

Colossians 1:1-14

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[0 : 00] Wonderful, but also profound. So let's read Psalm 1 together. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does, prospers. Not so the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Choice question, isn't it? When there was only one of things, it was so simple.

But now choice has engulfed us in every area of our life. And what is true in these circumstances is also true in the matter of faith. Someone approaching the question of what should I believe is confronted with a great number of choices.

[1 : 14] In 1996, in Heathrow Airport, an interdenominational chapel was opened. It caused a bit of a stir at the time. It wouldn't today, but it did then.

And Peter Sawyer, writing in the Telegraph, said, airline passengers of all faiths will be able to settle their pre-flight nerves by a quiet word with their own particular almighty.

And of course, that's the way faith is sometimes presented. It's a multiple choice question. And even if we start concentrating on Christianity, I was reading recently that within Christianity there are 36,000 separate denominations or groupings.

So someone coming to the question of, I'm interested in Christianity, is confronted by immense choice. And we need to have some idea of what the essentials of true Christianity are.

Some years ago, in the problem page of a national newspaper, this letter appeared from a concerned reader. She says, We recently moved house and want to be friendly to our neighbours.

[2 : 28] They seem nice people and have invited us to a party. However, I have discovered that it's actually a meeting of their Christian fellowship group.

We ought to encourage good neighbourliness, but I don't really want to mix with such people. What should we do? N.S. Godalming, Surrey.

And this was the reply from the newspaper's correspondent. First of all, don't worry, was the comment. But then this was added. Committed Christians may be tiresome, but as far as I know, they are not yet a dangerous cult built on brainwashing, unsuspecting new recruits.

So that's somebody's picture of Christianity. Tiresome, but not really likely to be over-intrusive in presenting their faith.

So I want us to look at this passage today in two ways. First of all, starting out with God, and then going on with God. Because we need to know, first of all, if we talk about starting out with God in the Christian sense, what do we mean by it?

[3 : 43] We see that Paul says in verse 2, he talks about these people who have faith in Christ. He says that they have a sense of fellowship, and also that they have a hope.

So we see that they have a core belief, that they have a sense of oneness in this belief and fellowship, and that they have a hope and a concept of life after death.

Well, that could be true of lots of religions, that these have these beliefs. But what makes Christianity different? We see in verse 5, as Paul continues, that you have already heard the things about the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you.

So there seems to be some link between this gospel and what Christians believe. So we ask ourselves, first of all, what is this gospel?

And we see, first of all, the deliverance God provides. Verse 13, notice that. He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness.

[4 : 52] Well, rescue obviously implies imprisonment or captivity. And this is the way the Bible describes those who are without Christ, that they are in the dominion of darkness.

They're not neutral. It's not the fact that they are not servants of Christ, and therefore they're not the servants of anyone else. The biblical concept is that we are either servants of Christ or servants of the devil.

Now, this doesn't go down well today, does it? And it didn't go down well in Jesus' time either, because when he presented this truth to Pharisees, suggesting that they were in some way constrained and bound and serving the devil, they resented the concept.

They didn't like that idea. But that is the way in which the Bible describes the condition of somebody outside of Christ who doesn't know Jesus Christ.

They're in the dominion of darkness. In other words, they're in need of freedom. And, of course, freedom can be a very elusive thing. Some people seek freedom in different ways, some in their career, some in family, and often it proves to be an illusion.

[6 : 07] I'm sure many of you will know the name of Jonathan Aitken, the discredited conservative MP. In his book, *Pride and Perjury*, you remember what happened, that he was imprisoned for perjury in 1999.

In his book, he explains his circumstances up to that point. In 1994, he was secretary to the Treasury and John Major's government. He came from a privileged background of Eton and Oxford. He was happily married. He had three children. He had good business contacts in the Middle East. And he was tipped as the next leader of the Conservative Party.

But he writes this, *Gnawing away inside me was a lack of inner peace. It was as though, having spent a lifetime wanting to climb a particular mountain, I had unexpectedly reached the final approach to the summit, only to find that there was not there worth the effort of the ascent.*

Not worth the effort of the ascent. A career which was full of promise. And so it was that he sought spiritual help and he became a Christian. And he was helped towards this in many ways by a man, Charles Coulson, whose name will be familiar to you.

[7 : 31] He had been one of Richard Nixon's advisors. And Coulson himself had been in prison, as Jonathan Aitken was shortly to be. Coulson because of his involvement in the Watergate conspiracy.

But this idea that success brings freedom, material success, if you only had more money, if you only had the right set of circumstances, the right job, then freedom would surely consist in that. But turning to a very different sort of person, one who had got to the top of his profession, the legendary rock musician, Jimi Hendrix, at the end of a concert in 1970, smashed his guitar, fell to his knees and stayed motionless, and then broke the stillness by asking, if you know real peace, I want you to visit me backstage.

Apparently, no one responded. And several days later, Jimi Hendrix, the rock legend, died from an overdose of drugs.

So here are two men who had in their possession the qualities that one normally thinks of outside Christianity, of providing freedom, fame, or success.

[8 : 53] But neither of these things did in the lives of these men. And so we find, when we return to our passage, that not only is it the case that we are in the dominion of darkness, but the consequences that we face in that position are serious.

We are under God's judgment, rightly. In Romans 3, 23, we are told that the wages of sin, what we rightly receive, is death. But the gift of God is eternal life.

God is a holy God. We are told that he can't bear unholiness, wickedness, that rightfully, wicked people will be judged.

But verses 13 and 14 tell us something else. They show us the forgiveness that we need. And it's couched in these terms, first of all, God has rescued us.

See that? Rescued us. Brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves in whom we have redemption. The thoughts of rescue and redemption are necessary if one is to escape this dominion of Satan.

[10 : 03] Redemption implied a price to be paid to free a slave. And Peter, in his epistle, puts it this way. Christ died, the righteous, for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.

How was that possible? How was Christ's death relevant to our salvation? Well, first, because of his perfection. Peter describes him. He committed no sin.

None of us could say that. No one can except Jesus Christ. And he comes to us as a substitute.

Again, Peter, he himself, he writes, Jesus Christ, bore our sins in his body on the tree.

How wonderfully this provision has been made. A redemption which only Christ could provide because of his perfection. but a substitution.

The price that we should have paid, he paid. That which we could not do for ourselves, he did. I don't know if any of you are fans of Le Miserable.

[11:16] Perhaps you've read the book or seen the musical versions of it. If you have, you'll know the story how Jean Valjean running on the run from prison, he spends a night in a monastery and he gets up early and he steals silver and he leaves the monastery but he's caught by the police and on his return he gives the improbable explanation that he'd been given this silver and clearly the police don't believe him.

But amazingly, Jean Valjean is supported by the abbot who says that's absolutely right but you have gone without the best. What about these two silver candlesticks you should have had?

And so the police are satisfied with his explanation and Jean Valjean is allowed to go free. But the abbot says this to him as he's about to leave the monastery.

He says as he encourages him to change his lifestyle, he says with this gift I have bought your soul for God.

Now that's a nice idea that by some act it's possible to buy one's soul for God. Perhaps a friend you're concerned of by some act of penance or sacrifice to buy their souls for God.

[12:43] But of course that's not the way it works. the price of a soul is the death of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only saviour. With his own blood he bought us and for our life he died.

As unconverted sinners we are in need of deliverance which neither our good deeds nor our penance nor the good deeds and prayers of others could accomplish.

Christ alone can and has paid that price of redemption and with that deliverance and the forgiveness of sins.

So how can we appropriate this? How does this become ours? Is this ours by right? Not at all.

There is a need for repentance. There is a need to turn from our sin to recognise our debt to be aware of our need.

The Christian writer Philip Yancey in his book Rumours of Another World writes of a website called www.notproud.com and this website provides people with the opportunity anonymously to confess their sin and it's extremely popular.

[14:06] people recognise the need for confession to unburden themselves the need for this elusive forgiveness and so confession to an internet website they feel in some way helps to relieve them of this burden but it's only Jesus who can do this.

In Christ alone our hope is found him says and that's true and at this point we ask ourselves do we know that salvation that only Jesus can give are we trusting him do we know him as our saviour has Christianity come to mean Christ has it come to mean to us a relationship with Jesus Christ this saviour who alone can meet God's demands and can provide the release the freedom from sin's dominion that's a thought we need to confront ourselves with and answer it honestly but becoming a Christian is a new beginning and of course not only do we need to start out with God but having started out there's a need to go on with God a maturity in Christian life my mother who lived to be a hundred was delighted to come across the phrase ageing is compulsory maturity is optional and what is true in the human sense is also true in the spiritual one if we know

Jesus Christ as our saviour we've been on the way longer today than we were yesterday and maybe that means many years but is there an evidence of maturity in our experience do people ever say to you at school what are you going to be when you grow up well maybe God's asking us that question when we think about our spiritual life what are you going to be when you grow up and there's a need to recognise Christian experience not just as a starting point and assurance of heaven that's a wonderful assurance to have but there needs to be a progression a growing and of course for the Christian it's important that first of all and that's the first characteristic there must be in the mature person a seeking of God's direction verse 6 tells us that Paul's prayer for these young Christians is that he asks that God would fill them with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding seeking

God's direction a Christian is one who recognises that he needs God's direction and indeed the apostle James encourages us because he writes that if we need wisdom we should ask of God and Jesus himself said to his followers I have called you my friends for everything that I learned of my father I have made known to you so we see from this that there is guidance and direction available to us fill me with the knowledge of your glorious will all your own good pleasure in thy child fulfill is the prayer of the Christian he is looking for God's direction so we ask ourselves what is the motive of looking for God's direction why should we do this is it just a matter of gaining more knowledge Paul writes to the Ephesians in a parallel passage to this one

I keep asking that the glorious father may give you the spirit of wisdom so that you may know him better the object of knowing God's direction is to develop this relationship relationship is a priority not just knowing more about God but knowing God and how does this come about well the word of God is there for our guidance and that must be our central and our main source but also circumstances help us as we seek to know God's will and also the advice of godly friends and I emphasize godly friends friends who will be faithful Bible says faithful are the wounds of a friend but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful and as we seek guidance I believe we have these sources available to us and there's necessary a discernment as we seek

[18:50] God's direction an understanding of scriptural principles at which we need to encourage in ourselves this discernment is something which is necessary particularly when our circumstances lead us in a direction which seems to be all going very well and yet there's a nagging feeling that it's not what God wants and there's no point in praying for guidance that is contrary to God's will even if the circumstances seem to suggest a favorable outcome remember Jonah God came and said to Jonah go to Nineveh and Jonah said not going there I'm going to Tarshish and so in his hometown Joppa he goes down to the quayside and lo and behold there's a ship there going to Tarshish how providential is that exactly where he wanted to go and so he goes on board buys a single to Tarshish and that's it well not quite because all that followed in terms of Jonah's experience was to bring him back to the point of obedience to God and we need to be wary and careful as we pray about circumstances that we're not really asking simply

God to endorse our will there needs to be a willingness an openness to accept the direction God gives leadership guidance is necessary in a church and it's important that as members of Christian fellowships that we pray for the leaders in our churches that they might be directed by God in their deliberation and discussion and so we see then that the first step in Christian maturity is seeking God's direction the second I believe is growing in Christ likeness see it in verse 10 there we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way growing Christ likeness how is this to be done two ways bearing fruit in every good work there's a public evidence of Christ likeness in this fruit bearing in every good work a public evidence by the good work of Christians Andy Patterson who was here a few weeks ago was talking about churches and their aim to do good churches do good and Christians do good the influence of Christians in the community is an influence for good we all know the great names don't we William Wilberforce William Carey a man who went to India in 1793 didn't return for 41 years was responsible for the translation of the Bible into 44 Indian languages an influence for good it would be inappropriate for me not to mention David Livingston on this 200th anniversary of his birth these are the if you like the big names but if I read just listen to these names and tell me what you think the common factor is the Red Cross the Royal National Institute for the Blind the RSPCA the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children the YMCA National Children's Homes now if you were to say the common factor is that they were all founded in the 1800s that would be right but the answer I'm looking for is that they were all Christians who founded these organisations and I was interested to see that even the RSPCA which isn't even about people was founded by Richard Martin in 1822 a Christian man Christians and good works should go together they're not doing good works to gain salvation but having come to enjoy salvation good works should be the characteristic of believers and so it is that this public evidence the bearing fruit is evident to the public but also there is an inner evidence too which is described as growing in the knowledge of God the private evidence of that our relationship as we encourage that to bring fruit in our lives so there's the two aspects of what it means to grow in Christ's likeness the outward demonstration of it by the quality of our lives which people can observe both Christian and non-Christian and this inner growing awareness of the knowledge of God for us as individuals a cultivating of that relationship the fourth thing that Paul prays for here for this group of

people that might become mature is that they might be strengthened by divine power see that in verse 11 strengthened with divine power that's his prayer to what end first of all he speaks of great endurance being needed and that was certainly true of the first century church and not just then but since we are aware of some of the shocking statistics of Cambodia where under the rule of Pol Pot 90% of Christians were killed in biblical times someone has pointed out in the book of Acts in these early days of the church in the 28 chapters of Acts there are 56 accounts of persecution it's an easy sum to do isn't it 28 chapters 56 incidents of persecution it's estimated too that every year 300,000 [25 : 08] Christians die for their faith every year great endurance is needed and of course these trials come in many forms we've been thinking of extreme forms involving people persecuted to the point of death but in our ordinary experience of life endurance is needed I'm sure many of you know the name of Johnny Erickson who was born in 1950 one of four sisters living in a comfortable lifestyle in America she became a Christian at the age of 15 but on the 30th of July 1967 aged 17 she was swimming in Chesapeake Bay with her sister Kathy and other friends and in an accident when diving from a boat into shallow water she broke her neck and has for the rest of her life been paralysed in the months following her accident she argued with God as to why this should be and what circumstances could possibly be to her benefit from such a terrible occurrence but as the years passed when she was into her early 20s she began to be known as a speaker speaking helpfully on the question of suffering and how

Christians should deal with it and so on and in one of her books she recalls this incident in her early 20s it was early on in her experience of visiting conferences and she was thrilled to be going with her sisters to this conference it was a week's conference missionary conference where many people were speaking about how God had blessed them in the various parts of the world where they worked and at the end of the conference the plan was that on the Sunday night Johnny would speak to this whole group but during the week she'd been talking to young people about her experience of paralysis and how God could help but on the Saturday night before the final meeting her friends were pushing her on her wheelchair across the car park and the lady who was pushing her slipped in the ice and the wheelchair tipped forward and Johnny with no ability to resist was thrown on her face onto the tarmac she broke her nose she had a head wound and various other injuries and she writes in her book how as the young people who had been at the conference gathered round she began to reason with God and say why should this happen and why my face it's the only part of my body that has any feeling have I not suffered enough with paralysis that this should happen and then as she began to think about this and all of this while lying waiting for the arrival of an ambulance she began to think well what about these young people that I've been speaking to this week encouraging them and so on and what about God does it matter to God how I react to this and she came to the conclusion that it didn't and so it was that she was able to go ahead and speak on a Sunday night stitches on her forehead broken nose abandoned her planned subject she had become skillful in being able to paint by holding a brush on her mouth and did beautiful paintings and she was going to be selling these and so on but instead she decided rather than that to talk about this experience and how God is faithful to us even in these experiences of life which are the sort of thing that we certainly wouldn't welcome great endurance the Christian life is not easy endurance is required in it and Paul adds another dimension patience that's even more difficult used to be a rhyme that said patience is a virtue possessed if you can seldom found in women and never in a man I see some smiles of recognition around the audience as we say that but patience is required patience is necessary for example in our prayers what about these folks you've prayed for for years does it weigh heavily on your heart keep praying patience in our witness people who we have told about the Lord we've explained the gospel message to them and as yet there's been no response how we're encouraged to persist in this patience and endurance and last of all we see that this evidence and patience are to be evident in an attitude of rejoicing in the father's inheritance verses 11 and 12 rejoicing in the father's inheritance joyfully giving thanks to the father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light

Paul talks in Romans about the fact that we didn't receive a spirit that makes us slaves but rather one that makes us sons and therefore we are the inheritors of this inheritance God provides the starting point as was our own starting point today focuses on this deliverance that is necessary that God provides and our acceptance of that salvation brings us into the availability to us of this inheritance he brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves in whom we have redemption the

forgiveness of sins for the Christian there is an eternal inheritance can I ask you do you think much about heaven you should how important it is to remind ourselves that there's more than this heaven the place where God is heaven the place where there's an absence of sin the home of the saints how wrong it is to think that

Christians are those who are so heavenly minded that they're no earthly use one writer has pointed out that the more heavenly minded we are the more earthly use we become how necessary to have that perspective so as we close today we ask ourselves first of all have we come to know Jesus Christ as our saviour have we started out and if so are we going on with him are we seeking God's direction are we growing in Christ's likeness are we strengthened by this divine power are we rejoicing in the father's inheritance one Christian writer talks of an elderly relative of his an old lady who when she died she was buried under an oak tree in Maryland and a simple stone was put in the place where she was buried it gave her name her date of birth and the date of her death one word underneath it waiting but we need to ask ourselves waiting for what if we don't know

[32 : 33] Jesus Christ as our saviour it's waiting for judgment but if we do know him it's waiting in order that we might enter into this inheritance of the saints this glorious provision I was reading the verses this morning Jesus says let not your heart be troubled and he goes on to speak of in his father's house many mansions how important to remind ourselves that this is open to us by repentance and faith in Christ not by works of righteousness that we have done but according to his mercy he saved us the last hymn gives us the opportunity as it says to bring our lives as a daily offering in worship to the servant king shall we sing this hymn together number 821 821 821 from heaven you came helpless babe entered our world your glory veiled not to be served but to serve and give your life that we might live 821 pray may the god of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our lord jesus christ that great shepherd of the sheep equip you with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through jesus christ to whom be glory for ever and ever amen amen amen