

FIRST LESSON: Proverbs 2: 1-11
SECOND LESSON: Colossians 1:1-14
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“Living in the Kingdom of Light”

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The city of Colossae was in a slow decline when Christianity arrived there in the 1st century. Once a very prominent producer of cloth it suffered from sharp competition from two newer cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis. But it was still a city, large and relatively prosperous. There are two theories as to when Paul wrote this letter (and of course some who say he didn't.) The first theory is that it was written in the years 61-62 when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. The second is that it was written in the mid-50s while Paul was briefly imprisoned in Ephesus. Logically, if Paul wrote it, I have to conclude it was from Ephesus, because by the year 60 Colossae no longer existed. A devastating earthquake struck in the year 60, causing massive damage and reducing what was left of the city to a mere village on the outskirts of a once thriving metropolis. While the neighboring cities, also hit by the earthquake, rebuilt, Colossae either did not have the resources or the will to do so. Most of the survivors left. It is eerie to realize that the original recipients of this letter had no idea that within five years everything they knew would be gone.

Colossae was known for fusing together very different religious ideas and traditions and for combining these ideas with the geological disruptions and rumblings that happened in this earthquake prone region. Pagan gods acquired a thing veneer of Christianity. Angels were worshipped. And of course, Jewish ideas were also added to the mix. Keeping the Church grounded in reality was a full-time job. Imagine how much worse it would have been if they'd had Facebook, Instagram or Twitter! As it was people were convinced that the Archangel Michael made a personal appearance and caused the earthquake in the year 60, although why he should do so is beyond me.

The problem we have with many of the letters in the New Testament, including this one, is that we don't know the context. We don't live in their world. All of this information about Colossae is new. We're not talking about Ardmore or Narberth. This isn't Harrisburg or Pittsburgh or Philadelphia. And to make matters worse, the style of writing is foreign too. We read a scripture passage. Then we read it again. Then we read it a third time. And we still haven't got a clue what's been said. The original writing is in long run-on sentences, and even if the translators have added grammar, it is full of descriptive words and concepts that are just not part of our everyday experience. The words appear to be simple, but the way they are used is not. I read, “the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in

heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel” and think, *“Umm hum, yeah. I had one but the wheels fell off.”*

So what IS being said? In this case Paul was dealing with a whole host of synchronistic religious ideas. The strange forms of Christianity that were emerging were turning Christianity into a mystery cult. Secret initiations, abstinence from sex and a strict diet, possibly even circumcision were all ideas being floated about. But Paul hauls it all straight back to God. Our faith and love come from heaven and from the true message of the gospel. Note that it is the TRUE message, as opposed to all these other ones.

Paul goes on in this passage to remind the Colossians to listen to their pastor Epaphras, who is a faithful minister. Between the lines we might read here—STOP LISTENING TO CRAZY IDEAS. And then Paul focuses on the practical matter of seeking God’s will, praying for the Colossians that they might know God’s will and develop wisdom and understanding. Seeking wisdom and understanding is one of the most basic Jewish traditions. Proverbs urges us to “turn our ear to wisdom and apply our heart to understanding.”

Living the Christian life is not about doing the correct rituals. It’s not about having secret insider knowledge. It’s not about practicing strict self-denial and austerity. Paul says it is about living a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing him. It is about bearing good fruit. It is about seeking God’s will, wisdom and understanding at every stage in our lives. We don’t know what’s ahead of us, just as these people had no idea that their city was about to be destroyed. Clearly God’s will doesn’t remove us from the trials of life. Christians suffer right alongside everyone else. Earthquakes are indiscriminate. But what Paul was urging the people to do was to concentrate on practical “rubber hits the road” spirituality, to use an idiom that people in 1000 years won’t understand. God has rescued us from the “dominion of darkness” and brought us into the kingdom of light. A contemporary paraphrastic version of the bible called The Message translates that as “God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons.”

The world is full of dead ends and dark places. It is full of traps, things that promise freedom or special insight, or power. Cults are attractive to people. Bizarre things like Q-anon and conspiracy theories exist because people are drawn to things that make them feel special. Those who feel powerless are made to feel as if they have all power, because they know things no one else does. The same was true in the 1st century, which is why strange mystery religions with secret initiations existed. But that is not how God works. God doesn’t desire there to be insiders and outsiders. The kingdom of God is all about reaching out. The kingdom of God is about light.

When we live in the kingdom of light we seek God’s will, wisdom and understanding, and as a result we become the kind of person who can be depended on when an earthquake hits. Paul did not know disaster was soon to hit that community. No one did. But those whose faith was grounded and real would have been much better equipped to deal with disaster than those who built castles in the sky.

Paul concludes this passage with one word and concept that also does not reach us the same way it would have reached his original audience—

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

This why preaching from a version such as “The Message” can be limiting, because The Message paraphrases this as: “the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.” But redemption is much more than a pit. Redemption is about slavery. We don’t live in this world. We don’t know that slaves could be “redeemed.” They could be bought and then freed. And since slaves were allowed to earn a little money, a not uncommon custom of the time was for the slave to bank that money at a local temple until such a time as the cost of the slave had been accrued. Then, technically the god or goddess would make the purchase and the slave would be freed. When Paul speaks about redemption he is using this analogy, except that we haven’t paid the price at all, Jesus has. We have been purchased from our master and set free. Our status has changed. We are no longer owned by darkness. We have been set free by the one who is light. And Paul urges the Colossians to remember this. The word Paul uses for “forgiveness” also means “release.” We have been released. We’re under new management. Just because we used to live one way, doesn’t mean we have to continue to do so any longer. We live in the kingdom of light.

For all the complications in the way it is expressed, Paul’s message here to the Colossians is simple.

1. Stick to the true message of the gospel and stay away from weird ideas and conspiracy theories.
2. Listen to your pastor. (I like that one.)
3. Focus on gaining practical wisdom and understanding.
4. Remember that you’re under new management. Do not give up your freedom in Christ. Amen.

Proverbs 2: 1-11

2 My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
2 turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
3 indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
4 and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
6 For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
7 He holds success in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
8 for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.

⁹ Then you will understand what is right and just
and fair—every good path.

¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

¹¹ Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.

Colossians 1:1-14

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

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 God's people— ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. In the same way, 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. 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. ⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: 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, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people 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.

Colossians 1:1-14 (The Message)

¹⁻² I, Paul, have been sent on special assignment by Christ as part of God's master plan. Together with my friend Timothy, I greet the Christians and stalwart followers of Christ who live in Colossae. May everything good from God our Father be yours!

³⁻⁵ Our prayers for you are always spilling over into thanksgivings. We can't quit thanking God our Father and Jesus our Messiah for you! We keep getting reports on your steady faith in Christ, our Jesus, and the love you continuously extend to all Christians. The lines of purpose in your lives never grow slack, tightly tied as they are to your future in heaven, kept taut by hope.

⁵⁻⁸ The Message is as true among you today as when you first heard it. It doesn't diminish or weaken over time. It's the same all over the world. The Message bears fruit and gets larger and stronger, just as it has in you. From the very first day you heard and recognized the truth of what God is doing, you've been hungry for more. It's as vigorous in you now as when you learned it from our friend and close associate Epaphras. He is one reliable worker for Christ! I could always depend on him. He's the one who told us how thoroughly love had been worked into your lives by the Spirit.

⁹⁻¹² Be assured that from the first day we heard of you, we haven't stopped praying for you, asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will, and so acquire a thorough understanding of the ways in which God works. We pray that you'll live well for the Master, making him proud of you as you work hard in his orchard. As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do *your* work. 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, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.

¹³⁻¹⁴ God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.