

## **“HOLY AND FAITHFUL”**

### **2. Living a worthy life**

#### ***Colossians 1:1-14***

If you were with us last week, you'll know that we're starting a new series of sermons looking at the letter St Paul write to the Christians in the town of Colossae in the Lycus Valley, in what is now Turkey. They're a bunch of fairly new believers whom Paul wants to encourage and inspire. He refers to them as "*holy and faithful*" and he is very keen that they should remain like that, people of integrity who stick to the truth of the Gospel that they have heard through Paul's friend Epaphras. Paul's main concern in this letter is that they should be sure of what they believe, particularly in a context where there were many competing philosophies and belief systems, and, above all, he wants to help them keep Jesus at the very centre of all that they are and all that they do. That's clearly something that is still very relevant today as we try to remain true to what we believe when there are so many other ideas and ideologies clamouring for our attention, so many competing truth claims, and so many voices telling us that we should be thinking differently.

Paul begins this letter in the standard way. Letters were a kind of literary form in the culture of Paul's day and people took a great deal of care over the way they set them out. (If you ever did Classics at school, you'll have come across such letters from people like Cicero, Pliny and others.) He begins by introducing himself – an apostle – and his friend and colleague, Timothy. In the light of some of the things he'll be saying in the letter, it's good that this comes from Paul, a Jew, and Timothy, a Greek: diversity in the church was as important then as it is now. And he greets his readers as "*holy and faithful*" – a compliment at the very start, which gets them on his side immediately and is very important as Paul himself has not visited Colossae himself.

Classical letters then usually have a short section of thanks. The writer might say something along the lines of how grateful he is for the friendship of the person he's writing to, or give thanks for some event that has recently occurred – a wedding or a house move or a successful journey or similar. If you look at Paul's letters in the New Testament (with the exception of *Galatians*), you'll see that he usually gives thanks for the faith that his readers have in God – and that's just what he does here. He says that he thanks God for their faith, love and hope – the three qualities which he so often mentions – which are a response to the Gospel which they encountered through the preaching of his friend Epaphras. And he encourages them by telling them that they are a part of a growing world-wide movement (v6 "*The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.*") It's always good to remind ourselves that we are not just some isolated little group of people in Middle England, but part of an amazing universal body of people who follow Jesus Christ.

That's all good stuff – uplifting and positive, as Paul always is about the progress of the Gospel – but he goes on to say that he is continuing to pray for them. They're in a good place and doing well, but there is so much more in store, so much more that they can enjoy. So Paul says *“we have not stopped praying for you”* and he tells them exactly what he is praying for them as this is very much what he is wanting to expand on in this letter.

He is praying that God will *“fill [them] with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives”*. He wants them to know what it is that they believe and for that to affect them in every way. They particularly need this knowledge, wisdom and understanding in their situation in Colossae as the people who are leading them away from Jesus are doing so through philosophies and ideas that need careful thinking about. Paul emphasises that here – although he mentions such things in his other letters, too – because that is the particular danger that they are facing. He doesn't want them to be deceived by false preachers and teachers who confuse them with clever arguments.

That is always a danger for the followers of Jesus if they haven't really grasped what it is they believe. And that is why it is so important for us today to continue to think about our faith and to do all that we can to build it up. We need to keep reading the Bible, the repository of teaching about God and his world and the difference Jesus makes to it all. We need to share together and learn together – in housegroups and study groups and so on – so that we can strengthen each other's faith and draw on one another's insights. We need to learn from others as we read books, use Bible notes, reflect on sermons and so on. Paul wants his readers – which now includes us – to do all they can to understand what they believe and to continue learning so that they are not deceived by what he calls in 2:8, *“hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.”*

But that could make all this sound very dry and intellectual, as if being a Christian was like being part of a debating society or some kind of academic study group. The 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator and scholar J B Lightfoot, in his remarks on this chapter, writes *“The end of all knowledge, the Apostle would say, is conduct”*. And a more contemporary scholar, R P Martin, says, *“Paul is appealing to his converts to rise to the level of their profession as Christ's people”*. In other words, Paul is reminding us that the Gospel is not all about head knowledge, it's about “walking the talk”.

In fact, that's exactly what he says here. He tells the Colossians that he is praying for their knowledge, wisdom and understanding *“so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work” (1:10)*. That phrase *“live a life”* is the Greek word from which we get our English word “peripatetic” and it means “to walk”. We are to walk, to journey through life, in a way

which expresses just what we believe about Jesus. Our beliefs are to be expressed in “*every good work*”. We cannot just sit round thinking about it all, even talking about it all – it has to be lived out. That is what really pleases God: people practising what they preach, people doing what they say, people committed to actions not just words.

In what ways should that happen, then? How can we truly please God? Well, Paul gives a few pointers here. Firstly, as we’ve just mentioned, we should be “*bearing fruit in every good work*”. We need to have something to show for all this belief and all this knowledge. The *Letter of James* later in the New Testament has a great deal to say about this, but it all boils down to the fact that this Gospel is no good to us if we do not get on and live it out. If we say we believe in Jesus, then we have to show that we believe in his teaching, too, and that is all about the way we actually live our lives, the way what we do affects others, the way in which we try to imitate Jesus in all that we do, not just what we say.

That will be helped by “*growing in the knowledge of God*”. Now that’s not just about learning more about him, but about deepening our relationship with him, through prayer and through reading his word and listening for his voice. Our relationship should be “*growing*” – developing, deepening, not staying static. We need to become more and more aware of God at work in our own lives day by day. And that will gradually become more and more obvious as we become more and more like the Jesus we claim to follow.

To help us in that, we need to pray that we will be “*strengthened with all power*”, says Paul. That word for “*power*” there is the word which is so often used in the New Testament to refer to the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to be constantly praying for the help of God’s Holy Spirit as we try to walk in God’s ways each day, asking that he will give us all the resources that we need to do his will. And, indeed, we need to be praying that for each other, as Paul is doing here for the Colossians.

And he is praying for that in their situation specifically so that they will have “*great endurance and patience*”. This is about keeping going, about what Eugene Peterson used as a title for one of his books – a phrase, believe it or not, taken from Nietzsche – “*A long obedience in the same direction*”. But not as some kind of enforced route march – rather as a joyful walk in the presence of God himself. Peterson brings that out in his translation of this verse in *The Message*: “*We pray that you’ll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy*”. We could probably all do with a bit of that now, so let’s pray that God will help us all to experience that power so that we can truly “*live a life worthy of the Lord*”.

You see, as Paul goes on to say here, we are already “*qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light*”. God has already touched our lives and made us his own. We are already his people. What Paul is saying here is that we should now get on and live like it. In his commentary on these verses, Tom Wright says “*Those who are ‘in the Lord’ must live appropriately*”. Yes, you need to think about what you believe. Yes, you need to develop in your understanding of what God has done and is doing. Yes, you need to keep reading the Bible and learning all you can. But all that is useless if you don’t allow it to affect your attitudes and behaviour. Whatever else you may take from this letter, remember this – as Paul says in some way or other in all his letters – you need to “*live a life worthy of the Lord*”. God’s done all the hard work in Jesus – accept that and follow where he leads you.

And next time, we’ll let Paul remind us of exactly who this Jesus is and what he has done for us that is so amazing and so worth living for. Don’t lose sight of him and make sure you keep him at the centre. That’s what will make the difference as you try to walk in his way this week.

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Firstly, we should be *"bearing fruit in every good work"*. We need to have something to show for all this belief and all this knowledge. If we say we believe in Jesus, then we have to show that we believe in his teaching, too, and that is all about the way we actually live our lives, the way what we do affects others, the way in which we try to imitate Jesus in all that we do, not just what we say.

That will be helped by *"growing in the knowledge of God"*. That is about deepening our relationship with him, through prayer and through reading his word and listening for his voice. Our relationship should be *"growing"* – developing, deepening, not staying static.

To help us in that, we need to pray that we will be *"strengthened with all power"*, says Paul. And he is praying for that in their situation specifically so that they will have *"great endurance and patience"*.

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#### **For reflection and discussion**

- 1) Our prayers for others usually concentrate on "crisis" situations. How can we develop our prayer life to pray as Paul does for the Colossian Christians?
- 2) What do you understand by *"growing in the knowledge of God"* (v10)?
- 3) How do you try to cultivate the power of the Spirit in your life? Does it work?
- 4) How can we maintain the right balance between head knowledge and heart experience, living out the things we believe?
- 5) In what situations do you find you most need *"endurance and patience"*? What are you doing about it?