

## A Broader Perspective

### Colossians 1.1-8

‘Nobody likes me; everybody hates me; I think I’ll go eat worms.’ Have you ever felt that way? I have – many times.

This is what we call tunnel vision, and it is not a good thing. Yet all of us fall victim to it from time to time – usually in moments of pain or discouragement. Tunnel vision happens when we lose perspective and think things are worse than they really are. Tunnel vision happens when we can’t take our eyes off ourselves.

Elijah was one of the greatest prophets the world has ever known, yet he suffered from tunnel vision. God gave him a remarkable victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Rarely in human history has there been such a display of God’s miraculous power at the request of a single man. God consumed Elijah’s waterlogged sacrifice right on cue.

And the people of Israel reacted strongly. Many of them turned to the Lord . . . and turned against the prophets of Baal, killing 450 of them. What a great victory! Queen Jezebel, however, reacted strongly in the opposite way – she took aim at Elijah.

So Elijah ran for his life. After about 180 kilometres, he found a secluded place in the desert, and from there he made a second remarkable request to God – ‘Lord, just kill me. Kill me now.’ In essence, Elijah was saying to God, ‘Nobody likes me; everybody hates me; I think I’ll go eat worms.’

How can someone who just had his name put up in lights forever in the Bible be so despondent? It actually wasn’t that hard. Tunnel vision. At that moment of weakness, Elijah couldn’t see anyone but himself, and so he complained to God, ‘I alone am left.’ But he was wrong; there were actually 7000 others – he just couldn’t see them.

Beware of tunnel vision.

Sermon on a Sentence: **Take time to look around and rejoice.**

Today we begin a new series of messages from Colossians. I am calling this series *Lessons in Life Management*. Colossians is a heart-felt and very practical letter – it tells us how we should live. I think you’ll find this series to be an indispensable study for your own heart and life.

Let’s get introduced to Colossians.

Colossians 1:1-8 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Colossae was a city located 160 kilometres east of Ephesus in what is now the country of Turkey. It was the first in a cluster of three cities, including Hierapolis and Laodicea. Colossae was known for having fresh cold water flowing through it, unlike Laodicea that had distasteful lukewarm water.

<sup>3</sup>We always **thank** God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and of the **love** that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup>because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup>which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is **bearing fruit and growing**—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup>just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. **He is a faithful minister** of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup>and has made known to us **your love in the Spirit**.

Do you think Paul could have been more positive when he wrote those opening verses? He thanks God. He commends the power of the gospel. He compliments God's people. This must be a very sunny day for Paul.

But in reality it is a dark and cloudy day in Paul's life – though you wouldn't know it from the tone set at the opening of this letter. Where is Paul when he writes this letter? In home detention. He pens this letter from Rome – where he is awaiting trial before the murderous Caesar Nero after more than two years of unjust incarceration. He is suffering . . . and, for all he knows, his execution might be just around the corner (see Philippians 1.20-21, which was written after Colossians during the same imprisonment).

It is a perfect environment for tunnel vision. But Paul doesn't have it. He chooses to **take time to look around and rejoice**.

In these verses, I want to point out three ways Paul has a great perspective on life.

## 1. A Broader Awareness (vv 3-4)

To appreciate this, you need to know something about Paul and Colossae. He had never been there – he is writing this letter to people who haven't met him.

Colossians 2:1 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup>For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all **who have not seen me face to face**,

Did you know Paul did not plant the church in Colossae? He planted a lot of churches – the one in Ephesus, the one in Philippi, the one in Corinth – but not this one. In all probability, Epaphras, who is named in verse 7, was the church planter. He would have met Paul – and may have been converted – during the three years Paul was in Ephesus.

Paul impresses me here. I have a hard enough time keeping track of the people I actually have met and know – Paul does all that plus has special thoughts for people he hasn't even met. And he's in jail . . . and he doesn't even have the benefit of the Internet or Facebook! That's amazing.

Most impressive of all, Paul acts on this awareness. He prays for them and praises them.

### a. Aware to pray

Colossians 1:3 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **when we pray** for you,

Paul speaks of a continuous action – the Colossian church is on his regular prayer list. Can you imagine how long that list must have been? At this stage in his ministry, he has been to sixteen cities preaching the gospel and planting churches – that’s an extended list already. Yet he commits himself to pray for the saints at Colossae, too.

Are you aware to pray? Do you have a prayer list?

In our Home Groups, we feature a ‘sister church of the week’ in our praying. Cornerstone Baptist is affiliated with the Australian Fellowship of Bible-believing Churches – a group that currently numbers thirty-three churches and is growing. We will never visit all those churches, but we should pray for them. They are our brothers and sisters, and we want God’s best for them.

As I prepared this message, I thought about our fellow Christians in other countries. Some of them are suffering persecution. In Laos, for example, there is a pastor named Limthong who holds services in rotating secret locations because biblical Christianity is illegal. Some of his colleagues have done jail time or even been martyred. Another example is Mali in Africa. You have heard of Timbuktu. Did you know the Muslims overran Timbuktu this year and destroyed the churches? Christians had to flee or die.

Being aware enough to pray is the perfect antidote to tunnel vision. We get our mind off ourselves and onto others for their eternal good.

Paul’s relationship with Colossae, however, went beyond prayer. It extended even to praise.

## **b. Aware to praise**

Colossians 1:4-5 (ESV)

<sup>4</sup>since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and of the **love** that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup>because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven.

It is so easy to think bad of other people – but Paul is highly complimentary. Can I tell you that there is no higher commendation than what Paul says here? Faith, hope and love. We remember these three from 1 Corinthians 13 – and ‘now abides faith, hope and love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.’

The reputation of the Colossian church has reached Paul in Rome – via Epaphras, no doubt. They have faith ‘in Christ Jesus’ – the right place for faith to be because He alone is the way, the truth and the life. We come to the Father only through Him. They also have love for ‘all the saints’, which means this is a generous congregation. And they have hope – hope that is more focused on treasures in heaven than treasures on earth.

That is the opposite of tunnel vision.

How are we in this? Are we like Paul – aware enough to praise? Who do we admire? Who do we take the time to compliment? It would be a good application for each of us to write and send a thank you note to someone this week, or at least to call or send a text message.

I also wonder how much our church in Erskine Park is like the church in Colossae. Do we have a reputation for faith, hope and love?

Not if we have tunnel vision. So let's take time to look around and rejoice. The first way Paul had a great perspective on life is a broader awareness. The second way is . . .

## 2. A Broader Anticipation (vv 5-6)

What do you expect? Is there anything you are looking forward to? How about the kingdom of God!

### a. Anticipating good

Let's go back to verse five again. In talking about hope, Paul uses words that communicate security and certainty . . . and it is all wrapped up in the gospel.

Colossians 1:5 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup>because of the hope **laid up for you in heaven**. Of this you have heard before **in the word of the truth**, the gospel,

This is true of every genuine Christian. No matter how difficult things become on earth, nothing and no-one can take away our inheritance in heaven. We are kept by God's power, reserved for the full salvation that will be revealed in the last times (1 Peter 1.5).

You don't have to be a Christian to know that hope is the secret to endurance. As long as there is light at the end of the tunnel, we can hang on. The good news for believers is that the brightest light is always ahead of us.

Paul says in Romans 8 . . .

Romans 8:18 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup>For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Such is the power of the gospel. We have everything to look forward to and really nothing to fear or dread. We anticipate good to come.

Most importantly, we anticipate this good for others -- as Paul has here. He is speaking of the Colossians, not himself. Again, this is the opposite of tunnel vision -- seeing the need in others and boldly declaring Christ as the best hope.

Romans 1:16 (ESV)

<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

This week I was whinging to myself about a person I don't like. Then it hit me -- this man's not a believer. Why haven't I been praying for him? Tunnel vision.

We must anticipate good -- that's what the gospel does -- it changes our circumstance. We also must anticipate change in us.

## **b. Anticipating change**

Colossians 1:6 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup>which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is **bearing fruit and growing**— as it **also does among you**, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,

Let me ask you, ‘Is the church of Jesus Christ growing or declining?’ If you look at the census figures in Australia, you might say it is declining. But the census is not the standard for the world.

Paul anticipates that the gospel bears fruit and grows in ‘the whole world’. And so it is. Even here in Australia the church is growing. Our fellowship of churches is averaging about one new church started every year. That is its breadth.

What is less apparent, but actually more significant, is its depth. This is the phrase ‘also does among you’. The gospel changes us from the inside out.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)

<sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Are you improving? Is God refining you and making you better? If you are in Christ, there is every reason to anticipate change.

But again, Paul is not talking about himself, he is talking about others. What is the best wish he can make for the Colossians? That they will be changed to be like Christ. That is what is best for them. By God’s grace, Paul is confident this good change is in progress.

Have you noticed good change in others? Let me encourage you – take time to look around and rejoice. The gospel works – let’s anticipate victory.

So we see Paul being aware. We see Paul anticipating. And the last way he displays a great perspective on life is by . . .

## **3. A Broader Appreciation (vv 7-8)**

Lately I’ve been noticing what a good job people do – whether it is the bank teller who takes the weekly deposit, or people who bring morning tea to church each week. It is so easy to take these things for granted.

My trouble is that when I notice something good, I seldom tell the person. What good is that to them, then?

Paul gives credit where credit is due.

### **a. Appreciating a colleague**

Colossians 1:7 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup>just as you learned it from Epaphras our **beloved fellow servant**. He is a **faithful minister** of Christ on your behalf

Now, if Epaphras were your pastor, would you be more or less inclined to trust his leadership after hearing this from Paul?

Do you know what the number one reason is that men leave the pastorate? It is discouragement. Too seldom do most pastors hear things like ‘you are a beloved fellow servant’ or ‘I’m thankful you are a faithful minister’.

What is more common is a spirit of competition between ministers – ‘I wouldn’t want to say nice things about him because people might leave my church for his’ – or a spirit of criticism between a congregation and its pastor.

A pastor needs as many right hand men and women as he can get. Will you be that at Cornerstone?

Take time to look around and rejoice. Paul appreciated the pastor, Epaphras. He also writes . . .

#### **b. Appreciating a report**

Colossians 1:8 (ESV)

<sup>8</sup>and has **made known to us your love** in the Spirit.

This report came from Epaphras. Paul said, ‘how’s the church going?’ And Epaphras gave a glowing report.

What was it that came to the mind of Epaphras first? Their love. The greatest of these is love.

Lately, when I’ve been asked how things are going at Cornerstone, I have felt good speaking of your commitment to God’s Word, your care for one another, and your desire to see people saved and this church growing. All of this was so clear in the way you prayed for and ministered to Alex – to give just one example.

This is what makes my work here a joy and not a burden.

We have seen, then, that it is time to look around and rejoice. Let’s not have tunnel vision. Let’s take our eyes off ourselves – our problems, our wants, our disappointments – and intentionally look at others – to pray, to praise, to seek good through the gospel.

And above all, let’s look to Jesus

Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)

<sup>2</sup>. . . the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.