

Colossians 1:1-8 - Sovereignty, Identity, Praise, Responsibility

This morning we embark on our voyage through Paul's letter to the church in the small city of Colossae. I think we're going to find these four chapters to be super helpful and practical in our lives. They are rich in theology, rich in doctrine, and detail how we live life as a church together.

And there is one theme in these opening verses that I think we can miss if we're not careful. It's a theme that drove the apostle Paul, that comforted him and encouraged him in difficult times of life and ministry. It's a theme that humbled him when things were going well. It's really a theme that defined his place in ministry and in the church, and really who he was in the grand scheme of things. And, as we'll see, this theme defined his prayer life as well. What was the theme? The theme is the sovereignty of God.

God's control over all things was all-pervasive in Paul's life. God's sovereignty did not negate Paul's work or Paul's effort or his responsibilities. It didn't negate his evangelism and it didn't negate his raising up leaders. Look down at **1:28-29. Read**

Paul's toils and struggles with everything that is in him to present every single person mature in Christ. But even here he's aware that the power that is working in him is not his own power. Who's power is it? It's God's. **Read 29**

He toils with God's power, that God works in Paul.

Look back at Phil 2:12-13. We see this same kind of tension. Paul calls the Phillippians to obey the Lord. But how are they to do it? **Read 12**

He says "obey!" You obeyed when I was there, now obey while I'm gone. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Not work for your salvation - this is not works based salvation. He's saying work it out - live it out - day by day with fear and trembling before God almighty. How are they to do that? **Read 13**

They are to do it in God's power. In fact, really, he says that the only way they can live out their salvation rightly is by remembering that it's God working in them to will and to work for his good pleasure: he says *for it is God* who works in you. The only way they - or we - will ever rightly understand how we are to live out our salvation is if we understand that it is God who sovereignly supplies us with the ability to do it.

No one can say "I can't obey God." If you are in Christ and Christ is in you then you have the power of God in you to obey. The choice is up to you.

All that to say, God's sovereignty extends to every area of our lives. We don't usually recognize the air we're breathing, a fish doesn't recognize the water it's swimming in - why? Because it's just all around them all the time.

Rom. 11:36: For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

That encompasses everything. See, in the Bible, God's sovereignty is never just an abstraction. It's never just some intangible concept that we argue about or give lip service to. God's sovereignty is always a concrete reality that the people of God are to anchor themselves to for comfort, and joy, and grace, and encouragement. Paul did.

Now, let me show you how Paul does that here. I think he does it in 2 ways. First, God's sovereignty affects his identity - that's in verses 1-2. Second, it affects his prayer life, that's verses 3-8.

First, let's look at how God's sovereignty affects our **Identity**. How does it affect who we are? We often fly right through these opening sections, but notice how Paul describes himself and others. **Read 1-2**

So this is a standard greeting for a Roman letter. Paul's name, Timothy with him and his title. Who he's writing to and a well wishing.

First, Paul himself is defined completely by God's work in his life. Paul says he is an apostle by what? The will of God. Paul's apostleship, his calling, his salvation had nothing to do with his own plan. Rather he grounded it in God's plan.

Rom 1:1: a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

1 Cor 1:1: called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.

2 Cor. 1:1: an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

Gal 1:1: an apostle - not from men, nor through man but from Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

Eph. 1:1: an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

1 Tim 1:1: an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.

2 Tim 1:1: an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

Titus 1:3: Paul was an apostle who preached the gospel because he was entrusted to do that by the command of God our Savior.

Nine of Paul's 13 letters open with his identity and his place in the church as being a direct result of the will of God. Now on the one hand, I think we could say that maybe what Paul was doing was simply establishing that this authority was not his own doing. Paul's laying down some pretty big commands - he's speaking with the same authority as Jesus. Who put him in charge?

If you've ever been in a middle management situation you know sometimes upper management makes you tell your people tough things. And you can kind of shrug your shoulders and say "Well, that's just what management wants." Is that what Paul's doing? There might be some of that. "Hey, I'm an apostle because of Jesus - this is what he wants said."

But I really think it's more than that. He could have just said "this is what the Spirit says" - completely unrelated to who he is as an apostle. I think this is Paul, at the outset of his letter, giving God all the glory and credit for who he is and where he's at in life. God's sovereign work in Paul's life was very personal. He went from being a persecuted of Christians, locking them up in prison and killing them, to an apostle exercising loving authority over Christians. His transformation was all God's doing. It wasn't cold or robotic or impersonal. No, this was very personal to Paul and defined his entire life.

We need to recognize as well, who we are in Christ and where we're at in life is because of the will of God. Your identity is not primarily in your last name, or your job, or who you are in your family, or your skills. If you are a believer your identity is primarily in Christ because of the will of God. So our conduct as fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and so on is primarily grounded to what God has sovereignly done in us through Jesus.

Here's the next way God's sovereignty affects our identity: it brings us into God's family.

Read 1-2a

Twice Paul refers to believers as brothers. He calls Timothy a brother and he addresses the letter to "the saints and brothers."

You ever been to church in the south? What do they call each other all the time? Brother. Some of you know Justin Peters - he has a great ministry exposing the false gospel of the health and wealth movement. Well he was raised in the south and he's one of the few people I know who constantly refer to other believers as brothers. And I like that. Through faith in Jesus we become a family - really a family that's even closer than our own blood relation because we are united together through the Spirit into one body.

And I was doing a little research on this. For many years I believed that the most common term for a believer in the NT was “slave” or some of our translations have “bondservant.” It turns out that’s not true. In fact, it’s not even close. Slave is used only a fraction of the time as “brother.”

Just in the book of Acts alone, the term brother is used 57 times, almost all of those referring to believers. Paul uses the term 136 times - mostly of believers. James calls believers brothers: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (**Jas 2:14**).

If you are a Christian, God has sovereignly brought you into the family of God. He has given you new birth, he has begotten you, he has adopted you into his family, he has given you an inheritance, you are now his son - those are all family concepts that we share in by his grace.

By the way, this includes ladies. The word brother in Greek - ἀδελφός - can refer to either a male sibling or if it’s used in a collective sense, it can refer to men and women. So Paul says Timothy our brother in **Vs. 1** and in **Vs. 2** it’s the same word but it’s a collective group. So the NIV says brothers and sisters, the NAS and NKJV says “brethren.” Those are all fine translations that don’t compromise gender issues.

The bottom line for us, though, is that God has brought us into his family as brothers. How we treat each other should be as family. Maybe some of you are thinking - well maybe not like my family. I understand what you mean. But actually, that’s all the more important. Sometimes as the family of God we go through some hard times. We go through very difficult times. We have disagreements, people hurt each other. But at the end of the day we have to remember that we are still brothers in the Lord. We are still family, covered by the same blood of Jesus, filled with the same Spirit, washed with the same baptism.

The third way Paul describes our identity being sovereignly affected is through our being saints. **Read 2**

I won’t spend a lot of time on this one because we touched on the exact same issue last week in Jude 1:3-4. But the people of God, Christians, are all saints. We are holy ones.

Paul isn’t making a distinction between saints and faithful brothers. He’s not saying “I’m addressing this letter to the really spiritual people in Colossae and also to the rest of you jokers who need to get your act together.” No, he’s actually describing all of the believers in two different ways. They are brothers *and* they are saints. Both descriptions are vital. Where brothers gives the idea of intimacy and family, saints gives the idea of holiness and purity.

Saints is ἁγίοις - holy ones. Every believer is a saint. We are holy and righteous - we are saints - because the righteousness of Jesus has been credited to us through faith in Jesus. We are not infused with righteousness nor do we have any righteousness on our own. No, Jesus' righteousness has been placed on our account. Our sinfulness has been placed on his. So even though we still sin and strive to put off our sin, our standing before God, our position before God is as though we are as holy as the Lord Jesus himself.

How you become a brother, a saint, is that you are in Christ. **Read 2**

Paul opens this letter with a prayer-wish, as most people call it: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

So all of our identity, all of our standing, all of who we are and how we view ourselves in relation to others is because of God's sovereign goodness to place us in Christ. That's our identity.

The second part here is Paul's prayer of thankfulness - that's **Vss 3-8**. Now, before we dive in, I don't want to lose the emphasis of this section which is Paul's thankfulness to God. It could seem a little like Paul is meandering in this paragraph, but he's really not. He starts by thanking God for their faith and ends with Epaphras because it is Epaphras who proclaimed the gospel to the Colossians, and then came and told Paul about how the Colossians received the gospel. It's like if we sent a missionary out to South America to go preach the gospel and start a church. So they go, people believe and the missionary comes back to give us a report of what's happened - that's Epaphras. So his work as a missionary is tied to the preaching of the gospel. **Read 3-8**

So I think it will be more helpful to work backwards through this section so we don't miss the main point. Vs. 7 says that the Colossians learned the word of truth - the gospel - from Epaphras. Epaphras is Paul's beloved fellow servant - he's a faithful missionary pastor who serves in Colossae. At some point after the church was established and people were growing, it seems that Epaphras went back to Paul in Rome, told Paul about the Colossians. In the little book of Philemon we learn that somehow he ended up in prison with Paul because Paul calls him his fellow prisoner (**Phil 23**).

So Epaphras is the missionary pastor who proclaimed the gospel of hope to the Colossians at the beginning.

Here, God's sovereignty affects Paul's thankfulness. **Read 3-5a**

Now, I know what some of you are thinking: we see a lot about Paul being thankful here, but we don't see a lot about God being sovereign. But let me ask you a question: Why do we thank people? Because they give us something, right? The heart of all thankfulness come

from receiving things. I'm not thankful for the things I earn myself or do myself - because I did it. Thankfulness wells up in me when someone ***gives me*** something.

In fact, thanks is the proper response when someone gives us something. If someone gives us a gift, it's right to simply say "thank you." You can write a note or tell them in person but thanks is appropriate. If you don't give them thanks you're saying you basically don't need what they've given you or you could have done it yourself. You're insulting them.

Look over at **Rom 1:21** for a minute. Romans 1 is all about our need for the gospel message. How because of our sin we need the salvation that God offers through faith in Christ Jesus. But Paul makes an interesting mention of thankfulness here in **Rom. 1. Read 18-20**

So before we get to the issue of thankfulness, this what Paul is saying: the fact that God exists and is eternal and is powerful can be known just by taking a step outside and looking around at creation. But unbelievers love their sin, they don't want to submit to God and so they suppress the truth about God.

It'd be like you and me in front of the Sear's Tower in Chicago and you telling me all about who made the Sears Tower and the engineering it took and the workforce required and I say: Are you kidding me? This building wasn't made - and it certainly wasn't made by people. And there was no engineer. And you go: do you see the same building I see? It's obvious. That's what Paul is saying about looking around at the universe and knowing there's a God. He goes on. **Read 21-23**

This is amazing. What Paul brings up - the ultimate insult to God - is that these people don't give thanks to God. Instead, they worship all the things God has made instead of God himself.

This is like your best friend buying you a cake and a really nice present for your birthday and you looking them in the eye and saying, "you didn't get me that." It's an insult.

In contrast, the believer's life is defined by thankfulness. It's defined by the fact that Everything we have and everything we are is given to us from God. We have nothing on our own to contribute to him. Rather, it is God who gives us everything we have.

Look back at Col. 1:3. Read

So this is who Paul thanks: God, the Father of the Lord Jesus. Paul's prayers are primarily directed toward the Father. I'm not opposed to praying to Jesus or to the Spirit. After all, we worship one God. But it does seem as though there is an emphasis throughout the NT to pray to God. So Paul thanks God the Father.

But here's why he thanks God. **Read 4**

He thanks God for their faith in Christ and for their love that they have toward the saints. Why would he thank the Father for their faith and their love? Because they're from God.

Their faith in Christ is a gift from God.

Phil 1:29: For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.

The Jewish believers praise God in **Acts 11:18**. Why? Because Gentile believers were filled with the Spirit and saved. "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

It's God who gives us eternal life. And it's God who empowers us to love one another. Paul thanks God for their love. Again, why? Because God is working in them to love each other.

We looked at those verses earlier that God works in us and we work in God's power. So in no sense can we say that it's by our own power.

I'm reading a book right now with a few guys about prayer. The book is called *The Praying Life* by Paul Miller and so far it's a pretty good book. It's been very encouraging to spur on my own prayer life with a proper attitude. One of the things he brought up this last week is that all prayer stems from an attitude of helplessness. It stems from a need for God to intervene and do the work. If we think we can do something on our own, in our own strength, we don't need God. So what we have to come to grips with is that we need God's power to do anything that will last for the kingdom.

And that includes our ability to love one another. God calls us to a radical, self-sacrificial love that the world looks at as foolish. The world is about revenge, and keeping score, and you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. But that's not a supernatural love, is it? No, supernatural, Spirit-powered, Christ exalting love is laying down our lives even for our enemies. Why? Because we understand the radical concept that Jesus laid down his life for us - his enemies. When someone grabs a hold of that: that's love. That's a work of God that we can thank him for.

Now, why would someone trust in Christ? And why would anyone sacrificially love another?
Read 5

This is why people place their faith in Christ and love each other sacrificially: because they have a hope laid up for them in heaven. Sins washed away, an eternity of glory, and joy, and happiness in the presence of Jesus.

Following Jesus isn't just about escaping hell, though we get that. And it's not all about doing good things, though we're commanded to. But if that's all our gospel message is, it's an incomplete gospel.

Paul says in **Vs. 5** that this hope is what they first heard about in the gospel message. If the gospel is anything it is a message of hope for people.

And look at the way that the message of hope changes people. **Read 6**

When people hear the gospel message it changes them. They are radically transformed. And it doesn't matter if they're Americans, Canadians, Russians, Chinese, Brazilian, wherever - the gospel, by its nature, will grow and bear fruit. Paul says it increases - it grows. And what he means is that more and more people believe.

The gospel continually flourishes. Even in the darkest times, even in the most difficult situations. When the Iron Curtain fell and the west could actually make contact with people inside the Soviet states most people thought Christianity would be dead. Instead, there was a thriving church.

Same thing today in China, in Iran - Iran is the fastest growing church in the world. The gospel speeds ahead, it bears fruit and grows.

So we've seen God's sovereignty in changing our identity, we've seen it in his provision for which we give thanks. But I want to leave us with the ever present reminder about our responsibility. God does work, but true gospel work is always done through faithful people. The way we see God's sovereign love and grace displayed is through faithful ministry. **Read 7-8**

How did the Colossians hear the gospel? From Epaphras. They learned it from him. Which means he had to invest the time and energy and resources to teach it to them.

And he's called 2 things which I think are telling of any gospel ministry that we take part in: He's called a fellow servant - literally, a slave. True gospel ministry is always based in service. It's serving other people, even if that service is simply teaching them the gospel. True gospel service is never easy, never convenient. It takes dedication and sacrifice. Which is why he's called a servant.

He's also called a faithful minister. A minister is someone who gives something out. What was Epaphras giving out? What was he dispensing? He was dispensing truth, he was dispensing the Word of God in a faithful manner. Yes, he was a servant but he was a minister and a faithful one.

Whatever ministry God has called you to in life make sure that you are found faithful with it. It's better to be faithful with a few things in life than unfaithful with many.

You remember the parable of the talents in Matthew 25? One guy got 1 talent and wasted it. The others got 2 talents and 5 talents according to their ability. You know what Jesus said to the guy with 5 who did well? Well, done good and faithful servant. Do you remember what he said to the guy with 2 talents? The exact same thing.

Whatever God has given you in life to do, do it well. Be a faithful minister knowing your work will bring glory to our sovereign God.

Pray