

Captivated by Christ

Seeing Jesus clearly in the book of Colossians

Richard Chin

*"This book is a terrific resource for seekers, new believers,
and long-time Christians alike." – Kevin DeYoung*

No fads. Just the fullness of Christ.

No silver bullets. Just the sufficiency of Jesus.

No clever philosophies. Just clear proclamation of the one
in whom "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"
are found.

Join pastor and preacher Richard Chin as he seeks
to present you mature in Christ by delivering a clear,
compelling picture of Jesus from the pages of Colossians.

.....

"This is a delightful book—read it and savour it!"

Gary Millar

PRINCIPAL, QUEENSLAND THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

***"Richard's engaging illustrations give a velvety
softness to the hammer that pounds the rich and deep
truths of Colossians into our soul."***

J. Mack Stiles

PASTOR, ERBIL INTERNATIONAL BAPTIST CHURCH, IRAQ

***"A clear, fresh, sparkling commentary, filled with
helpful practical application, which gets to the heart
of the apostle Paul's letter."***

Lindsay Brown

DIRECTOR, FELLOWSHIP OF EVANGELISTS
IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF EUROPE

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Richard Chin has written a guide to the Christian life as presented in Colossians that is—like Paul’s letter—clear and simple, pithy and punchy. The book is compact but powerful. Theology and practical matters are both presented accurately from the text, and steeped in Richard’s own experience of following Christ for years and helping others to do the same. This book is a model for people in their own Bible reading, for small group leaders, and even for preachers as they prepare messages from Colossians. I highly commend it.

Mark Dever

Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC
President, 9marks.org

Richard Chin’s excellent guide to Colossians is written with characteristic pithiness and clarity. He explains the text of Colossians in a way that is understandable and readable. His careful illustration and acute observation enable the reader to see just how and where the teaching of Colossians applies today. Above all else, this book directs the reader to the Lord Jesus Christ in all his fullness. This is what makes the book so valuable. It did me good, and reading it refreshed me in my love for Jesus and appreciation of who he is, and all that he has done.

William Taylor

Rector, St Helen’s, Bishopsgate, London

Richard Chin has given us an engagingly written book, both respectful of God’s word and also continuously applied in a deeply personal way. It helps us all to learn from Colossians.

Peter Jensen

Former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney
General Secretary, GAFCON

I met Richard several years ago at a student ministry conference. I was immediately impressed by his clear, careful and winsome exposition of Scripture. Those same qualities are on display in this excellent treatment of Colossians. Richard offers us personal stories, lessons from history, present-day application, and (most importantly) faithful teaching rooted in words of the Bible. This book is a terrific resource for seekers, new believers and long-time Christians alike.

Kevin DeYoung

Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, NC
Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed
Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC

This book has helped me to see Jesus Christ more clearly from the Bible. Whenever *that* happens, as Christians all over the world discover, God speaks straight into your sinful heart, then comforts you with his forgiveness, helps you by his Spirit to grow in mature Christlikeness, *and* prepares you for the hard road ahead as we follow our crucified Lord to glory.

Richard has turned his series of talks on Colossians into a book that is so readable, you can almost hear him delivering each chapter. Your time in this book is worth it to be captivated by Christ!

Bronwyn Windsor

Lay ministry leader, Sydney

This is a delightful book—read it and savour it! Not only has Richard Chin gained a profound grasp on the rich letter to the Colossians, he has clearly lived it. This is clear, warm-hearted, searingly applied teaching which will both lift us up and bring us down to size, as it presents Christ to us on every page, in order to present us mature in Christ. I cannot recommend *Captivated by Christ* highly enough.

Gary Millar

Principal, Queensland Theological College

Co-author, *Saving Eutychus*

A clear, fresh, sparkling commentary, filled with helpful practical application, which gets to the heart of the apostle Paul's letter—highlighting Jesus Christ's majestic uniqueness and calling all his followers to flesh out his lordship in every sphere of life.

Lindsay Brown

Director, FEUER (Fellowship of Evangelists in the Universities of Europe)

Former General Secretary, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students

I was immediately drawn to *Captivated by Christ* by Richard's warm and winsome writing style. His engaging illustrations give a velvety softness to the hammer that pounds the rich and deep truths of Colossians into our soul. This is a treasure of a book, with helpful sidebars and penetrating questions for small group study. It's a joy to recommend.

J. Mack Stiles

Pastor, Erbil International Baptist Church, Iraq

Author, *Marks of the Messenger*

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Gratefully dedicated to my wife and prayer partner,
Jeanette, and my children, Rachel, Naomi, Grace and
Thomas, and in memory of my late wife, Bronwyn, who is
now at home with Jesus.

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory”
(Psalm 115:1)

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Introduction

In essence, this book began the day my life was turned on its head.

It was July 1983 at a student conference when the speaker asked, “Is Jesus number one in your life?” I knew he was a good number two or three. But he was not number one. Sometime that week, I joyfully received Jesus as my Lord.

Since then, I have journeyed as a son, a father, a widower, a husband (twice over), a church member, a worker, and, above all, as a great sinner with a great Saviour.

But no verses of Scripture describe my life’s desire more closely than Colossians 2:6-7:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

This is what it means to be “mature in Christ” (1:28). But such maturity must involve a clear vision of the Jesus we receive as Lord. Sadly, this clarity can be blurred not only

by deceptive teaching, but also by the air that we breathe. I wonder whether, like me, you have felt the allure of material gain, the appeal of career advancement, the pull of pride, the draw of sexual temptation, the charm of becoming more comfortable, the claim of personal rights in relationships or even a fascination with religious practices—all of which prevent us from seeing Christ clearly.

This is the same air that the Colossians breathed in the first century. That’s why the New Testament letter bearing their name is so worthy of meditation and prayer. The apostle Paul gives you a gloriously clear view of Christ and how to walk in him. And the book in your hands is an attempt to apply his words from Colossians 1:28:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

My overriding concern is to present you “mature in Christ” by proclaiming Jesus from the pages of Colossians. And, as we work systematically through the letter, this will involve as much warning as it does teaching. There are sidebars with further thoughts, discussion questions for more reflection, and ideas for thanksgiving and prayer to bring before our Father after each chapter.

But please ensure that you meditate far more deeply on the New Testament book of Colossians itself than on anything in this book.

No New Testament letter has shaped my life and ministry more than Colossians. As such, this book began when I first received Christ Jesus as my Lord. But *writing* this book began as a series of seven sermons preached at the CMS

Summer School in Katoomba, NSW, Australia, in January 2018. The content of these pages substantially captures what was preached. I am indebted to my wife, Jeanette, for looking over my original sermons, and to Geoff Robson for helping me especially modify them into this book.

May you cherish Christ for his glory in the pages that follow.

1 | The gospel of Christ

Have you ever received mail from someone that you don't know? When that happens, it's usually not very exciting—a discount pizza voucher, a bill or your local elected official telling you how wonderful he or she is.

But in the first century, a fairly unremarkable and unimpressive group of people received a letter from someone they didn't know: a man named Paul, writing his letter to the Colossians.

This group of people met regularly in someone's house—just an ordinary group of people meeting as Christians. They wouldn't have had a slick children's programme or parking attendants or beautifully designed handouts or a band with professionally trained musicians. But they probably sang. They would have read the Old Testament Scriptures, prayed together, and sought to encourage each other as followers of Jesus Christ.

One day, this letter arrived—probably delivered by two men named Tychicus and Onesimus. But this letter wasn't like most of the junk mail that passes through our

letterboxes. It was a letter of such importance that it had to be read aloud, pored over, discussed, analyzed, and preserved. So imagine someone unrolling a scroll as a hush comes over the expectant Colossians, then reading out those opening words:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and
Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at
Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.
(1:1-2)

Who was Timothy?

Timothy was one of Paul's protégés and closest colleagues in gospel ministry. He joined Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 16-20), was sent to the church at Corinth to help them resolve problems (1 Cor 4:17, 16:10), and served as a leader of the church in Ephesus (1 Tim 4:12). They were so close that Paul called Timothy "my true child in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2), and he wrote Timothy two letters—1 and 2 Timothy—to instruct him on how to shape his gospel ministry.

Since he is mentioned in 1:1, did Timothy co-author the letter? Throughout Colossians, it is much more common for the first person singular to be used (e.g. 1:23-2:5, 4:3b-18), with the first person plural only appearing occasionally (e.g. 1:3-14, 4:3a).

Therefore, it seems best to view Paul as the sole author of the letter. However, he was keen to convey just how closely he worked with Timothy—particularly to show that they were mutually encouraged by the Colossians, and that they were mutually committed to praying for them.

Paul had never met these Colossian Christians. Apart from knowing a few people like Tychicus, Onesimus and Epaphras, he'd never even seen them face to face. It was Epaphras, not Paul, who had preached the gospel to them.

So why does Paul write to this particular unimpressive, unremarkable group of people? And what does this letter have to do with us today?

The answer to that question starts with knowing the author. Paul introduces himself as an 'apostle'—literally, a 'sent one'—of Christ Jesus, who chose and sent Paul to be his ambassador. So this letter arrived with the royal stamp of approval. Paul is the official envoy of the King, representing Christ himself.

But unlike the original 12 apostles, who were sent to preach the good news of Jesus to the Jews, Paul was especially sent to the Gentiles. Actually, the word 'Gentiles' is much too weak to capture the scope of Paul's ministry. Paul was especially sent to 'the nations'. He was God's chosen instrument to take the momentous news of Jesus to 'the ends of the earth'—to people from every tribe and nation on earth. As such, even though he had never met them, Paul was the God-appointed apostle to the Colossians, just as he was to the Corinthians and the Ephesians and so many others. He's my apostle. And, if you're a Gentile, he's your apostle.

The risen Jesus sent Paul especially as the *suffering* apostle to the nations. As we'll see throughout this book, part of Paul's role involved "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (1:24) and 'struggling' for all God's people, even those he hadn't seen face to face (2:1). At the very end of the letter, we learn that he was in chains as he wrote (4:18). Their apostle, our apostle, was the *suffering* apostle to the nations.

So we have Paul, the official envoy of King Jesus, writing personally to the Colossians from his prison cell in his role as the royal ambassador to the nations. And he endures great suffering for them.

This is a letter that deserves our attention.

Who are “the saints”?

In Colossians, as in other New Testament letters like Ephesians and 1 Peter, the word ‘saints’ is generally reserved for Jewish Christians, but is sometimes broadened out to include Gentile Christians. New Testament scholar Lionel Windsor brilliantly captures a key nuance:

“The saints” in Ephesians doesn’t just mean “Jewish Christians”, and it doesn’t just mean “all Christians”. That’s too static. The phrase “the saints” is used to make a point about the dynamic movement of holiness from Israel to the nations through the gospel of Christ. So “the saints” are firstly the early Jewish apostolic community, and then all those who believe in Christ—and this dynamic movement matters.¹

This “dynamic movement of holiness” also captures the meaning of ‘saints’ in Colossians. In 1:2, “the saints” includes all the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Colossae who together have this holy status. But in 1:26-27, Paul clearly distinguishes “the saints” from “the Gentiles” as he uses the terms in the context of salvation history:

...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. **To them** [i.e. to the saints] God

1 ‘Ephesians & Colossians: Jews, Gentiles, and the Apostolic Mission’, *lionelwindsor.net*, 2017 (viewed 19 December 2018): www.lionelwindsor.net/2018/01/02/christs-mission-israel-nations/. See also his *Reading Ephesians and Colossians after Supersessionism: Christ’s Mission Through Israel to the Nations*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2017.

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.

Whatever we conclude about Paul's audience, the key idea is clearly their holy status before God. But working hard to understand the nuances of Scripture is always worth the effort. It's like watching TV in ultra-high definition as opposed to just high definition—grasping this nuance will help us understand Paul's apostolic mission more clearly as we work through the letter.

Gospel-shaped lives: faith, love and hope

So why exactly does Paul write to these people that he's never met? First, he writes to express his gratitude for their gospel-shaped lives:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 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. (1:3-5a)

Even from his prison cell, Paul had heard about their gospel-shaped lives: their faith, hope, and love. It's no surprise to see Paul using this famous triad to describe the Colossians.

Let's not glide too quickly over these verses. Firstly, note that the Colossians had *faith* in Jesus. They trusted Jesus as the Christ, the King who ruled all kings. They put all their weight on him. They depended on Jesus as the pulsating centre of their lives. So Paul thanked God that they trusted Jesus, and not Caesar, as their ultimate King. He thanked God that they derived their identity, their value and their

status not from any earthly authority, but from Jesus.

It is worth pondering what ‘authority’ we look to or trust as we seek to derive our identity. Do we place our faith in our government to identify as citizens or in our employers to identify as employees or in our friendship circle to identify as ‘cool’ or in our family to identify as ‘approved’?

Another way to discover what we see as the source of our identity is to ask: where do our private thoughts habitually flow when nothing else demands our attention? What would your private thoughts reveal? Could it be a desire for the dream career? Or the dream home? Or the special relationship?²

Could one of these things, or something else, inadvertently offer an authoritative identity in which we trust? Please remember that, if you’re a Christian, your identity arises ultimately from your faith in Jesus Christ. And Paul gives thanks because, for the Colossians, the gospel generated this kind of deep-seated faith.

Second, Paul gives thanks that the gospel also generated their *love* for all the saints. If “the saints” includes Jewish Christians in salvation history, it’s small wonder that Paul thanks God for this too. After all, in Jesus’ day, the Jewish community used to equate being a ‘Gentile’ with being a sinner. The gospel changed all that. But having generated their faith, the gospel also kindled the Colossians’ love for their Jewish brothers and sisters, despite the long history of enmity between them.

2 For further reflection, see Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*, Penguin, New York, 2011.

This is radical. In today's terms, it's like Arab Christians embracing American Christians as family. I remember being at a conference when an Arab Christian, dressed in traditional Arab clothing, stood on stage in front of several hundred people. He was joined on stage by my dear friend Mack Stiles, an American brother who had helped pioneer a new gospel work in the Middle East. The Arab put his arm around Mack and declared, "This is my hero". This is the power of the gospel—kindling love where there would otherwise be division and enmity.

Look how Paul describes the Colossians' love: "[Epaphras] is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love *in the Spirit*" (1:7b-8). Their love for the saints is a God-empowered, Spirit-saturated, supernatural love.

Don't ever take for granted the love that God's people have for one another. Don't ever be content to see God's people living with a lack of love among one another. After all, Jesus himself said that all people will know we're his disciples "if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

But why did the Colossians have faith in Jesus and love for their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters? Because of their heavenly *hope*. Verse 5 tells us that their faith and their love exist "*because of the hope laid up for you in heaven*".

Hope is anticipation—a looking forward to something. Hope is what drives us on in life, and is even more powerful

Loving when it's hard

Is there a Christian brother or sister whom, for some reason, you find particularly difficult to love? How might Paul's words about love (his thanks for the Gentile Christians loving the Jewish Christians) shape your approach to this person?

than fear. Hope gives us a reason to live. Many people who survived Hitler's concentration camps later said that hope sustained them, even though they had no guarantee that they would survive.

As Christians, we have a hope that preserves all this forward-looking anticipation with assurance. That's why Paul can describe our hope as being "laid up in heaven". Heaven, the place "where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt 6:20). Heaven, where we have an inheritance that is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1 Pet 1:4). This is guaranteed.

Can you see the power of this hope? It's no wonder that Christians down through the ages have known how to endure through suffering, and even how to die well.

My first wife, Bronwyn, died well. She passed away on Easter Sunday in 2013 after a painful battle with pancreatic cancer. But she never lost her hope. She even wrote an article titled, 'Thank God for cancer'. People were shocked by that. How do you thank God for cancer? Bronwyn knew that her sovereign Lord had assured her of her eternity, and that even cancer in this life was ultimately for her good and for his glory. Hope makes that possible.

Can you see why Paul overflows with gratitude as he writes from a prison cell? Because this seemingly unimpressive, unremarkable, rag-tag bunch of people that he had never even met *trusted* Jesus, *loved* their former enemies, and lived lives shaped by a *hope* secured in heaven.

The gospel and its fruit

Paul then tells us how the Colossians came to hear of this hope:

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 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, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. (1:5b-7a)

The Colossians heard the gospel as “the word of truth” and as “the grace of God in truth” from the lips of Epaphras.

The gospel is news—an announcement, a message. Notice the verbs that Paul uses to describe what happened: they “heard”, they “learned”, and they “understood” this gospel. They didn’t think it up themselves. They didn’t philosophize on the best way to live or the best way to relate to God. They didn’t hear Epaphras’ message and say, “That’s a good start, but how can we make the message more palatable, more relevant or more culturally acceptable?” Epaphras proclaimed the message to them; their job was simply to hear it, to learn it, and to understand what it meant for their lives.

Moreover, the gospel bore fruit. The gospel created their faith in Christ, their love for the saints, and their hope for the future. And as such, this gospel bore fruit and grew not just among them, but also “in the whole world”.

Never forget that this gospel is not just for you or your church or your friends—but for the whole world. Never rob

God of his glory by having too small a vision for his gospel. The news about Jesus is the most important force in all the world, bar none. Real power does not lie with the media or our universities or our governments or armies or the Rule of Law or social justice. Nothing in this world shapes and changes lives more than the message of Jesus.

But it's so important to note that there is a difference between the *gospel* and the *fruit* of the gospel.

The gospel is the momentous news of hope and grace in Jesus Christ. The gospel is an announcement of what God has done in Jesus to draw people to himself in love. It centres on Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It centres on his victory over sin and death, on his rule and his lordship, and on his call to submit to him as our Lord and Saviour.

The gospel is about *Jesus*.

The fruit of the gospel is about *us*.

The fruit of the gospel is about our transformed lives—our faith in Jesus, our love for each other, and our good works. The gospel creates a life of love. But the life of love itself is not the gospel.

Don't get me wrong: the life of love is the necessary fruit of the gospel, and it will adorn the gospel. But it is not the gospel. It's why the popular saying, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary use words" is so misleading.³ As Ligon Duncan says, it's like saying, "Feed the hungry at all times;

3 These words are falsely attributed to St. Francis of Assisi—founder of the Franciscan Order—and are intended to say that proclaiming the gospel by example is more virtuous than actually proclaiming it with voice. See Glenn Stanton, 'FactChecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi', *The Gospel Coalition*, 10 July 2012 (viewed 19 December 2018): www.gospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/.

if necessary use food”.⁴ There is no way to preach the gospel other than with words, because the gospel is not about us and our good lives. The gospel is the message about Jesus.

If we don’t grasp this, we’ll never be clear in our evangelism. We’re not ‘gospelling’ when we care for refugees in Darfur or educate the poor in Kolkata or hand out free food on a university campus—unless we also make sure that people hear the message of Jesus.

A good friend of mine, Joe Radkovic, served as a medical missionary with CMS and set up a maternity clinic in one of the poorest slums of Kenya. Under God, he used his first-class medical training to see the infant mortality rate drop from one in ten to one in 110. He did all of this because of love. God’s love drove him to provide the best possible medical care for some of the poorest people in the world.

But Joe knew that caring for the poor was not evangelism. He knew it was the fruit of the gospel, not the gospel. He knew he wasn’t ‘gospelling’ until he shared the news of Jesus. So he arranged to have a huge gospel outline painted on the walls of his clinic, and ensured that every single person who came through the clinic heard the message of Jesus.⁵

But even though the life of love is not the gospel, it still makes an extraordinary impact. And when you see a fruit-bearing life of faith, love and hope, you know that

4 Ligon Duncan, ‘Saying, “Preach the Gospel, use words if necessary” is like saying, “Feed the hungry, use food if necessary”’, Twitter, 31 October 2017, 6:54pm (viewed 27 December 2018): www.twitter.com/ligonduncan/status/925541401554759680.

5 Joe used an adapted version of the *Two Ways To Live* gospel outline (see www.twowaystolive.com).

person has heard the news through an ‘Epaphras’, a faithful minister, somewhere along the line. And that should make our hearts burst with thanksgiving.

Stop and think for a moment: who is the ‘Epaphras’ in your life? Who can you thank God for? Who has shared this gospel with you? Is it your family? Is it a Sunday School teacher, a friend or a faithful minister? We can thank God for them, just as Paul was clearly thankful for Epaphras, his “beloved fellow servant”.

But let me also ask you: who are the ‘Colossians’ in your life? Whose lives can you thank God for—even if you haven’t met them? One of my great joys is to read prayer letters from missionaries all over the world. It’s a joy to learn about people reading the Bible for the first time or becoming Christians or wanting to apply the word of God to their lives. I’ve never met most of the people mentioned in those letters, but I can thank God for them. Every time you get a prayer letter or an email from a missionary and you pray for the people they’re serving, you’re praying for the ‘Colossians’ in your life.

Paul's gospel-shaped prayer

Paul was filled with gratitude for the way the gospel had generated faith, love and hope in the Colossians’ lives, and this gratitude drove him to prayer. The opening words of verse 9 tell us not just *what* he prayed, but *why* he prayed:

And so [more accurately, “Because of this”—because he is so grateful for the gospel fruit in their lives], from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for

you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God... (1:9-10)

At first glance, it seems like Paul prays for many different things in these two verses. But if we look closely, it turns out he's only really praying for one key thing: that they will be "filled with the knowledge of his will". Everything else flows out of this one core request.

But what does it mean to be "filled with the knowledge of [God's] will?" Does it mean that you can expect God to provide you with specific guidance about your personal future? Do you have "knowledge of God's will" when you know who to marry or where to live or what job to get or which course to study or where to go to church?

Now, God *may* provide you with specific, personal guidance along those lines. He's God—he can do anything he wants to. In answer to your question, "Should I marry Zedekiah?", he could write you a personal message in blazing letters across the sky: "No!"

But this kind of "knowledge of God's will" isn't what Paul has in mind here, and it's not what God promises us. Paul's focus is on what God *delights in* and what God *takes pleasure in*. It's much less about knowing what my specific future holds, and much more about knowing what will be pleasing to God.

This kind of knowledge involves, firstly, spiritual wisdom and understanding (1:9b). It's given by the same Spirit who gave the Colossians their love for all the saints.

Secondly, this kind of knowledge is in contrast to “the elemental spirits of the world” that Paul mentions in 2:8. And where can we find such wisdom and knowledge? As we read through Colossians we’ll see this idea crop up in many different contexts, but for now let’s jump ahead to chapter 2:

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is *Christ, in whom* are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (2:1-3)

The answer is strikingly simple: all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found *in Christ*. As we’ll see in the next chapter of this book, Paul is about to present us with a breathtaking picture of the majesty, the wonder, the magnificence, and the supremacy of Jesus Christ in all things.

In other words, if you want knowledge of what pleases God, and if you want spiritual wisdom and understanding, look to Jesus. As we come to see Jesus more clearly, so we will grow in knowledge, wisdom and understanding of God’s will. As we see Jesus more clearly, the gospel gets bigger and bigger in our hearts. His death becomes more wonderful. His resurrection becomes more astonishing. Sin becomes more disgusting and the devil seems more evil. The restoring work of the Spirit gets mightier. The global extent of the gospel becomes more important. The connections between everything within the Bible become clearer. Our yearning

for eternity becomes greater. And the love of God becomes more delightful.⁶

That's why Paul expects that this knowledge will lead God's people to "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him", and it's why he expects that they will continue "bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (1:10).

Paul not only thanks God for the fruit in the Colossians' lives; he also prays for more fruit! Paul's gratitude flows over into his request for more. He doesn't want the Colossians to rest on their laurels and think, "We're spiritually mature enough". There's no such thing! Paul pleads with God to give the Colossians *more* faith in Jesus, and *more* love for all the saints, and *more* understanding of the hope laid up in heaven for them. Paul is greedy for their continued growth.

In Paul's understanding, Christian life and ministry is not just meant to be problem-centred—looking around for the people who've gone off the rails and helping them to get back on track. A huge part of gospel ministry is finding the people who are, by God's grace, living the life of faith, love and hope—and praying that God will keep working in them so they might be *filled* with the knowledge of his will, *fully* pleasing to him, living with *ever more* faith, love and hope.

In verse 11, Paul then goes on to pray that God would give them power. But power for what?

If you were to ask God for power, what kind of power would it be? Power to succeed in everything you do? Power

6 cf. John Piper, 'Never Let the Gospel Get Smaller', *Desiring God*, 17 March 2009 (viewed 19 December 2018): www.desiringgod.org/articles/never-let-the-gospel-get-smaller.

to crush your enemies? Or maybe something more godly, like power to preach the gospel and see thousands saved? Look at the kind of power Paul prays that they'll have: "...being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for *all endurance and patience with joy...*" (1:11).

Paul prays that they would be strengthened with all power *to endure*. Why is that necessary? Because living a life pleasing to the Lord will put us on a direct collision course with a world that is opposed to him—a world of darkness. If we please God, we will not please this world. And we will suffer accordingly.

This is happening more and more in Western societies, as God's people increasingly face ostracism for holding to the truth of his word. And throughout the history of the church, it's been happening in violent and frightening ways for brothers and sisters around the world.

In another letter, Paul says that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). Not *some*, but *all*. And not *may* be, but *will* be. We need to remember, and we need to teach our children, that persecution is a normal part of the Christian life. And we all need God's power to endure whatever assaults come our way.

But not only will Christians suffer through persecution. We'll also suffer the effects of a broken and divided world filled with suffering, turmoil, tragedy, sin, and death. Our hearts will rightly sting as we look at the darkness of this world until Jesus returns. And yet, Paul says, we can give thanks through it all.

But what do we have to thank God for in this dark world?

...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
(1:12-14)

We can thank God because, in his incredible kindness, he has dealt with our greatest need. Our greatest need is not to be healed from sickness, nor to experience harmony and justice in our societies, nor to see poverty eradicated, nor even to establish lasting peace with each other. Our greatest need, above all others, is to be transferred into Christ's kingdom and have our sins forgiven.

Someone somewhere once wrote, "I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages".⁷ We too can learn to kiss the wave of dark trials, because we have certain hope laid up in heaven for us. We share in the inheritance of the saints in light. We have been forgiven all our sins, because of Jesus. We have absolute security in God's Kingdom.

Can you now begin to see why this letter transformed the lives of the Colossian Christians as they read it and pored over it together? Their apostle thanked God for their gospel-generated faith, love and hope. And they heard how his gratitude ignited his unceasing prayers for them to see

7 These famous words are falsely attributed to Charles Spurgeon. Wherever they originated, they beautifully capture biblical truth. See '6 Quotes Spurgeon Didn't Say', *The Spurgeon Center*, 8 August 2017 (viewed 19 December 2018): www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/6-quotes-spurgeon-didnt-say.

Christ and his plans for the whole world more clearly, so that they could live gospel-shaped lives.

May the same be true for us as we delve deeply into the words written for us by our apostle.

Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for the apostle Paul. Pray that God would renew your mind and transform your life as you read Paul's letter to the Colossians.
- Thank God for the ways in which the gospel is bearing fruit in your life. Pray that God would enable you to grow in maturity and bear even more fruit.
- Thank God for those who have shared the gospel with you, and pray that their ministry would continue to bear fruit in the lives of many people.

Discussion questions

- Where, other than Jesus Christ, are you most tempted to seek your sense of identity?
- “The news about Jesus is the most important force in all the world, bar none.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What resources or methods can you use to pray for “the Colossians in your life”—Christians to thank God for, even if you've never met them?
- Have you learned to “kiss the wave that throws you against the Rock of Ages”? What might help you to further develop this mindset?