

“Knowing the Truth”

Isaiah 9:2-7 • Colossians 1:1-14

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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The 19th Century French leader Napoleon Bonaparte is certainly best known for his military conquests. In fact, that period of French history is known as the Napoleonic Wars. When you think of Napoleon you immediately think of war. But there is something else he is less known for – his love letters. In the 1790s, Napoleon had fallen in love with Josephine and would write to her while he was away at war. In one letter he wrote, “A few days ago I thought I loved you; but since I last saw you I feel I love you a thousand times more. All the time I have known you, I adore you more each day.” Even after they were married he continued to write while he was away. In another letter he wrote, “Oh, my adorable wife! I don't know what fate has in store for me, but if it keeps me apart from you any longer, it will be unbearable! My courage is not enough for that.”

In the days before cell phones and the internet brought us instant communication, most of us had to write letters to one another. Even today there is something about getting a personal, hand-written letter that can't be replaced by an email. When you get that letter you read it over and over. You treasure the words.

This morning we are beginning a short series on the book of Colossians, which is a letter that the Apostle Paul has written to the church in the city of Colossae. In this letter, as we will see over the next few weeks, Paul is trying to strengthen the faith of this little church and to fight against a dangerous heresy that they were facing. But this first section Colossians is basically a love letter. And I have to imagine that when they received this letter they read it over and over and treasured the words Paul had written. In fact, we know they did because we can still read it today.

Before we get into this first part of the letter, we probably need a little bit of

background. The town of Colossae was in what is today western Turkey. It was about 80 miles inland from Ephesus, where Paul had spent two years ministering. During that time two visitors from Colossae, Epaphras and Philemon, heard Paul preach and became believers. Philemon later hosted the Colossian church in his home and Epaphras worked evangelizing the area.

After some time a problem arose in the Colossian church. There were false teachers leading some of the people astray with what is called Gnosticism, which comes from the Greek work *gnosis*, which means “to know.” What they claimed is that Jesus was a good place to start but that they needed additional spiritual knowledge that was secret and mystical. A major part of the Gnostic thinking is that the spiritual is good but that matter – the physical world – is evil. So they rejected the idea that Jesus, who was fully human, could be fully God. This is what Paul's letter to the Colossians is seeking to correct. I think it's important for us to study this closely because today we find people in our culture and even in sections of Christianity trying to intellectually diminish the person and work of Jesus.

As I mentioned, this first section is really like a love letter. Paul says, “We always thank God...when we pray for you.” He goes on to say that he thanks God for the Colossians faith, hope, and love. He is thankful for their faith in Jesus, pointing out how their faith is bearing fruit and increasing. Paul then says that he praises God because their faith in Jesus has made a difference in their lives by impacting their behavior. They demonstrate their faith by their love for all the saints or holy ones. In other words, as a result of their faith in Jesus they love each other and it shows. Paul then points out the source of that kind of love and faith. It's the hope of heaven, the hope of eternity with Jesus, that they know and believe because, as verse 6 says, “it's the grace of God in

truth.” The thing about truth is that, unlike what the Gnostics believed, truth is not hidden or secret. It can be known. Today people tend to think of truth as relative. You have your truth and I have mine. Our culture likes to say there’s no such thing as absolute truth. But Paul reminds us that there is truth and that we can know the truth.

Beginning in verse 9, Paul then gives a description of his prayers for the Colossian Christians. He says, “we have prayed continuously for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him; bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father.”

This prayer is a great model for us as we pray. Most of the time, when we pray for ourselves or for others we end up asking God for physical health, for material or financial needs, or for our relationships. Sometimes we will pray for spiritual growth. But imagine how things might be different if you prayed for the people you love like Paul prayed for the Colossians. First of all, you would pray that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will and would have spiritual wisdom and understanding. What does that mean? I think it means that they would have a biblical worldview. They would see the world through the lens of God’s will as revealed in the Bible.

Remember that Paul is trying to correct the Gnostic idea that they needed a secret knowledge, or *gnosis* in Greek, in order to be saved. But when he prays that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will he uses the word *epignosis*, which means full knowledge. That full knowledge, as we will learn over the next few weeks, is the truth of the gospel, the truth about who Jesus is, the truth that they no longer have to live in the kingdom of darkness but have been transported

to the kingdom of God. You and I can have that same knowledge. You can know, you can be assured, of the truth. You can live right now in God’s kingdom.

That brings us to the second part of Paul’s prayer—that their knowledge would lead to changed behavior. It’s not enough to know facts about God. We must put that knowledge into action. Paul says he prays that they would be filled with knowledge, wisdom, and understanding so that they will “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” He wants them to please God by “bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

In the Bible, the idea of “walking” as it’s used here is a metaphor for how we live our lives. The more you and I know God’s truth, the more we will *want* to do things that please him. In other words, it’s not just that we don’t do bad things. We lose the desire to do those bad things. Our thinking changes, which is the literal meaning of the word “repent.” It means to change your mind and your behavior will follow.

Paul describes four ways that we are to live that are pleasing to God. The first is “bearing fruit in every good work. I think what Paul is referring to here is sharing the good news of Jesus with others, just as Epaphras has done for them. That’s the fruit God expects from us as well. Jesus’ final instruction to his disciples was to go and make disciples and you and I are to do the same thing.

The second thing when we are walking in a manner worthy of the Lord is “increasing in the knowledge of God.” This is not passive. You are ultimately responsible for your own growth in knowledge of God. If your faith is not growing, if you’re not learning more and more about God through intentional Bible study, you’re doing it wrong. Make reading and studying the Bible a priority. There are opportunities through the church of course but you should also be spending time alone with God’s Word as well.

Third, Paul prays that the Colossians are “being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.” Kent Hughes points out that endurance and patience are not the same thing. He says that endurance refers to difficult circumstances. We are to pray for endurance during the difficult trials we face, especially those we face because of our faith. Patience, on the other hand, can also be translated as longsuffering. Hughes says that patience “is in reference to difficult people.” He says, “This is the way we must pray for our brothers and sister. ‘Lord, give them perseverance in difficulties and patience with people. Do it by constantly strengthening them with your power.’ Imagine if you were praying that for the people in your life. Maybe it would help to think about what it would be like if people only had as much patience with you as you had prayed for them to have.

The fourth thing that marks people who walk in a manner pleasing to God is “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” What are we to be thankful for? You should be thankful that God has brought you into his kingdom and with that comes “redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” This is the heart of the Christian life. Everything you think and do should flow from an attitude of thankfulness to God.

So let me challenge you today to use this as the model for your prayers this week. Pray these things for yourself and for others. And let’s see if it doesn’t make a difference in the way you think and the way you act.

Amen.