

How to read the Bible for yourself * Colossians 1
January 1, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

If you've spent any amount of time listening to my preaching, then you'll probably know that one of my most common sermon applications is to read the Bible for yourself. 'Spend time in God's Word.' 'Read the Bible for yourself.'

There's a couple of reasons for that. First off, the Bible *itself* encourages us to spend time in its pages, soaking in who God is and what He's done and what He calls us to. That in and of itself is reason enough, but beyond that, I just personally think it's really, really important for all believers to have daily or close to daily devotional time for themselves. I know that for me, I didn't really grow as a believer until I made reading the Bible for myself a priority. My faith was pretty shallow until I started to invest the time in reading God's Word and getting to know Him better through it.

Ben and Anna's Christmas musical had a song with a line that really drove that idea home for me. It said: "I can't stand on God's promises if I don't know what they are" (<https://youtu.be/qSnh1N8aNz0?t=65>). If I'm not steeping my heart in God's Word, how will I know what it says? And if I don't know what it says, how can I stand firm in the face of trials? How can I honour God the way He deserves?

When we spend time reading the Bible for ourselves, we get to know God better and we get to stand on His promises.

So I think that it's really important for us to spend time reading the Bible every day.

I've said that many times in my preaching, but it has struck me before that I've never really shown you how to do it. The Bible is a big book and it can be kind of intimidating to get into. But I don't want that to keep you from discovering the treasure within and so today, I want to look with you at a passage of Scripture and show you how I would approach it in my own Bible study time. I want to walk through it as if I was doing my own devotional time so that I can model for how to read the Bible for yourself and encourage you to make Bible reading a consistent part of your everyday life.

So, everybody turn with me in your Bible to Colossians 1 and we'll look together at this passage of Scripture. Colossians 1. And I do mean EVERYBODY. I want you all to walk through this with me so that you'll so feel comfortable doing it on your own.

So, come on in to my office because that's where I do my Bible reading. It doesn't have to be there, you can read the Bible anywhere where you're free from distractions, and that often for me is my office. So come on in, imagine that it's tomorrow morning, first thing, and I'll show you how I would read the Bible for myself.

The first thing I do is calm my heart. 'Be still and know that God is God.' We have busy lives; it sometimes feels like we're in five places at once. But to truly listen to God we need to slow down and calm ourselves before Him. So let's do that. Let's just quietly calm our hearts and put ourselves in the headspace to realize that we are standing face to face with the God of Creation. "16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 14:16).

Now often I find that that time leads very naturally into prayer. In John chapter 14, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will teach us all things and remind us of everything that Jesus has said, *(26 But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26 NIV))* and so it's important to open our Bible study time with prayer, asking the Spirit to lead. So let's do that. Let's pray:

Our God, we are here to hear from You. We thank you for Your Word that tells us who You are and what You ask of us. We thank You for minds to read and understand it. We pray, Holy Spirit, that just as you inspired the people who first wrote it down, you would now inspire us as we take it up off the page and plant it into our hearts. Give us ears to hear and hearts to obey. In Jesus' name, amen.

We've calmed our heart and invited God to speak, let's hear what He has to say. Colossians 1, verse 1.

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

Now there's lots that I could say about this, but for the sake of time, I'll just use this as an opportunity to put in a quick plug for a study Bible. I DO think it's important for everyone to have their own Bible and if you have a Bible in a readable translation, that's all you REALLY need. That being said, there are a lot of good study Bibles out there that will get you deeply into the text and what it means.

Generally speaking, a study Bible will give you the Scripture at the top of the page and then very readable notes underneath to tell you things like the sociohistorical context of the passage and what it means for us in our day. For example, a study Bible here will tell you about Paul and what it means to be an apostle and Timothy and who he was and Colosse and where there is and how it was founded and how the church in Colosse came into being – all very helpful things if you want to understand the letter that Paul wrote to the Colossian church. I've given you a few names that are solid study Bibles and even one online that you can access for free and I encourage you to make use of those resources.

So, we've got the introduction done; let's keep going.

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,
4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-
-
5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you
have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you.

Now as I'm reading that, there is a trio of words that catch my attention. Did they catch yours? There are three words here that appear together quite often in the NT;ⁱ do you know what they are? Faith, hope and love. The most famous use of those words together is probably 1 Corinthians 13:15 –

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1Co 13:13 NIV).

We hear that at weddings sometimes; the fact that it appears here makes me think that this is something I should think about. Why has Paul referred to 'faith, hope and love' in this passage?

Let's look at it again.

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Paul says 'we always pray for you' and then he says why: 'we pray for you because we have heard about your faith and your love that spring from the hope that you have in Heaven.'

I would want to spend some time thinking about the connections there, so let's do that. Let's tease out what it is that Paul is saying.

I think it starts here – as followers of Jesus, we have hope stored up for us in Heaven. The Hope of relationship with God and the hope of eternal life and the hope of justice stored up for us in Heaven.

Now if you've made a habit of reading the Bible for yourself, you'll probably realize that this isn't the only place in the Bible that says this. 1 Peter 1 says we have a living hope stored up for us in Heaven for us, imperishable, unfading. Not only that, God is preserving us so that we will necessarily get there to enjoy the things we hope for.

(Just an aside - When you take the time to read God's Word, you'll see these echoes and cross-references more and more and you're reading of the Bible will become so much more nuanced and meaningful).

So we have this hope, but this passage implies that we don't just hold this hope up in our hearts; we don't just put it in the safety deposit box and leave it there. We put this hope work and allow it to motivate us to action in the world.

Paul says in verse 5 that for the Colossian church, their faith and love spring forth from the hope they have in Heaven. They don't just believe, they don't simply have faith; they believe because of the hope they have in their hearts. They don't just love unprompted; they love because they know how deeply they are loved.

This would make me stop and think for a minute. Do I have that kind of hope? Real, tangible hope that motivates me to trust in God? Am I so convinced of what God has promised that it inspires me to hold on in faith, no matter the situation? And does my hope inspire love? Does my confidence in what God has for me move me to love others the way that God loves me? This is where I start to take the passage and apply it to my own life.

I have hope in Jesus and that should motivate me to deeper faith and greater love. I would probably pause at this point to pray. And how I would pray would depend on the condition of my heart. At this point, some of you might want to pray 'Lord, make me more certain of this hope that You've given us.' Some of you might be saying 'Thank you for this hope that You've given me for the future; may it give me faith for today.' And some of you might want to pray 'I have hope and faith but it's never really occurred to me that hope would be material to fuel my love for others. May my hope inspire me to love.' Search your heart and your motivations and you'll know what to pray.

Now once I've got to that point, I would probably go back to the text.

'We always thank God for you because of your faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the Gospel that has come to you.'

Now that's an important note; this 'faith and love that's rooted in hope' that we have isn't just a theory that we cling to blindly; our faith, hope and love is rooted firmly in the historically attested, experientially proven word of truth that is the Gospel. Just look at what comes next – verse 6

6 ... All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. [From our point of view, we can add 'down through the ages too, this gospel is bearing fruit and growing,' proving that it is not just some 'make-believe fairy tale' but a trustworthy truth backed up by the power of God.

I would probably pause here to give thanks for that, that in all times and all places, the Gospel continues to grow and bear fruit. I'm here, you're here because the Gospel didn't stop growing when it hit Colossae; it went all throughout Turkey and on to Greece, then on to Rome whose

roads were so good that the Gospel could spread quickly. And on it went up into Germany and France and England and from there to America and into Canada and through our churches and into our hearts. The Gospel is bigger than you and me and it continues to grow.

Now, verse 7 continues -

7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, 8 and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

Again here a study Bible would be helpful to understand what all this is about. Incidentally, I made a point of only using a study Bible for this message so that you can do the very same things that I am doing here. I actually learned from a study Bible this week that archaeologists have found an inscription of this guy's name in Colossae; probably not the SAME Epaphras as this one but certainly evidence that this is rooted in real world experience.

So let's see – up to this point, Paul has heard from his dear friend Epaphras about the faith, hope and love that the Colossians have and that has moved him to pray for these people.

Now from here, Paul tells us how he is praying for them.

9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you –

'Because the word of truth has taken root in your heart and blossomed into faith and love, I pray for you constantly':

... asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Paul asks that the Colossian church would have all-surpassing spiritual insight in order to know what God wills. Now that tells us that knowing God's will is important and the next verse tells us why:

10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way...

So Paul is praying that we would have the insight and ability to do the will of God, so that we can live a life that is pleasing to God. This tells me that that's important. I want to make 'knowing God's will and living a life that is worthy of Him' a priority in my life.

But notice here that Paul is also telling us that this is too big for us to do on our own. We want to live lives that honour God, but we're going to need help to do it. Look at what he's written – he has NOT said – 'ok, listen disciples, if you wanna keep God happy then you need to live a life worthy of His goodness and do His will at every turn' – he says 'because of the hope we have in Christ, we want honour Him, but we're going to need help to do it. Paul here call us to pray for

God's help in honouring Him, so that we will lean on God's strength in this and to rely on God for wisdom in this in order to live in light of the hope that He has given us.

And the rest of the prayer gives us a sense of what a God-honouring life will look like. Paul prays that we would live a life worthy of the goodness of God,

bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,

11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully

12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Paul is praying for us that our lives would overflow with good deeds in all that we do, that we would know God more and more every day. And he reminds us that we need God's help in that – he prays 'may God Himself strengthen with HIS power, so that you will have endurance and patience and joy and gratitude.'

Because, after all, he reminds us, this is not earning us salvation; God has already qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of life. He continues – verse 13 -

13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He has already done that – that's why we have hope, hope that motivates us to faith and love and that moves us to live lives that are worthy of the great gift that God has given us, all according to His power and strength!

I would want to stop at this point and pray through these verses – for myself and for others. Quite often I will stop and pray for you, as a church, sometimes as individuals – verse 11 in particular – I often pray the specific people here would be strengthened will all power for endurance and patience and joy and thanksgiving.

And then, what does the next verse say? Verse 15 -

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Well now we've switched from talking about the Colossians to talking about Jesus; you could keep going at this point, or you could say 'this is a natural break into the text' so let's pause here. At some points in my faith, I would read all of Colossians in one go or a chapter at a time. That's helpful because it gives you a birds-eye view of that passage, but it's also important to slow down sometimes and take just a little at a time.

So that's what we'll do here. We've seen that this passage says, we've talked about what it means, now we need to think about what it means for us.

At this point in my devotional time, I would probably stop to think back over these verses. I would preach myself a little sermon, like 'let your hope in God inspire deeper faith and greater love.' And 'knowing the redemption and forgiveness of sins that Jesus has given us, live a life that is worthy of those gifts.' And then I would pray for God's help in that. I would pray for the knowledge of His will, for the capacity to do good, for patience and endurance and joy and gratitude. And then I would pray for people in my family and life whom God lays on my heart and then I would say 'God work through me today.' And off I go.

Sometimes that process will take me twenty-five minutes, sometimes it will take me six depending on the time I have. What's really important is not how long you do it, but how consistently you do it and how much of your heart you put into it. If you go in with a desire to know God better, all the time you spend with God will be valuable.

So what do you think? Do you think you can do that yourself? I think you can. Actually, I think that the hardest part is not actually reading the Bible, but deciding that reading that Bible is important enough to carve out some time in your day. Once you get over that and make reading the Bible a habit, you'll be more godly than I am! 😊

To help you to do that, I've set up a little two week reading plan that will take you all the way through the book of Colossians. I think Colossians is straightforward enough that you'll have no problem going through it, but if you'd like a little help, I've given you a few notes to help you identify the things that I would probably spend time thinking about and praying over as I read. I think that if we do this together and get into the habit of reading the Bible for ourselves, we will grow as believers and as a church in really meaningful ways.

So, it being the New Year, let this be your resolution: to spend time with God in His Word as often as you can. Grow nearer to Him in 2023.

Let's pray.

Help in Bible study.

Confidence in the hope laid up for us in Heaven.

Faith and love growing out of that hope.

The advance of the Gospel to give others that hope.

Wisdom and insight to live lives worthy of the Gospel

bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,

11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully

12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,
14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

BENEDICTION

Colossians 3:16-17 - Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Bible readings and questions

Colossians 1:1-14

1. How are faith, hope and love related?
2. Pray verses 9-12 for yourself and your family.

Colossians 1:15-23

1. These verses tell us that Jesus is first over the world and the church – ie., in all things. Does your life reflect Jesus' supremacy?
2. Given that Jesus has made you holy, without blemish and free from accusation, are you investing in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope of the Gospel?

Colossians 1:24-2:5

1. God's long term plan was not just to be 'with us' but 'in us' – 'Christ in us is the hope of glory.' What does it look like to carry around the life of Jesus within us?
2. Paul's statement in verses 28-29 is like a pastoral mission statement for me – as I pastor, I want to proclaim, admonish and teach Jesus so that everyone will be perfect (in the sense of 'mature' and 'complete'). Am I helping you in these areas and are you applying what I say on Sundays?

Colossians 2:6-23

1. What 'hollow and deceptive philosophies' based on 'human traditions and the basic principles of the world' are people hawking today?
2. Let's put verses 6 and 13 side-by-side. Verse 13 says that 'when we were dead in sin, God made us alive with Christ, forgiving all our sins.' That implies that this is pure grace: we didn't earn salvation, we simply received it as a gift. Now look at verse 6: 'Just as you received Christ as Lord (by pure grace), continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, etc...' What does it look like to 'live by grace' just as we were 'saved by grace'?

Colossians 3:1-17

1. Is your mind set on things above or earthly things? What do your mental habits and day dreams say about that?
2. What parts of your earthly nature need to be dealt with and what parts of your new nature need strengthening? Pick one of the commands in the last half of the verse and work at it.

Colossians 3:17-4:1

1. Some Bibles put a heading between verses 17 and 18, implying that the 'household code' of wives, husbands, parents and children begins a new idea. Others though (including me) think that verse 17 leads into and informs verse 18. How do the commands to submit, love, obey, etc. change when they are prefaced with the overarching command to 'do it in the name of (ie., reflecting the values of) the Lord Jesus and giving thanks to the Father'?
2. How can you apply verse 23 in your life and work?

Colossians 4:2-18

1. Pray the first few verses for our church.
2. Notice the variety of ministry done by people here. Some travel great distances, some host Christian gatherings, some 'wrestle in prayer' on behalf of others. What ministry could you do that would move Paul to refer to you by name?

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 13:5; Colossians 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8.