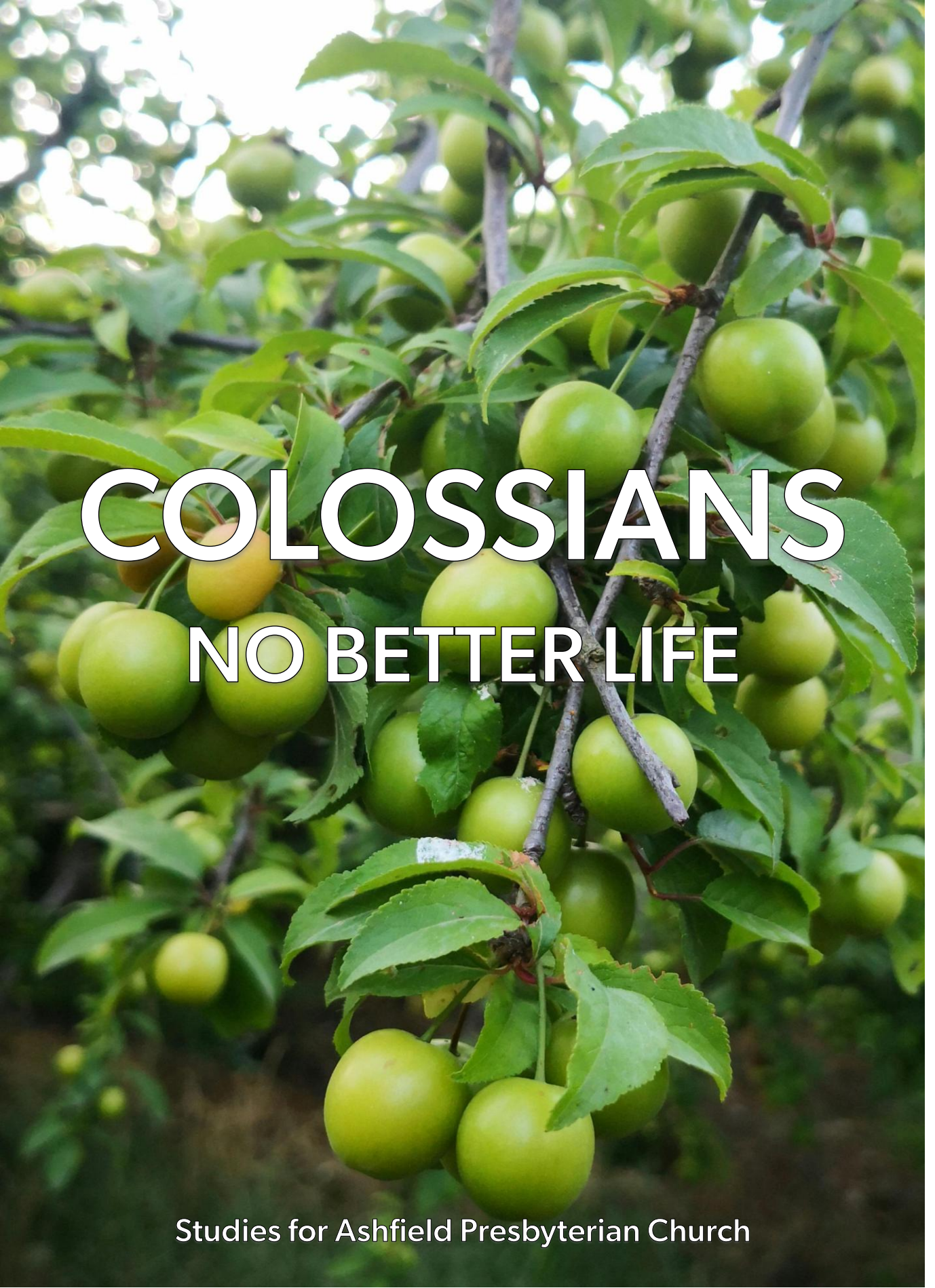




COLOSSIANS NO BETTER LIFE

Studies for Ashfield Presbyterian Church

INTRODUCTION

The ancient town of Colossae was located on the southern bank of the river Lycus in the Roman province of Asia (modern day western Türkiye), about 160 kilometres west of Ephesus. The road from Ephesus to the Euphrates passed through Colossae and Sardis (a city we read about in Revelation 1:11 and 3:1-6). The fertile Lycus Valley produced crops of figs and olives, and in the 5th and 4th centuries before Christ, had a profitable wool industry. Nearby cities included Laodicea (see Revelation 1:11; 3:14-22) and Hierapolis.



Colossae was a place of great cultural and religious diversity. Its population was made up of native Phrygians, and Greek settlers. In the 2nd century before Jesus about two thousand Jews had been resettled into the valley from the regions of Babylon and Mesopotamia. Syncretism, in which elements of different religious traditions were combined to shape life

and worship, was a way to keep the peace.

By Roman times Colossae had apparently declined to being not much more than a small town. While there has been much archaeological excavation at the impressive sites of Laodicea and Hierapolis, the remains of Colossae remain unearthed beneath a small hill just off the modern road. Our knowledge of the Christian church in Colossae comes from the letter itself, and to some extent from the Paul's letter to Philemon, a believer who lived in the city.

The church was planted by Epaphras, who was from Colossae but had heard the gospel of Jesus from Paul during the apostle's ministry in Ephesus. The churches in Hierapolis and Laodicea were also planted through the evangelistic work of Epaphras (see Colossians 1:7; 4:12-13). Paul had not met the believers at Colossae, but as the apostle to the Gentiles he felt a burden of responsibility for this mostly Gentile (non-Jewish) church. He wrote to them from prison, believed to have been in Rome in about 60-61 AD.

Some Bible scholars suggest that there was a specific problem within the church (described by them as "the Colossian heresy"). But identification of the nature of the "heresy" has proved difficult despite efforts to pull all the things Paul warns about together into a consistent philosophy (adherence to Jewish food laws, vision of angels, ascetic treatment of human bodies).

Others suggest there was no particular heresy at all. Instead, they claim that Paul was warning the church about general dangers they would face as believers and offering wise advice about how to respond to these problems.

This approach is more helpful, because it enables readers like us to recognise the sorts of problems that we will encounter as believers in the 21st century, waiting for Christ's return. And, importantly, it enables us to understand what we have received in Christ, and why he is our best defence against our troubles in the world. The letter, like Paul's other letters to first century churches, helps us be better equipped as followers of Jesus.

STUDY 1 – COLOSSIANS 1:1-14: BEING WHO YOU ARE

Read Colossians 1:1-14

1. Paul had met very few people in the church at Colossae. How does he identify himself in the opening of his letter? What does this tell us about what he thinks of himself? (1:1)
2. How does he identify the people who would read the letter? What does this tell us about how the Colossian believers should see themselves? (1:2)
3. How does 1:3 maintain the proper focus of thanksgiving about the lives of the Colossian believers?
4. For what two things in the lives of the Colossian believers does Paul thank God? (1:4)
5. How does Paul describe the chain of factors that have led to the Colossians' faith and love? (1:5-8)
6. Why does Paul keep praying for the Colossians? (1:9-10)
7. How does Paul describe the chain of factors that will lead to the Colossians living lives "worthy of the Lord"? (1:9-14)
8. Why should the Colossians live lives worthy of the Lord? (1:13) (Compare with Exodus 20 and 1 Peter 2:9-12).
9. How do our lives change when we leave the "dominion of darkness"?
10. What difference does it make for you to know that someone is thanking God for you?
11. Make a note of someone in your church family that you can thank God for and pray for. Remember to let them know that you've prayed for them!

Pray as a group for people in your church family.

STUDY 2 – COLOSSIANS 1:15-23: NO BETTER SAVIOUR

1. What differences are there between the world and culture of 1st century Colossae and the world and culture of 21st Australia? What similarities?

Read Colossians 1:15-23

This section of the letter presents the supremacy of Christ in Creation (1:15-17) and New Creation (1:18-19). Part of it may have been an early Christian hymn.

2. Who was meant to show the image of God throughout the world? (See Genesis 1:27)

3. Who, truly and perfectly, shows us what *God the Father* is like? (1:15)

In what way does God *the Son* show us what *humanity* is meant to be like?

4. How does Paul show that Jesus' control over creation is absolute? (1:16,17)
5. Paul is not saying that thrones, powers, rulers and authorities are essentially evil. After all, they are created by the Son. But the fact that they are created by the Son tells us something about them, and where they sit in God's world. Can they be legitimately worshipped? Are they able to bring spiritual salvation?
6. What idols are worshipped in 21st Australia? Which is/are a particular problem for you?
7. Where do we see Christ's supremacy now? (1:18,19)
8. How are Christ's death (1:20,22) and his resurrection (1:18) both necessary for the New Creation?
9. How has reconciliation with God changed the lives of the Colossian believers? (1:21-22)
10. What warning does Paul give them? (1:23)
11. How can we make sure that we don't move from the hope held out in the gospel?

Pray, using this week's text as a starting point.

STUDY 3 – COLOSSIANS 1:24 – 2:5: APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

Read 1:24-2:5

1. In 1:24 Paul says two things about his suffering in ministry. What are they?
 - a)
 - b)

2. The first idea is familiar to us from our reading of Paul's other letters. But the second is difficult. Why does it sound like heresy?
3. What stops us from rejoicing in our sufferings for the gospel in 21st century Australia?
4. Paul says he is a servant of the gospel (1:23), and a servant of the church (1:25). How are these roles connected?
5. When Paul uses the word "mystery" he is not speaking about something that no one understands, or which requires special "insider" knowledge. In the New Testament, this word is used to describe something that was once hidden but is now revealed. What (or who!) is the mystery that Paul says is now revealed? And who can understand it?
6. What does "Christ in you" mean, and how does it relate to "the hope of glory"?

In Jewish thinking, the transition from "the present evil age" to "the age to come" would be accompanied by suffering, the "birth pains of the Messiah". Christ had indeed come, and he had indeed suffered and risen again to inaugurate the "age to come". But the "present evil age" was clearly not over. Paul understood that suffering and hope would exist side by side until Christ returned in glory. The church lives in a time of suffering, and the suffering of the church is also the suffering of Christ (see Acts 9:4). In 1:24, Paul is not saying that his suffering for the Colossian church is something to be added to Christ's suffering on the cross, as a contribution for their salvation. We know Christ's work on the cross is complete! His sacrifice is a once-for-all sacrifice (Colossians 1:19-22; Hebrews 7:27). Paul is, instead, reminding the church that the effects of Christ's work are now spreading in the world: "As the Lord Jesus suffered to reconcile all things, so there is suffering for those who serve the gospel by which the suffering-won reconciliation reaches into all the world." (John Woodhouse, *Focus on the Bible, Colossians and Philemon*, 2011)

7. What is the purpose of Paul's suffering? (1:28-2:5)
8. Paul includes "admonishing" (NIV), or "warning" (ESV), with his teaching (1:28). Why should these things be found together in good ministries?
9. How is this connected to Paul's goal expressed in 2:3 ("I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine sounding arguments")? See for comparison, 2 Thessalonians 2, especially 2:8)

Pray for gospel workers, for spiritual leaders, for the people who shared the gospel with us. Give thanks for them and ask that their suffering will lead to the good of the church, and the glory of God.

STUDY 4 – COLOSSIANS 2:6-23: FREEDOM FROM ...

Read Colossians 2:6-23

1. Up to this point in the letter, Paul has been reminding the Colossian believers of what God has done in Christ for them. Make a quick note of the things that seem most significant to you.
2. Verses 6 and 7 summarise the theme of the whole letter. What, now, does Paul command the church? (2:6) Why do you think he chooses words that create a picture of ongoing growth? (2:7)
3. The warning of 2:4 (“I tell you this so that no one may deceive you”) is expanded three times in this part of the letter. What is Paul warning the Colossian believers to avoid? What might such things look like in 21st century Australian culture and churches?

2:8

2:16

2:18

4. Paul condemns “hollow and deceptive philosophy”. (2:8) He provides enough detail in the subsequent verses for us to understand that he’s speaking in part about Judaism (which at this time in history styled itself as a “philosophy” for Gentile audiences). But there is also a critique of paganism in these verses: the “basic principles of this world”. What does he say about the “rules of the world” (2:20)
5. Why is the baptism/burial/resurrection imagery a perfect explanation of the effect of Christ’s work in saving us?
6. How does Christ’s life, death and resurrection enable believers to resist “hollow and deceptive philosophy” and instead “walk/live in him”? See 2:9-15.

Paul's ministry was dogged by 'Judaizers': a group within Judaism that said Gentiles (non-Jews) could only be saved and become a part of God's people – if they formally became Jews. This meant they had to be circumcised and live under the Jewish Laws (“the written code with its regulations”). Obedience to the Law and worship of angels were connected in some way, see Hebrews 2v1-3. Paul is warning the new church at Colossae not to be taken in by a 'super spirituality' that looks good and appears impressive but can't achieve what Christ has done for his people!

How does this result in believers “overflowing with thankfulness”? (2:7)

7. How does Christ’s headship over “every power and authority” give us hope and confidence to persevere in following Jesus?

Pray with thanks for the work of Christ in each of us and in the church. Ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to help us walk in Christ, and to resist the ways of the world.

STUDY 5 – COLOSSIANS 3:1-17: FREEDOM FOR ...

Life can be confusing at the best of times. Most of us have many different spheres of life. There's the place we work, the people we socialise with, the people we live with and our families. What's more, these spheres keep changing as we move from place to place, as we grow older, as we change jobs, and they will probably keep changing until the day we die. Each sphere has its own expectations of how we should act - when we are at work we act a certain way, wear certain clothes, and speak a certain way. But at home, or when we spend time with friends on the weekend, that all changes! It's like living in different worlds.

Christians live in this world we can touch and see (work, friends, family and so on), and we belong to the world to come, God's kingdom. In this section of Paul's letter, he calls the church to be living and acting in one consistent way, even though believers belong to two worlds.

Read Colossians 3:1-17

1. Paul begins this section of the letter with the words "Since then ...". All that he's said so far is the reason for what he's about to say next about the Christian life. What does Paul mean when he says the believers have been "raised with Christ", and why might that be motivation for holy lives?
2. On what does Paul tell us to "set our minds", and what should we set aside?

How does this changed focus affect the way we live?

3. In 3:3-4 Paul captures the past, present and future for believers. We "have died" (ESV); our lives are "hidden with Christ"; and when Christ returns, we will "appear with him in glory". What encouragement does this give us?
4. Paul describes the new identity, new character and new conduct of the Christian "walk" (3:7). Summarise the contrasts of hearts, minds and actions that are set out in 3:1-17 and use this as a tool to examine your own life.

Put to death

Set your minds on ... clothe yourself in ...

5. Paul tells us that the wrath of God is coming because of the “whatever belongs to our earthly nature” (3:6). What has saved the Colossian believers, and us, from God’s wrath (see chapter 1).
6. What does a life ruled by the “peace of Christ” (3:15-17) look like in individual Christians? And in the congregation of believers?
7. “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (3:17) What does it mean to do something in the name of the Lord Jesus?

When is it hard to obey this command? When is it easy?

Pray for yourselves and for the congregation, that we would walk with the peace of Christ ruling our hearts.

STUDY 6 – COLOSSIANS 3:18 – 4:1: SUBVERSIVE SUBMISSION

In Colossians we have seen how Christ's work in the world – his life and death and resurrection – have consequences for the Christian "walk". God has rescued us and we look forward to a new life when Christ comes again in glory, and this changes how we live. So far in Chapter 3 we've been exploring what it means to be in relationship with Christ, and how that works itself out in our relationships with each other at church. Now, Paul deals with how our relationship with Christ changes three relationships that were significant for 1st century Christians: husbands and wives, parent and children, slaves and masters.

Some of what Paul says here has caused – and still causes - arguments inside and outside the church. Does Paul intend to denigrate women with these instructions? Is he condoning, or even supporting, slavery? Why should anyone submit to another person? What does Christ-like submission mean? There are similar instructions in Ephesians 5:21-6:9, so keep that passage open too as we read on in Colossians.

Read Colossians 3.18-4.1

1. Why does our world have trouble with the idea of *submitting* to another person?
2. What does Paul instruct wives to do within a marriage? What does he mean by "as is fitting in the Lord"? (3:18)
3. What does Paul instruct husbands to do? (3:19)
4. What does Galatians 3:26-29 tell us about the place of women and men before the Lord? How does that help us understand the nature of "submit" in Colossians 3:18?
5. What does submission and love look like in day-to-day life for husbands and wives?
6. What does Paul instruct children to do? (3:20)
7. What does Paul instruct fathers NOT to do? (3:21)
8. What outcome is Paul hoping for from these instructions to children and parents?

9. What does Paul instruct slaves to do?
10. What does Paul instruct masters to do?
11. How does 3:23-24 put the slaves' obedience into a proper perspective – who are they really working for?
12. Can we apply the instructions to slaves and masters in our roles as employees or volunteers? If yes, what impact would that have?

Pray about our “household” relationships, that they would be characterised by obedience to the Lord.

STUDY 7 – COLOSSIANS 4:2-18: WALKING, TALKING AND WORKING

Paul finishes his letter to the Colossian church with some encouragements and instruction about prayer, and with news about fellow-workers for the gospel. It's an insight into what's important in Paul's life and helps us shape our prayer life in both our attitude to it and what we ask for.

Read Colossians 4:2-18

1. Paul gives three instructions about how to pray: be devoted to it, be watchful in it, and be thankful. Why do you think these three things are so important? (4:2)
2. Paul is in prison when he writes this letter (4:10), yet he doesn't ask the Colossian church to pray for his release. What *does* he ask them to pray about? (4:3-4)
3. Paul's instructions about wise engagement with "outsiders" – people who do not yet know Jesus – follow on from his requests for clarity in gospel proclamation. He wants the same thing for the Colossian believers as he has asked for himself. Why does "being wise toward outsiders" help to make the most of opportunities? (4:5-6)
4. Paul's ministry was not a one-man show. He gathered around him many fellow-workers – men and women who proclaimed the gospel, planted or hosted house churches, provided for Paul's needs, carried messages across land and sea. Many of them, as here, are listed in the greetings at the beginning or end of Paul's letters to the churches. In this letter Paul gives some detail about three who would be of particular concern for the Colossian church. What does he say about them?

Tychicus

Onesimus

Epaphras

5. How can Paul's prayer help us shape the prayers we make for unbelievers and for each other as fellow workers for the gospel?

Pray and encourage one another as partners in the gospel, just as Paul did for the Colossian church.