

Daily Inspirations in St Paul's letter to the Colossians

Day 1: Colossians 1:1-2 'First things first'

Not many of us write letters anymore – at least not by choice. Emails, texts, posts, tweets, blogs – but a letter? Only for formal replies to institutions: and even then, usually typed on a computer and printed out.

To receive a handwritten letter nowadays is a rare and beautiful thing. And yet it really wasn't so very long ago that this was the main method of communicating. I still have a carrier bag full of letters from my friends and family, written to me while I was at university around 30 years ago. I could fill a similar bag with those I wrote back to them. To read them now brings back so many powerful memories, and also makes me smile at the craft required to write them. How to use words to communicate, not just ideas and news, but emotions and sensations. Emojis are really just the new punctuation. A sadly lost art!

However, whilst it is tempting to imagine that the rarity of letters is a modern phenomenon, this is far from the case. You may be surprised to learn that letter writing was equally rare 2,000 years ago – paper was expensive and difficult to make or acquire. A handwritten letter was just as precious then as it is now.

Today we begin a detailed look at one such precious letter written 2,000 years ago – by St Paul to a fairly new Christian community living in the city of Colossae, now in modern-day Turkey. Paul had not started this church, although his protégé Epaphras had likely started it following Paul's fruitful time in Ephesus. However, he did want to encourage them in their faith, so he sent another friend Tychicus to them with this letter, and encouraged them also to read the one he sent to the church down the road in Laodicea at the same time.

Although the letter is only four chapters – this is typically the amount of text that could be squeezed onto one sheet of papyrus, which is why most of Paul's letters are roughly this length – there's so much in it which is just as relevant to us today. The Colossians (i.e. people who live in Colossae, hence the English name of the letter) lived life in the spiritual supermarket, just as we do. They had a vibrant faith but faced pressure to add unnecessary things to their faith, just as we do. They needed to keep grasping just what a glorious message we have, and who we really are in Christ – just as we do.

And it starts with a simple greeting: *'grace and peace'*. It was Paul's adaptation of a typical Roman greeting... but so much more. In three simple words he defines the beating heart of our faith, of what it means for us to be followers of Christ. First, grace: God's undeserved mercy to us, his heart of love for humanity, shown in Christ. I was brought up to understand grace by this simple acronym: God's Riches At Christ's Expense – and it's hard to get a better definition, even now. Philip Yancey describes grace as the 'last, best word of the English language,' defining it as: 'nothing you can do can make God love you more, nothing you can do can make God love you less.' I like that.

And the outcome of grace is that second word: peace. More than just the absence of conflict, it derives from the Hebrew word shalom, which means complete wellbeing in every dimension. Whilst we may feel a long way short of that, to know the grace of Christ slowly brings order and peace to all our relationships: with God, with others, with the wider community, even with ourselves.

Grace and peace. What better way to greet someone? And what better thing to pray as we begin our series: may God fill us all with a deeper understanding of his grace, that we too might overflow with peace. Amen.

Daily Inspirations in St Paul's letter to the Colossians

Day 2: Colossians 1:3-5 'Faith, hope and love'

Yesterday we looked at the foundations of our good news: the two pillars, if you will, of grace and peace. God's gift of undeserved mercy, which in turn brings shalom to our relationships in every dimension. God's grace, our peace. These are the twin foundations on which our walk with Jesus rests – and as such, it's a perfect way to introduce a letter designed to strengthen our spiritual lives.

Today, Paul builds on that image by describing how to build fruitfully on those foundations. What are the defining characteristics of this life-giving journey, of what it *means* to live in grace and peace? As Paul gives thanks for what God is doing in the church in Colossae, he talks about three old friends, ones which form the basis of our reflection today: faith, hope and love.

You may be familiar with something called the 'rule of three'. It's a very old concept, tracing back to ancient Greece – the idea that things go better in threes. It was a technique they developed in communications (as Paul does here), but the history of human society and culture suggest that the 'power of 3' goes deeper than just good ways of communicating information or telling stories. We seem to connect with 3s.

Theologically I think that probably has something to do with the nature of God himself: we worship God as 3-in-1, as Father, Son and Spirit. So it would be natural that human beings – made in this divine image – have a deep connection with things that come in 3s. Hence '3' defines both how we relate to the world around us (in 3 dimensions) and also how we experience time (past, present and future). Ironically, it tends not to work so well for us in human relationships – though Christian couples will attest that bringing God into the heart of their relationship creates 'a cord of three strands not easily broken'.

And in the bible, alongside the Trinity, probably the most well-known 'set of 3' is the set we encounter today. It was something Paul had famously developed in a letter written a few years earlier to the Christian community in Corinth, and still used in many wedding ceremonies today: 'and now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'

I get the feeling that Paul was (quite understandably) pleased with what he wrote, as he develops the ideas here in this letter. Only now he adds further content to the principles. We are to live with: faith in Jesus Christ, love for God's people and with the hope of heaven.

What I find powerful is where each attribute is directed. First we need *faith in Jesus*. This is vital. We often commend faith in a generic sense, but the bible always insists that our faith has to be directed *somewhere*: specifically, our faith is to be in Jesus. Why? Because we need to place faith in someone we can trust, who loves us, who is completely dependable, and has both the compassion and the authority to make things right. That would be Jesus.

Empowered by this faith, we are then able to *selflessly serve (i.e. to love) our fellow Christians*. That's not to say that we don't love all people, but we are to give particular love and support to those who also try to follow Jesus – who could you apply that to today?

Finally, this life of faith and love has a future purpose: we are living for eternity, the *hope of heaven*. Time and again, we are encouraged to see heaven as a motivating factor in our here-and-now lives: the firm and confident conviction that we are headed somewhere much better than here. Yes, we seize every day on this earth, and give thanks for every blessing: but we are on a journey somewhere better.

Faith, hope and love – it's 'the true message of the gospel' (v5) and what Paul gives thanks for in the lives of his readers. May it be our 'rule of 3' too, and may God stir in us ever more completely these golden threads of: faith, hope and love.

Day 3: Colossians 1:3-8 'All over the world'

The Church is a very big thing. *Very* big. It's hard for us to get a true handle on just how many people claim to follow Jesus. Think of a big crowd that you've been part of. One of the biggest for me was the crowd of 80,000 in the Olympic Stadium in London in 2012. That was an amazing experience – but, if current figures are roughly correct, the global Church is more than 25,000 times larger than that crowd!

Imagine that. 25,000 London Stadia all joined together – or to put it another way, if you ever go to a concert or a football match, imagine that *each* person there represents tens of thousands of people – and that's the Church in 2021.

It's pretty hard to get your head around, isn't it? And maybe a bit unsettling, too. I like being in big crowds, I find them energising. I've always loved the thrill of being part of something bigger, that sense of losing yourself in a collective experience. But the last phrase is suggestive: 'losing yourself' is also not necessarily something we like to feel too often. Does the size of the Church mean that we as individuals don't matter any more?

In today's passage, St. Paul speaks joyfully of the fact that, even in his day, just 30 years after the 'Jesus movement' began, it was 'growing throughout the whole world' (v6). And within the more limited understanding of the size of the world at that time, this was certainly true. Paul himself had travelled all round the Eastern Mediterranean, including Greece and Turkey. He had first met Jesus on the way to Syria. It had already spread to Rome without his direct influence. It was known to be in North Africa, and Paul no doubt knew of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian official, so was likely to be further south, too. 'Throughout the world....'

At the time Paul wrote, the actual numbers would have been small: a few tens of thousands at most – they could have fitted comfortably into one London Stadium! But a movement had begun which would truly spread across the world. Today there is at least one follower of Christ in every country, and millions in most of them. How great is our God!

But – and this is our other encouragement for today – it is *not* an impersonal gospel. Or to put it another way – you matter. The amazing thing about God is that he still knows and loves each one of us. Each of us is precious. And each of us plays our part. The church in Colossae came to faith because of the work of one faithful follower – Epaphras – from whom this small group of believers learned about Jesus (v7). In turn, this small community of individuals now loved each other (v8).

Huge as it is, *in the kingdom of God everyone matters*. The mustard seeds that grow the great tree are still vital seeds in their own right.

If you get the chance today, go and enjoy one of the blossom trees which are everywhere at the moment. Look at the thousands of blooms – a glorious sight! Then choose just one bud, and look closely at it. It's amazing. It's beautiful in its own right. That's you. Yes, there are tens of thousands like you on the same tree – but your blossom matters. Your small act of 'bearing fruit and growing' plays its part. Thanks be to God!

Daily Inspirations in St Paul's letter to the Colossians

Day 4: Colossians 1:9-14 (i) 'Not stopped praying'

Prayer is hard. Anyone who tells you it isn't either hasn't tried it very much, or perhaps hasn't tried it at all. For many of us in our walk with Jesus, prayer remains the central challenge in our journey. Certainly in my role as a pastor I have listened to more people confess that prayer remains the greatest struggle of their spiritual life than anything else. Very few of us would ever admit to be good at praying.

Why is that? If it's so important and valuable and life-giving, why is it so *hard*? Why do we struggle with it so much? I think a good place to start in trying to answer that question is to acknowledge that it is a very intense activity, much more tiring than almost anything else. An hour of prayer – by which I mean intercessory prayer, prayer for others and the needs of the world – is like half a day of any other activity. We need to recognise that prayer is not 'time off' but time *intensely on*, engaging in the deepest, most powerful activity known to humanity.

Then we have recognise that, precisely because it is so valuable, our spiritual enemy will do everything in his power (which is limited, by the way, in Christ we have nothing to fear) to stop us. Doubts, distractions, interruptions, little lies whispered in our ear – "God won't hear you", "that wasn't the right prayer" – you know the sort of thing! Nothing drastic – just enough to make us wonder if it's worth the effort.

Most critically, I think what kills prayer is the list of 'oughts' we bring to it. I *ought* to pray for this long. I *ought* to pray in this way, using these prayers or these long words. I *ought* to pray like so-and-so prays, who's a much better Christian than me. I *ought* to 'feel' something. I *ought* to have prayed like this yesterday.

It's funny that we place all these 'oughts' on prayer, when all Jesus tells us to do is to find a quiet space and to pray something short and simple (Matthew 6:5-8). He's much more worried about the *direction* of our prayer (for God, not for others to see how holy we are) and the *attitude* of our hearts (humility, not pride – Luke 18:9-14) than the way we pray. Where do all these oughts come from?

Actually, Jesus is concerned about one other thing in prayer: that we keep praying, and don't give up. This is the biggie for most of us, isn't it? Every single one of us will have some prayer that we've prayed for a long time that doesn't appear to have had a positive answer yet. And Jesus' encouragement to us – and St Paul's here in v9 of today's passage – is simply this: don't give up. Keep going.

'We have not stopped praying,' Paul tells his readers today. God doesn't care about the oughts. He just cares that we keep going. I came across some good, no-nonsense advice this week from a Catholic theologian, Dom John Chapman: 'the only way to pray is to pray... If one has no time [to pray much], then one must at least pray regularly.... As to beginning afresh or where you left off, I don't think you have any choice. *You simply have to begin wherever you find yourself.*' Or as my old mentor put it to me: pray as you can, not as you can't.

So, wherever you find yourself today, just take a little while to pray. As you can, not as you can't. The passage has some great ideas for what to pray, you could just pray those exactly as they are on the page and that would be a great start – for you, and for others that come to mind. But whatever you can manage, remember: no oughts! God loves to be with you as you are.

Day 5: Colossians 1:9-14 (ii) 'Wisdom and understanding'

Following yesterday's reflection, let's spend a little time today looking at the content of prayer. Most of us – me included – focus a lot on practical requests. And that's fine: Jesus encourages us to ask God for what we need today (our daily bread), and there's harm in naming those things. Or indeed for naming others who need particular things too.

But I always find it helpful to look at the content of biblical prayers – especially the prayers of St Paul in the letters he wrote. Whenever I read them, it seems to open out a new dimension for me in prayer. It's like Paul is praying on a different plane, you might say a deeper foundation. It's the difference between asking to be given bread and asking to learn how to bake – at least some of what we need. Now that would be something, wouldn't it?

And it usually starts with our *minds*. Before Paul prays about people's lives, he prays – like he does here – for 'God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.' (v9) If we know God's will then it's much easier both to pray for that will to be done, and also to try and do it. We're no longer stumbling along in the dark, but walking more confidently in the light.

It's deceptively simple, but powerful. And as I've tried to grow in my own walk with Jesus, I've learned to give more time in my prayers to asking God for *wisdom to know what to pray for*. I've found that offering this prayer – which is usually answered more surprisingly clearly than you might think – both fills me with more confidence, boldness and inspiration than to pray whatever that is, and also saves precious time and energy, which can be invested in other ways.

But let's observe that this wisdom is *given by the Spirit*. It's vital that we give time in our prayers asking God's Holy Spirit to fill our minds as well as our hearts. To think 'God-thoughts', to take the words we read in the Word to heart. Word and prayer go hand-in-hand: and as the two feed off each other – the Word inspires our prayers, which inspires us to go back to the Word for more, which inspires our prayers in turn, and so on – so we receive a different, more nourishing kind of bread. We start to co-operate a little in the baking process, so to speak.

Don't hear me wrong – I'm not preaching a gospel of self-reliance here. The Christian life is God's gift at its heart: it's just that Paul encourages us to pray for different gifts, a different kind of bread you might say. This kind of bread, Paul says, is remarkably energising, if verses 10-12 are anything to go by. We'll look a bit more at this bread next time.

But today, let's take a few moments to pray verse 9 for ourselves and for any situations where we particularly need wisdom and understanding. Ask God to reveal that wisdom to you by his Spirit – and may that wisdom feed your prayers and energise your walk with Jesus today. Amen.

Day 6: Colossians 1:9-14 (iii) 'A worthy life'

'Wisdom is proved right by all her children.' These words of Jesus are beautifully turned into prayer by St Paul in verses 10-12 of this marvellous passage, which we return to today. On Saturday we looked at how Paul encouraged us to pray for spiritual wisdom and understanding as the first priority of his prayers for fellow Christians like us. How we need it!

But this kind of wisdom has good outcomes, and it is these outcomes that Paul now prays for us, too. In summary, spiritual wisdom enables us to 'live a life worthy of the Lord and [to] please him in every way' (v10). What a good aim in life to have – but thankfully Paul doesn't stop there, he puts flesh on the bones of the idea. This kind of worthy life manifests itself in several ways:

We bear fruit in every good work. I like the emphasis that it's not just good work – it is fruitful work. So many of the practical choices we make as followers of Jesus are to do *God stuff and not just good stuff*. It's a good habit to develop, to ask God to discern the 'God' things from the good things. Don't get me wrong, good things are still good things. But life is finite and time is short, there are usually several good things we can do at any point in time. What a blessing to have confidence that the particular good thing we aim to do is also the 'God thing' – the thing which God will most use for his glory.

We grow in the knowledge of God – which is pretty self-explanatory, except to say that knowledge in this sense is always practical, life-orientated, and not just academic. We are to know God like we know how to bake a cake or drive a car – we could write down the recipe if we wished, but best of all we can actually do it!

We have great endurance. As we've observed before, it's not how you start, it's how you finish. Following Jesus is a long old journey. Simply keeping going, faithfully and consistently, is a very underrated quality. When asked about his qualification for becoming a missionary, William Carey – the father of overseas missions – simply said: 'I can plod'. God loves plodders!

We give joyful thanks – so often we come back to this thought: retaining a spirit of gratitude in our lives. Counting our blessings. It is easy to get stuck in a negative mindset – I do quite often. But gratitude is so powerful: it not only gives glory to God, it lifts our spirits, and inspires us to keep following our Lord wholeheartedly.

So... God stuff not just good stuff, continuing to learn, plodding faithfully whatever life throws at you, staying grateful – this is the worthy life. And I love the fact that it's, well, *normal*. It's not for the super-spiritual, it's the sort of list all of us can look at and say – 'well, I can manage at least two of those, and on a good day I can manage 3 or even 4.' And that's how it's meant to be. Following Jesus isn't easy – but it is for people like us! And God has all 'glorious might' (v11) to enable it to happen. How good is that?

Daily Inspirations in St Paul's letter to the Colossians

Day 7: Colossians 1:15-20 'The Son'

Today we step onto holy ground. Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the great jewels of Scripture – a hymn of praise to the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ.

For once I'm not going to say anything – but rather to encourage you to read this glorious passage slowly, allowing every phrase to wash over you.

Then read it again. What jumps out?

Then be still for a few moments in the awesome presence of 'the firstborn over all creation'.

May God grant us a fresh sense of awe and wonder today at just who we worship. May we see Jesus as he is. And may that cause us to praise and pray with renewed hope. Amen.

Day 8: Colossians 1:15-20 (ii) 'Before all things'

Among the many striking things about Prince Philip's funeral – the beautiful, haunting music, the sadness at seeing the Queen in isolation, the bare church nave – I was particularly struck after the Commendation Prayer by the long list of the titles and offices held by His Royal Highness. Not just 'Duke of Edinburgh,' but many others besides – I counted 13, though it was hard not to be distracted by the unusual uniform worn by the chap reading them out.

How do you describe someone's greatness? Prince Philip had a real humility – not least in refusing a eulogy – but it was still incumbent, at some point in the service, to find words to 'declare his greatness' by the many titles and offices he held.

This passage is something similar in relation to Christ – only on a much grander, universal scale. How can we possibly declare how great Christ is? We can't – but St Paul attempts a 'cosmic list' to try and give us a picture. The background is that the Colossian Christians were facing pressure to 'add things' to their faith, as if Jesus wasn't enough. Paul's answer was to remind them just how awesome Christ is – in other words, that he is more than sufficient for all we need in the spiritual life.

Fundamentally, and put bluntly, Jesus is top dog, best of the best, numero uno – or, to use the language of the text, 'before all things'. The One who was, who is, and who is to come. Just look at Jesus' amazing titles in the passage: (1) image of the invisible God; (2) firstborn over all creation; (3) creator of all things; (4) the reason that all things were created at all; (5) the One in whom everything holds together; (6) head of the church; (7) first to rise from the dead – note, in the sense that he has life within himself – we know of course that Jesus raised others in his earthly ministry; (8) possessor of the fullness of God; (9) the reconciler of all things to God; (10) the One who shed blood on the cross.

The last one jars, doesn't it – in the list of titles, it sticks out a mile. And yet, strangely, it is the one which decisively demonstrates the truth of all the others. It is the way Jesus himself declared that he would be glorified (John 12:23) – and through it, everything else is brought to fruition. Jesus' legacy is, extraordinarily, sealed through his death on our behalf: it is the fulcrum for his surpassing greatness which existed from the beginning of time, and is afterwards manifested in his resurrection power and authority.

We can never exhaust the greatness of Christ – there is no-one more amazing, no-one more worthy of our worship and adoration. And this extraordinary Saviour died – and rose – for us! Hallelujah!

Day 9: Colossians 1:21-23 'Presented holy'

When I was training in my previous role in the commercial world, an old colleague once said to me: 'If ever you feel intimidated in a meeting, just imagine them all sitting in their underpants.' It's a fairly comical strategy, but many will testify that it works!

This idea of finding ourselves in the presence of someone or others 'with no place to hide' is a hidden fear for many people. But if that seems scary in the presence of another human, imagine what that must be like in the presence of Almighty God. 'With no place to hide' wouldn't even come close to it!

Or so you would think. Certainly we have to acknowledge that the awesome presence of God throughout the bible was enough to make people fall on their faces before him. And yet, St Paul is able to talk of a very different reality for those who are in Christ. Thanks to the work of reconciliation effected by Jesus – through his bodily crucifixion and resurrection – the incredible news is that can now be presented to God 'holy in his sight' (v22).

The word 'holy' means set apart, chosen, special – and that is what we are. We might not *feel* like that – but the bible consistently affirms that it is true. For many of us, a key point of growth in our faith is to really accept the *fact* of our holiness – set-apartness – even if it doesn't always feel like it.

This act of being presented holy has two particular blessings attached to it: firstly we are '*without blemish*' *i.e. clean*. Many of us feel 'soiled' by things we've done wrong, or by the more general sense that life rubs off on us. But in Christ we are clean – 'not just nearly clean, but really clean', as the cheesy old ad put it. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow,' as God promises in Isaiah 1 – praise God!

Second, we are '*free from accusation*'. And who accuses us? Most of the time, it is ourselves. Our consciences nag us, occasionally we get that little voice in the ear, whispering lies: 'You'll never be good enough for God' – or somesuch. But such lies are destroyed by the good news of our faith, by the *fact* of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is not a leap of faith as such, but an historical event. Feelings rest on faith. Faith rests on facts. And because Jesus really died and really rose, the voice in our ear can be silenced. There is no-one now to accuse us, because Jesus has declared us holy!

So whatever our past life – and Paul talks openly about the reality of that in v21 – our future is assured. In Christ we can be presented before God – holy, clean and 'in the clear'.

'This is the gospel that you heard...' Paul says. It's the same gospel we hear now – and it is life, joy and peace to us. May we live clean and free today. Amen.

Day 10: Colossians 1:21-23 (ii) 'Established and firm'

'Don't move!' If you watch a lot of detective dramas as we do, then you'll hear this phrase often – usually as some cop corners a criminal. I must confess it is also sometimes said in our home when coming across a large spider!

.... and, as it happens, it's St Paul's advice for followers of Jesus today. Having spent the last few verses describing just what an amazing message we have – good news with the power to cleanse the soul and bring us eternal life in the presence of our great God forever – Paul's encouragement to all of us is: 'Don't move!' (v23) Hold fast to this message, it's all you need.

It might sound strange that Paul would even need to say it. Surely the power of the message speaks for itself? But the lesson of history is that we are always tempted to veer off course. It's tempting to think to ourselves occasionally: surely the message is too good to be true? Is Jesus *really* the whole ball game? Isn't he just the starting point, with more levels to climb, or more things to add?

The message underlying this lovely little letter is that: *Christ plus always equals Christ minus*. Now there's an impossible equation for the mathematicians among you! If you add stuff to Jesus, in the end you take stuff away, because it undermines the sufficiency of Christ for our spiritual lives.

The church in Colossae had some particular 'additions' to deal with and we'll see some of those in chapter 2. There was a widespread belief in the idea of 'hidden knowledge', which led many to think that there must be 'new levels' to ascend to.

Our challenges may be different, but we still come across it: to be a real Christian you have to do x, y or z. And often these things are really important: we might attach 'obligations' to church attendance, or frequency of prayer, or particular moral habits. And don't get me wrong: these are all vitally important. Church is vital. Prayer is vital. Purity is vital.

But we find all we need to prosper in these habits *in Christ*. As Watchman Nee once said: Jesus is not just a means to an end – Jesus *is* the end. And as we journey deeper into this astonishing relationship with him, so we find all we need to flourish spiritually. Christ is our sure foundation – which allows us to stand, not to move, 'established and firm'.

Today, take a few moments to marvel at the sufficiency of Jesus. He is all you need. Let him be all you need today. Amen.

Day 11: Colossians 1:24-27 'For the sake of his body'

Who'd be a leader? As General Hopper declares in the great film 'Ants': 'The first rule of leadership is – it's always your fault.' And we are all too painfully aware of the damage that can be done by leaders who are corrupted by power.

Which is why the Christian perspective on leadership is so refreshing. Jesus began a revolution in our understanding which has been our pattern ever since: 'Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.' To lead we must serve. The very concept of 'public service' which still prevails even in secular government models could not exist without the Christian tradition from which it originates. It was unknown before the first century AD.

And it's also clear that the earliest Christian leaders adopted Jesus' model from the word go. St Paul here talks very personally about his own leadership journey, and describes it as follows: 'I have become its (the church's) servant by the commission God gave me.' (v25) And this servant leadership was hugely costly: most of us will be well aware of the suffering that Paul endured in order to fulfil the commission God gave him. Here he rather cryptically describes these trials as follows in v24: 'I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.'

It's worth stressing that Paul is *not* saying that Jesus didn't suffer enough. But what he is saying is that to follow the pattern of Christlike leadership involved trials which were not unlike Jesus' own.

This reflection is certainly challenging for me to write. Many of us leaders are fortunate not to have been called to the same level of suffering to fulfil our particular callings. And yet leadership remains costly. And we are all called to live lives of service, after the pattern and example of Jesus.

So do take a few moments to pray for leaders today – outside the church, but especially within it. In particular, remember those leaders around the world who have to pay a similar price to the one Paul refers to here – but even for those who don't, may we all continue to fulfil a pattern of servant leadership, 'for the sake of his body,' and for the glory of Christ. Amen.

Day 12: Colossians 1:24-27 (ii) 'Glorious riches'

If you were asked to summarise the purpose of life in a few words, what would you say? What's the point of it all? What represents the 'grand plan'?

It's a tough question, but in these stunning verses we get close to an answer. God's ultimate purpose for all people is this: 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (v27). This is the mystery that humanity has been waiting for – one that 'has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people' (v26).

It might sound fairly innocuous, but it goes to the heart of what it means to be human, what we were designed for. We were made to be in perfect, loving relationship with our creator. This was designed to be a beautiful, intimate friendship that would last forever. Our selfishness wrecked all that – but *in Christ this pattern can be restored*. We can know God intimately again – so closely that Christ dwells 'in you' by his Spirit. We have Jesus' constant loving presence abiding with us – teaching us, encouraging us, strengthening us, growing and maturing in us all the qualities of a flourishing life: peace, joy, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness. It is what we were made for – it is how things were always meant to be.

And this relationship is meant to last forever. Death was never meant to be the end – we were made to live in the embrace of God's love for eternity. Again, our selfishness shattered that, the world became dislocated. But in Christ we now have 'the hope of glory' – i.e. the assurance that we will enjoy this relationship, this healed state of being, for all time. God's glory never ends.

'*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*' Two simple phrases which define the ultimate purpose of life – and our destiny, praise God. At Easter we celebrate the greatness of God's salvation – but so often we limit our vision to 'saving souls'. Yes, it is that – but it is so much more. It is the restoring of all creation, it is becoming the people God designed for us to be.

Today, let these awesome truths lift your spirits. Christ is in you – welcome him again! And you are walking in hope from earth into eternity – one day at a time.

Day 13: Colossians 1:28-29 'Mature in Christ'

Today I want to introduce you to a word that is not very well-known – not least because it's in Greek – but is very important, and that is the word *teleios*. Now *teleios* is quite a hard word to define, but it's the word used here in verse 28 which is translated in modern translations as 'mature' or 'fully mature'. St Paul describes it as the goal of all discipleship, this verse is like his personal mission statement – 'to present everyone *teleios* in Christ.'

If you look at dictionaries they'll use other words to define *teleios* like completeness, perfection, integration, wholeness. You get the idea. Ultimately it means *becoming all that we could be in Christ*, or to put it another way, *where the image of God is fully restored and complete in us*. The finished article, if you like.

It's not used in many other places in the bible, but whenever it is, it's pretty big stuff. Jesus himself uses it in the iconic Sermon on the Mount as his summary of what a life submitted to God looks like: 'be *teleioi*, (plural of *teleios*) he says, as your heavenly Father is *teleios*.' (Matthew 5:48) In other words: God is a fully whole and complete being, he's the finished article – and you're made in his image, so his plan is for all of us to be, too.

Elsewhere, St Paul in another of his letters tells the Ephesians that, when leaders exercise the full range of their giftings and the body of Christ is built up accordingly, then we become *teleios*, 'attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ' (Ephesians 4:13).

It's quite a big thought for us to get our head around, isn't it? God's purpose for you is to become completely whole, fully perfected in Christ. And as you read this, you're probably thinking: that is quite a long – let's be honest, a very long – way away. I sympathise: it is for me, too.

But that is the finish line – and the good news is that *we don't aim for this on our own*. We have people to help us – leaders, teachers, each other – and we also have the God's help: the Spirit of Christ, which 'so powerfully works' in us (v29).

However far you feel on this journey, give thanks that you *are* on this journey. God will get us to the finish line, each one of us – and that finish line will be glorious. Take heart – you're further along than you think!

Day 14: Colossians 1:28-2:5 'United in love'

Having spelt out the great goal of our lives yesterday – to be fully mature in Christ, St Paul moves on in this passage today to describe two natural outcomes of this maturing process. 'My goal,' he says, 'is that [we] may be encouraged in heart and united in love' (v2).

What a great pair of goals to have! It's easy to get discouraged sometimes, either by the pressures of life, or the challenges of faith. Paul, though, wants us to remain *encouraged in heart*. God is always greater than our struggles and challenges, his power at work in us can do marvellous things even when we feel at a low ebb. It comes back to that wonderful mystery: 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.' Take a moment to let that truth fill, strengthen and encourage your heart again.

Second, we are to be *united in love*. Christian unity is always a challenging topic to write about – and even harder to practise! I came across some lovely words on the subject of unity recently from the great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, words which I can't improve on:

'Unity among people is not first of all the result of human effort, but rather a divine gift. Unity among people is a reflection of the unity of God... When Jesus prays for unity [John 17], he asks his Father that those who believe in him, that is in his full communion with the Father, will become part of that unity. I continue to see in myself and others how often we try to make unity among ourselves by focusing all our attention on each other and trying to find the place where we feel united. But often we become disillusioned, realising that no human being is capable of offering us what we most want....

'Jesus calls us to seek our unity in and through him. When we direct our attention not first of all to each other, but to God to whom we belong, then we will discover that in God we also belong to each other. The deepest friendship is a friendship mediated by God... This truth requires the discipline to keep returning to the source of all unity.'

In our fragmented world, we have a deeper unity than normal bonds of friendship or human connection – we have joined the 'unity of God'! May God continue to unite as sisters and brothers, and as we do so, to find the great joy of sharing our journey towards maturity together.

Day 15: Colossians 1:28-2:5 (ii) 'All the treasures'

Who's the smartest person you know? I suspect there'd be a range of answers to that question – you might have a particularly brainy friend or family member. Some of you will naturally think of famous big brains, like Albert Einstein or Alan Turing.

I bet not many of us said 'Jesus'. It's funny isn't it? He's the Son of God, co-creator of the universe, the one holding it all together (1:17). He can rise from the dead, heal people spontaneously, calm the natural elements at his command, and know what people are thinking without saying it. He can do all that... but we don't usually think of him as clever.

I wonder if this is partly to do with our image of Jesus which tends to be of the 'wandering hippy' variety – we think of Jesus meandering around with long hair and sandals. Charismatic, yes; approachable, definitely; clever... er, maybe?

It's also partly to do with a strong anti-intellectual current in modern Christian culture. Whilst ultimately our faith does rest on... well, faith – that doesn't mean that it lacks rigour, or good evidence, or that we only believe so long as we don't ask tough questions. That is a barb aimed at us by some clever atheists, and deep down many of us are worried that it might be true.

And it's nothing new. It was around right from the early years of the church. Greek culture was very sophisticated, and from the beginning the church faced suspicions that its belief system was a bit lightweight and needing beefing up with a bit of Greek philosophy or hidden knowledge (*gnosis* – its adherents were called Gnostics. It's where the word agnostic comes from (literally 'no hidden knowledge' i.e. I haven't made up my mind yet!))

The little Christian community in Colossae were under particular attack by these gnostic teachers. And it was denting their faith. But Paul has good news for them. We don't need to look anywhere else for true wisdom, because 'in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' (v3) Jesus is not just all-sufficient for love and peace and comfort and strength in times of trial. He has all the wisdom we need as well!

I'll leave the final word to the great writer on the spiritual life, Dallas Willard:

'Once you stop to think about it, how could he be what we take him to be in all other respects and not be the best-informed and most intelligent person of all, the smartest person who ever lived? ...[Jesus] is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history (Rev 1:5) while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it (John 14:2). He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life.'

Need help today? Let's bring our lives and our dilemmas to this remarkable genius in prayer now.

Daily Inspirations in St Paul's letter to the Colossians

Day 16: Colossians 2:6-7 'Rooted'

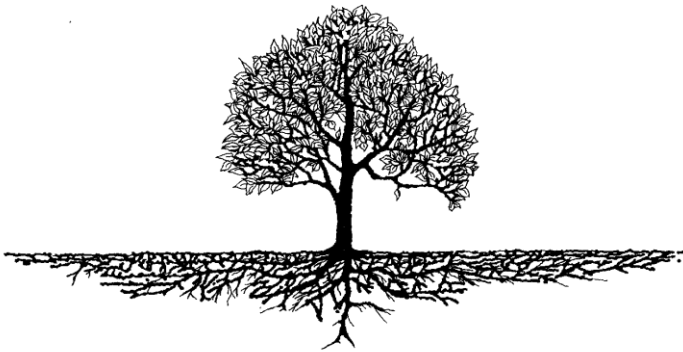
Trees are wonderful things. Many of us love trees. I certainly do. I love being close to them, just standing in their presence, admiring their size, their beauty, their dignity. My family have got tired of going out for family walks in woodland with me, as I find myself lagging behind, just gazing at all the lovely trees, usually taking pictures as I go.

Those of us who live in Milton Keynes are lucky to live in a city which is known as the City of Trees. There are 22 million trees and shrubs in Milton Keynes, not including the vast area of woodland in Woburn and Aspley just outside our city boundary.

Trees are one of the greatest parts of God's creation. Science tells us they are hugely important in cleaning our air and regulating our weather. They protect us from flooding, and provide a haven for wildlife. They have a special place in most cultures throughout history. Trees heal, trees shelter, they stand strong and firm in all weather. They just *are*. Or rather, they have been, they are and they will be. That sense of majestic permanence is part of their appeal.

Psalm 1 – one of the great psalms – tells us that *our lives are to be like trees*. 'Blessed is the one... they are like trees planted by streams of living water.'

And trees need roots – without them we won't grow strong and healthy. Here's an image of what the average root structure for a mature tree looks like:



So where we do find our roots? Simply here: in Jesus. That's what today's passage affirms. We are to be *rooted in Christ* (v7). To become these flourishing, strong trees that God longs for us to be, we put our roots down in Jesus. We make an intentional choice to follow him ('continue to live your lives in him' v6) and, as we saw yesterday, we seek our wisdom from him – which means soaking up the timeless treasures of the bible. We become those whose 'delight is in the law of the Lord' (Psalm 1 again).

To flourish as human beings, we need our roots in the right place. Take a few moments today to ask God for grace and strength to put your roots ever more deeply into his amazing Son, Jesus. And maybe pray that for a few others, too. We all need it!

Day 17: Colossians 2:6-7 (ii) 'Built up'

I love a good switch of metaphor. Yesterday we looked at what was under the surface of our lives – today we go above ground, but via a different image. If yesterday was plant-based, today it's buildings. To flourish as Christ-followers, it's not just about our roots, it's about visible growth too – we are to be '*built up in Jesus*' (v7). The structure of our lives is slowly constructed brick-by-brick according to God's will.

Any of us who've tried it know that this kind of human building takes time – like, a mediaeval-church-construction length of time! We are all works in progress. But we can also look back and see the ways we've grown. A new wall of kindness, a new column of patience, a new flowering garden of peace. Sometimes the odd brick gets knocked out and has to be built again – but little by little, God is at work, the master builder.

And the image has that sense of 'reinforcing the structure' – we can all pursue personal growth, but often that feels shaky. God's type of building has built-in reinforcements – the presence of the Spirit, the power of community support. And Paul mentions two particular visible supports to the growing edifice of our lives: first, *staying strong in the faith that we were taught*. We keep the main thing the main thing. We choose to remember what led us to Jesus in the first place, and we continue to believe the heart of biblical truth – that Jesus died and rose and is Lord of all, that he loves us and desires to be with us.

And second, *we cultivate thankfulness*. Not always easy – but modern science has proved that thankfulness is actually good for our health. Thankful people are happier and kinder. St Paul knew that 2,000 years ago – he also knew that thankful people stay closer to God. God designed us for thankfulness: so it's no wonder it's good for us, too. There are seasons when that is easy, and seasons when that is hard. God knows which season you're in.

So – rooted and built up. What is God building in you at the moment? Pray for grace for that work of God in you to continue, and also grace to be as thankful as you can, whatever season you find yourself in.