glory
- Christ is the fullness of God’s glory.

### **1) GREETING** - Paul begins with a customary greeting (Col 1:1-2)

#### 1.1. Not just Paul’s letter

Paul’s *and Timothy’s* letter to the Colossians

Paul happily honored others: at end of letter (Col 4:7-9) he honors Tychicus and Onesimus (former slave) with the task of giving the apostolic update

#### 1.2 Paul wishes two things for the Colossians: i) grace and ii) peace

‘Grace’ is not just the first word of blessing in the letter; it’s also the last (Col 4:18)

‘Peace’ with God is the theme of Col 1:20; ‘peace with each other’ (Col 3:15)

### **2) THANKSGIVING** - what he’s been thanking God for (Col 1:3-8)

#### 2.1. Paul’s prayers for the recipients of his letters generally

Many of Paul’s letters open by telling the recipients how he’s praying for them and these opening prayers usually contain the key themes of the rest of the letter.

In other words, Paul doesn’t introduce his themes as an essayist; he prays his themes as a pastor.

2.2 In this letter, Paul thanks God that the Colossians embraced the same gospel as the rest of the world

2.3 Classic Pauline triad: “faith, hope, & love” (Col 1:5) (cf 1 Cor 13:13, 1 Thess 1:2-3)

Faith/hope/love is Paul’s way of thinking about the whole Xian life:

Faith in what X has done in past,

Love for all in present,

Hope for future kingdom.

2.3 Paul is ratifying the Colossians as sound Christians, he drives the point home in Col 1:6

Paul has some critical things to say about ‘additions’ to Gospel later but he first thanks God that the Colossians have accepted the true Gospel.

2.4 Strategically, Paul is also setting up the fact that the solution to the Colossians’ problem is a return to the basics of:

Simple faith, hope, love and trust in the ‘gospel’ (probably why Paul alludes to their conversion in Col 1:7).

Almost always in the Christian life, the solution to our problems—ethics, doctrine, experience—are resolved by a greater realization of the basics (not ‘advancing’).

**3) PETITION** - what he has been asking God for on their behalf (Col 1: 9-14)

3.1 Fill/fullness

Two kinds of ‘fullness’: i) knowledge (v.9b) & ii) lifestyle (vv.10-11)

Colossians are tempted by extra sources of knowledge as well as extra aids for Christian living.

3.2 In Christ we have full spiritual wisdom and full power for life and these two are inseparable:

Right knowledge of God leads to right conduct toward others and good theology results in “good work” (Col 1:10)

For Paul, **THE** good work is love (Col 3:14)

How many Christians are growing in the ‘knowledge of God’ but failing to bear fruit in ‘every good work’?

**4) REASSURANCE** - Colossians already have all that they need to flourish (Col 1:11-14)

4.1 Paul’s transition from prayer to his reassurance

For Paul, the ongoing Christian life is powered by God. It’s not divine ‘grace’ to get in, then human works to carry on.

And nor is Paul saying that because of this divine power working in us we will eventually attain qualification.

The Colossians (and us) have already qualified (v.12).

Christian living is not about attaining mercy through growth in theological conviction and social commitment. Instead, the beautiful simplicity of Christian faith is about responding to the mercy already secured with a thankful exertion to know God better and to love people more

**5) THE SONG IN COLOSSIANS**

**If the fullness of God is in Christ, all who have Him are full to overflowing.**

Having 'greeted' the Colossians, given 'thanks' for them, 'prayed', and 'reassured' them, Paul breaks into a song of praise to Christ's lordship in creation/redemption (Col 1:15)

Col 1:15-20 is a poem, a song, in fact, the "theme song" of the letter, a hymn to **Christ as God**.

"The sum total of their guilt or error was no more than the following. They had met regularly before dawn on a determined day, and sung antiphonally [in alternate groups] a hymn to Christ **as to a god**" (Trajan, *Letters* 10.96).

From the beginning, Christians worshipped Jesus not just as a man, but as the incarnate Lord of creation

#### a) **SONG OF CREATION** - Jesus in pre-history (Col 1:15-18a)

##### 1.1 First title: Image of invisible God (Col 1:15)

Jesus mirrors his Father in the role of Creator

##### 1.2 Second title: Firstborn over all creation (Col 1:15)

'firstborn' was a title for 'leader' in the ancient world

Psalm 89:20-27 uses the word 'firstborn' to describe David

##### 1.3 Unpacking the titles (Col 1:16)

This verse declares Jesus to be both the agent and purpose of creation

Colossians had added a speculative adoration of angelic beings to Christianity but here they are reminded that *everything* is relegated to Christ

##### 1.4 A Theory of Everything (Col 1:17)

The Lord is "before all things, and in him all things hold together."

New atheists speak of the 'Christian God' as just another competitor in the endless roll call of gods through history. These gods are all supernatural creatures within creation But the biblical God is outside of creation and outside of time. Otherwise, he could not be the source of space-time.

"Beliefs regarding fairies are beliefs about a certain kind of object that may or may not exist within the world, and such beliefs have much the same sort of intentional shape and rational content as beliefs regarding one's neighbors over the hill or whether there are such things as black swans. Beliefs regarding God concern the source and ground and end of all reality, the unity and existence of every particular thing and of the totality of all things, the ground of the possibility of anything at all. Fairies and gods, if they exist, occupy something of the same conceptual space as organic cells, photons, and the force of gravity, and so the sciences might perhaps have something to say about them, if a proper medium for investigating them could be found.

... But all the classical theological arguments regarding the order of the world assume just the opposite: that God's creative power can be seen in the rational coherence of nature as a perfect whole; that the universe was not simply the factitious product of a supreme intellect but the unfolding of an omnipresent divine wisdom or logos ... According to the classical arguments, universal rational order—not just this or that particular instance of complexity—is what speaks of the divine mind ... (David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. Yale University Press, 2013, 33-38)

The existence of God provides a powerful explanation of why there is something rather than nothing, why the universe has the character of rational order instead of

chaos, and why the universe has produced minds like ours that are able to ponder these matters. Fairies, on the other hand, explain nothing.

### 1.5 Who is the master of the Colossian church? (Col 1:18a)

The master is neither a local deity nor some angelic being of Colossian folklore but the one through whom and for whom all creation exists: HE is the head of church

The idea of adding to Jesus (as the Colossians were tempted to do) is utterly absurd

## **b) SONG OF REDEMPTION - Jesus in history (Col 1:18b-20)**

### 2.1 First title: the 'Beginning'

Here Jesus is being named the originator of a new beginning; a new act of creation that we call 'salvation'

### 2.2 Second title: 'firstborn' from among the dead

refers to Jesus' resurrection: an event which demonstrates God's ability/intention to redeem/recreate

In both *creation* and *new creation* Jesus is supreme

### 2.3 Unpacking these titles (Col 1:19 and 20)

The word fullness/fill and theme song occurs again here: whether in Creation or Redemption, God's fullness is found nowhere else than in Jesus.

In the history of Jesus, God took on our frail form: subjecting himself to all the environmental/social decay we experience.

The incarnation, wonderful to Christians, is blasphemous to Muslims

But Jesus came to earth in human form not merely to identify with us (as a consoling friend), he came to represent us before the judgement seat and, as our representative, die the death we deserve

In his death on the cross, the one in whom God dwelt fully accepted the judgment we deserve, so we could be reconciled to God (Col 1:20)

The purpose of the divine incarnation was a divine amnesty

God is in business forgiving & forgetting

**Whether in Creation or in Redemption, Christ has the fullness, and all who have him are full to overflowing. Jesus is our theme song.**

## **c) SONG COMMENTARY - stressing staying put in Christ (Col 1:21-23)**

### 3.1 Trusting the received Gospel

No matter what our former 'evil behaviour', if we trust Christ we are 'holy', 'without blemish', 'free from accusation' but only if we continue in this dependence. (Col 1:21-23)

It is not about trying harder nor doing more, but trusting the gospel they had already received.

### 3.2 Preparation for the central content of the letter in the next chapters

false teachers have appeared in the Lycus River Valley (Col 2:8 )

Paul wants the Colossians to come back to their wedding vows (as it were) i.e. to recall Christ's pledge to them and their pledge to him

### 3.3 Parallels between ancient Colossians and modern Christians

3.3.1 Mysticism - looking for fresh experiences of worship

3.3.2 Traditionalism - good as it does point to Christ but it can be a substitute for knowing Christ

3.3.3 Moralism - need to do more good, or good deeds become a substitute for evangelism/worship

3.3.4 Intellectualism - can inspire zeal for novelty of thought instead of faithfulness in worship

3.3.4 Apathy - not so much 'adding' to Jesus, as 'subtracting' from his glory

## CONCLUSION

Turn your eyes upon Jesus  
Look full in His wonderful face,  
And the things of earth  
will grow strangely dim,  
In the light of His glory and grace

**If the fullness of God is in Christ, all who have Him are full to overflowing.**

## TALK 2

### INTRODUCTION

#### Benjamin Franklin and his moral regime

"It caused me so much painful attention, and my faults vexed me so much, and I'd made so little progress and amendment, and had such frequent relapses, that I was almost ready to give up the attempt." (B. Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*)

Walter Isaacson, in his book *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* said that late in life, Franklin felt let down by his own failings, and those of his deist friends.

#### The Colossians and their moral regime

The Christians of Lycus River Valley in AD62 became enamoured with their own innovative external regime to mend the human condition.

#### 1) THE APOSTLE AND HIS GOSPEL (Col 1:24 to 15-2:5)

1.1 For Paul, ministry is all about Christ – suffering for Him and preaching Him (Col 1:24)

The words "Christ's afflictions" don't refer to Christ's death on the cross but to his ongoing suffering in his body the church; persecutions of the church are 'afflictions of Christ' (Acts 9:4-5 and 15-16)

1.2 Everything is about Christ (Col 1:25 and 28)

Paul suffers for Christ because he preaches Christ.

Christ is the content, Christ is the means, Christ is the goal.

1.3 Paul is working for the Colossians (Col 2:1-3)

1.4 Pivot point (Col 2:4-5): someone is causing trouble

#### 2) THE INFLUENCER AND HIS PHILOSOPHY (Col 2:8-23)

2.1 The Influencer is a 'Jewish new ager'

The Influencer's philosophy concerns human 'traditions' and the spiritual 'forces'

2.2 "elemental spiritual forces of this world" refers to the Greek concept of 'the elements of the cosmos' (Col 2:8)

Many ancient Greeks/Romans believed the universe was made up of completely unpredictable, capricious forces—the ‘elements of the cosmos’.

The goal of religion (and some philosophy) was to placate these forces/elements so one could navigate life with as few bad encounters with them as possible.

An inscription, discovered in the Apollo temple at Hierapolis records the ‘oracle’ that the delegation received. It’s all about appeasing the capricious forces of the world:

You are not alone in being injured by the destructive miseries of a deadly plague, but many are the cities and peoples which are grieved at the wrathful displeasures of the gods. I bid you avoid the painful anger of the deities by libations and feasts and fully accomplished sacrifices. Firstly then to Earth, the mother of all, bring a cow from the herd into her hall, and sacrifice it with sweet-smelling incense. Secondly, sacrifice an unfeasted offering to the Aither and to the gods of the heavens, all sweet smelling with incense. To Demeter, as your custom is, and to the gods of the underworld, perform rites with victims free from pollution, and to the heroes in the ground pour drink-offerings in accordance with the precepts. Also around all your city gates consecrate precincts for a holy statue of the Clarian Phoebus equipped with his bow, which destroys diseases, as though shooting with his arrow from afar at the unfertile plague. Moreover when after you have wrought appeasement and the evil powers have departed, I instruct your boys with maidenly musicians to come together accompanied by libations. If you perform what it is seemly for god-fearing men to accomplish, never will you be in painful confusions, but with more wealth and better safety. (H. W. Parke, *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor*. London, Croom Helm, 1984, 153-55)

### 2.3 Paul’s answer to the Influencer (Col 2:9 and 10)

Why would you chase human tradition when you already have the **fullness of God** in Christ?

### 2.4 Circumcision and baptism just human signs of God’s salvation for Israel (Col 2:11 and 12)

For Paul it is all about: “faith in the working of God” (Col 2:12)

### 2.5 Metaphor 1. Sins have been “nailed to the cross” (Col 2:13 and 14)

“the charge of our legal indebtedness” refers to a handwritten note of debt, duly signed, which put a person in the red

### 2.5 Metaphor 2. Christ has disarmed the powers and authorities (Col 2:13-15)

The language in these verses is especially evocative to ancient readers as it is the jargon of a Roman victory parade.

When an emperor vanquished a foreign army, the prisoners of war (and all the booty) were paraded down the main street of Rome to rapturous applause. “public spectacle” and “triumph” (v.15) are exactly the terminology used.

And victory comes through a CROSS

**If the fullness of God is in Christ, all who have Him are full to overflowing.**

### 2.6 Paul’s rapid-fire denunciation of all additions he knows the Influencer is proposing.(Col 2:16-23)

Paul is saying that, in light of Christ’s majesty & grace, the additions are all totally unnecessary.

The additions are a fusion of Jewish custom, invocation of angels and pagan mysticism

Marian: an example from ancient Galilee

Ancient life was a life of great anxiety: negotiate 'powers of the cosmos' through ritual, angels, incantations, moral regimes.

Into this world, the gospel of the reconciliation of all things through the cross of the Lord of heaven and earth was a breath of fresh air and the very breath of life.

## CONCLUSION

### Patricia's journey to Christ

"Suppose for several days in succession—preferably at the same time each day—you go to some quiet place where you can be alone and uninterrupted. Take a pencil and a piece of paper with you. Ask God to show you any unconfessed and unforgiven sins out of your past, including those half-forgotten memories which you have pushed down into the subconscious mind. Don't be afraid of the word 'sin'. It's a sturdy, old-fashioned word. It's an honest word. Then you take your list, all the things of which you are ashamed, and you claim for yourself that wonderful promise that "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all righteousness."

When every uncomfortable memory has been confessed before Christ, he will keep his promise and remove those sins completely. He will take away the guilt and shame. You will make you feel clean again. And you may then **tear up or burn your list**—and, by the **grace of God**, begin life anew." (Peter Marshall, *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master*, pp 159 and 160)

Christian life isn't about advancing beyond Christ: it's about "continuing to live in him" as Lord'.

Perhaps above all it is about a life "overflowing with thankfulness" (for all God has done in Christ)

## TALK 3.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Moral record keeping

Benjamin Franklin, Patricia, Nick

The Colossians needed to be reminded of what is effective for living the Christian life.

#### 1) JESUS DEATH AND LIFE (Col 3:1-5a)

##### 1.1 Beautiful logic (Col 3:1-4)

Christ died, Christ raised, Christ appeared. Therefore, you've died to sin, you've been raised to new life and you will appear with him in glory.

The final realisation of Christian life is in the future as only then are we fully free of power of sin.

##### 1.2 Direct our thoughts and affections to Christ and his kingdom (Col 3:1-2)

##### 1.3 Put to death the old life and put on the new (Col 3:5)

What the mind/heart rehearse, behaviour often follows.

**Christian living is the grateful outworking of Christ's gracious work in us.**

#### 2) PUTTING TO DEATH TO OUR OLD SELF (Col 3:5a-11)

##### 2.1 You're dead; live like it !!!! (Col 3:3)

You put to death certain things because, in God's eyes, you're already dead to them

## 2.2 Vices can be divided into 2 groups - i) physical ii) relational

Christianity is 'conservative' in private ethics and 'progressive' in social ethics.

### i) physical sins are to be put down (Col 3:5)

Terms "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires" are all related but used to close loopholes

Greed is a lust for 'stuff' (Col 3:5b)

Paul calls it 'idolatry' (false god) because greed is reverencing 'created things' in the place of the Creator.

### ii) relational sins (Col 3:6-10)

'Anger', 'rage', 'malice': again closing loopholes

'Slander', 'filthy language' (= obscenities directed at someone more than 'swearing')

'lying' (Col 3:9)

Lying wasn't universally denounced in Greco-Roman societies in the way it is in our heavily Judeo-Christian society especially if a lie was told to someone beneath 'rank' / outside social / ethnic group. This is probably why Paul adds verse 11.

Remember the logic of all this (Col 3: 9-10)

**Christian living is the grateful outworking of Christ's gracious work in us.**

## 3) PUTTING ON OUR NEW LIFE (Col 3:12-17)

### 3.1 'Therefore' . (Col 3:12a)

You have been re-clothed in God's eyes (clean, dazzling); now live like it

**Christian living is the grateful outworking of Christ's gracious work in us.**

### 3.2 Christ's character in us (Col 3:12-13)

'Compassion': a deep feeling provoked by the needs of others

'Kindness': a determination to treat people beyond what is merely just.

'Humility': not a low view of self but the noble choice to regard others above yourself

'Gentleness': refusal to use power against others (strength, beauty, intelligence, money, etc.)

'Patience': willingness to put up with people's foibles, idiosyncrasies

'Bear with each other': true tolerance is the capacity to show kindness to those you disagree with.

'Forgive': to release a petitioner from their moral indebtedness against you ("as the Lord forgave you").

### 3.3 Love, the heart of character of Jesus (Col 3:14)

agapē, 'love', seeking the good of other without regard to affections or actions.

The logic of our love is clear: grateful outworking of God's love for us in Christ.

### 3.3 A life of gratitude/thanksgiving (Col 3:15-17)

Singing is not separate from Christian living At heart: grateful lips from a grateful life

### 3.4 Behind all our work to put to death vices and put on virtue is God's work in us (Col 3:10)

Not 'you are renewing' but 'being renewed'

Paul has repeatedly emphasised God's work in us (1:29, 2:12, 2:13, 2:19)

Christ is in us by Spirit to mysteriously move us to put off vice and put on virtue

Just gratefully choose to be godly; and watch God renew you ...

**Christian living is the grateful outworking of Christ's gracious work in us, both objectively in the past and mysteriously in the present.**

## CONCLUSION

### Mockery of criticism of Christian living

Alan Dershowitz argues that Christian ethics is motivated by avoiding hell and earning heaven. Therefore, it's selfish, not ethical (*Letters to a Young Lawyer (Basic Books, 2001, 193–200)*)

"Do you really mean to tell me the only reason you try to be good is to gain God's approval and reward, or to avoid his disapproval and punishment? That's not morality. That's just sucking up." (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, 2006, 226).

"If a person is responding to the needs of others because they assume God will approve of their good behaviour rather than simply because those people are in need, is this not a rather tarnished, diminished version of goodness?" (Hugh Mackay, *The Good Life*. Macmillan, 2013, 186-187.)

Christian living is motivated neither by reward nor punishment but by gratitude

We live ethically (in theory) as the **grateful outworking of God's gracious work in us**

### Joseph Samuels – the man they couldn't hang

"May the grateful remembrance of these events direct his future course!" (*Gazette*)

When you know God's reprieve (record of our sins nailed to cross), grateful remembrance directs our future course.

Grateful remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection in which we died to sin and have been made alive makes some things irrational (sexual immorality, slander, rage, lying ...) and some things perfectly rational (Christ's own virtues of compassion, humility, forgiveness, and love)

And, toward this rational goal we are "being renewed (by God) in image of Christ."

**Christian living is the grateful outworking of Christ's gracious work in us.**

## TALK 4.

**In many areas of life it is possible to become so introspective we begin to lose perspective.**

Examples: new relationship, first child, Westpac (bank in Australia), churches

Churches too often become inward focused and forget that the church is one of the few entities in the world that exists for non-members as much as members.

The church in Colossae could easily have become such a church.

Paul reminds them:

**If the fullness of God is in Christ, all who have Him are full to overflowing.**

**Christian living is the grateful outworking of Christ's gracious work in us.** And Paul now lifts his/their gaze from 'theology' to 'public Christianity'

### 1) HORIZON OF THE HOUSEHOLD (Col 3:18-4:1)

#### 1.1 Living on a more public horizon

Christians are to honour their wider household: wives → husbands, husbands → wives,

1.2 Submission and slavery. **Submission** and love are both ordinary Christian virtues, which all Christians show to all. Yet, in the wisdom of God there is something about the relational dynamic of a marriage that flourishes when—within the broader Christian ethic of mutual love and submission—the husband reflects deeply on how to love his wife sacrificially and the wife reflects deeply on how to respect/submit to her husband. Submission can **never** lead to abusive relationships. When Paul, and Peter, ask **slaves** to honour and obey their masters (1 Peter 2:18; Colossians 3:22, Ephesians 6:5), they are not mandating, teaching, or even endorsing slavery as a system. It's about how to cope within existing structures they couldn't change at that time.

1.3 Are we honouring our wider family, especially those who don't believe?

### 2) HORIZON OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH (Col 4:7-18)

#### 2.1 Mentioning special people

2.2 Greetings from other famous missionaries (Col 4: 10-15)

2.3 Connect with the church at Laodicea 20kms away (Col 4: 16)

2.4 Colossians/we are to lift their/our sights out of their/our internal disputes to issues of the wider church.

### 3) HORIZON OF THE MISSION (Col 4:2-6)

#### 3.1 Prayer (Col 4:2-4)

Prayer is an upwards activity addressed to God with 'thankfulness' and an outward-looking activity not an inward, private activity. Of all the things Paul urges his churches to pray for in his letters, prayer for mission is the most common. And of all the activities Paul urges us to do to reach out to others with gospel, the most frequent one is prayer!

#### 3.2 Lifestyle (Col 4:5)

Paul wants us to walk in wisdom (knowing Christ and his ways) toward (implying full engagement with) outsiders. We are to seize opportunities to do good as Christian living is not just 'politeness'; it's active service! Confucius famously said: "Do not inflict on others what you yourself would not wish done to you." (Confucius, Analects 15.23.). Jesus: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31) The difference in these two ideas is the difference between deciding not to punch you in the nose and deciding to build a hospital.

### 3.3 Conversation (Col 4:6)

God can use all our words to convey His grace which is why our words are to be “filled with grace, seasoned with salt”. Answer everyone with grace because the manner of our replies says as much about what we believe as the content.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Reminders**

If the fullness of God is in Christ, all who have him are full to overflowing.

Christian living is grateful outworking of Christ’s gracious work in us

### **Now it’s time to look up and out**

To give honour to our wider household, perhaps to our extended families.

To pay attention to the universal church where the needs are great, but where amazing things are happening all around the world

To focus on the gospel mission praying for the work of the gospel, seizing opportunities to do grace to others, never failing to speak up with grace

To let the grace we’ve received overflow in our lives and words of grace

Paul’s final word to the Colossians is the word that animates all of this and compels us to look up and look out toward the world “Grace ...” v.18