

The background of the cover is a photograph of ancient ruins in a valley. In the foreground, there are several tall, white marble columns, some standing and some partially ruined. The middle ground shows a long, straight street lined with more columns and buildings. In the background, there are hills with sparse vegetation and a large, dark, tiled roof of a building. The overall scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

Useful  
in the  
Kingdom  
Devotions on  
Colossians

Louis Nel

# **Useful in the Kingdom**

**A Series of Reflections  
on the book of Colossians**

Louis Nel

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## **Foreword**

To be a Christian is quite easy. However, when it comes to practicing your faith, it becomes somewhat more challenging - it requires effort from you.

At the turn of the century - the year 2000 - Ballito Family Church received a mandate to undertake an internet ministry. Initially, daily devotions, written by various pastors, were used to reach out to congregants. However, since 2002, these daily devotions have been generated by a member of the congregation and are distributed worldwide to fulfill Jesus' command in Matthew 28.

My sincere prayer is that this series of reflections will mean as much to you as it has meant to me while writing it.

Louis Nel

# **My Purpose on Earth?**

## **Introduction to Colossians**

What is the purpose of Christian believers on earth? Why are we here? The answer is actually very simple: because Christ is here! He is the One who came and still makes all the difference. With His coming a new light fell on everything that up to that point was known as religion and He gave worship of God a whole new experience! So if we want to know who we are as Christians, we must first know Christ. We need to know who He is, what He has done for us and what it all means to us. These things become clear from the letter to the Colossians. This book teaches us to look at Christianity from a new perspective, one of practical Christianity.

Most congregations today are very privileged to have one or more dedicated, learned leaders, a pastor, reverant or other trained person to take the lead and minister the Word. However, there are congregations that are not so privileged. Colossians was just such a congregation!

Colossians did not have such a learned leader to help them with their daily spiritual problems. Despite this, however, these Christians not only had to survive spiritually, but they also had to be the missionaries who had to carry the Christian faith to all the heathen in the city of Colossae. The problem, however, was that young Christians could easily go astray without the necessary guidance, or worse, that they could begin to give up Jesus' unique authority! He often became just another way to reach out to God!

One of the members of the congregation, Epraphas, was a very concerned man. He saw what was happening and he could no longer hide his concern about the state of affairs. The only person he knew who would have advice for their problem was the great missionary Paul. However, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Epraphas' concern was so great that he decided to travel all the way to Rome to discuss the problem with Paul.

Paul listened intently to Epraphas' sad story and then wrote a letter to the congregation to guide them on the right path. It was no easy task! He had to stay with the core of the Gospel, because the congregation members were confronted with non-Christian ideas where the emphasis often fell on what one had to "do" to get to God.



Of course, it sounds logical and very noble to ask what I have to do to get to God. With the Colossians, however, the answer was to obey all kinds of cultic laws. This involved, among other things, honouring angels and imitating all kinds of religious practices. So it was not even about Christ at all! Paul had to make it very clear to this congregation that without Christ and His redemptive work, no salvation is possible.

Paul wrote several letters, many of which got lost. A total of thirteen of his letters were eventually included in the New Testament. As we can already deduce, this was one of the letters he wrote while in prison in Rome, somewhere between 61 and 63 AD. He also wrote several other letters from prison, such as those to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon.

Just something about the ancient city of Colossae: it was built on a major trade route through the Lycus River Valley in the Roman province of Asia Minor, present-day Turkey. Colossae was especially famous for a beautiful dark red material, colossus made there. But Colossae's importance as a business centre diminished significantly around 100 BC, when the neighbouring city of Laodicea was founded. The two towns, along with the neighbouring Hierapolis, were destroyed by an earthquake in 17nC and then again during the reign of Nero in 60 AD. Colossiae was rebuilt after each earthquake, but it never regained its early prominence. By 400 AD the city no longer existed and today there are only ruins left of the once important trading city.

The city had a mixed Greco-Jewish culture, which was also reflected in the

congregation. Paul lived for a long time in Ephesus, about 200 km from Colossae. Some of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages heard the message from Paul in Ephesus and so the Gospel spread to neighbouring villages. In this way Epraphas probably also heard the good news and in turn recounted it in Colossiae. Every believer was, in fact, a "lay preacher." However, when things did not make sense anymore, Epraphas turned to Paul for help.

Today we as believers want to sit back comfortably and only pay the pastor to preach the Word. However, when we read the Colossians letter, we must conclude that every believer today still has the task of practically participating in the preaching of the Gospel in one way or another. Let us learn again what it really means to be a Christian believer.

Prayer:

Lord, I want to thank you this morning for making me Your child. I realize that it involves a lot of responsibilities for me. Help me to practically practise my Christianity according to Your will.

## **We are a family**

### **Colossians 1: 1.2**

Who ever still writes a letter today? I'm talking now about a real, genuine letter written with a fountain pen on paper! Yes, I know that the postal service is almost non-existent and even if you post a letter, I doubt that it would reach its destination. On top of that, the electronic media has made everything so convenient for us that we have totally un-learned how to write a letter. Even a letter sent by email has become rare because social media like Whatsapp has caused a few cryptic words in a message to be enough!

Do you still remember the days of a handwritten letter? Oh, how I think back with great nostalgia to my army days, when I watched the dust trail of the army

postman's Jeep somewhere in the veldt with great excitement. In his post bag there was a letter addressed to me and my heart was pounding when the postman finally called out my name. With excited hands I opened it very carefully. It was of course from my Mosbolletjie! I inhaled the scent that clung to the paper deep into my lungs and saw her shy, laughing face in front of me, woven into the scent of the letter. Then I sat down flat on the ground under a tree and drank in every word and read it over and over again. Oh what bliss! I really hovered on a cloud .....

Paul was a man who understood and mastered the art of letter writing very well. He begins his letter with a preface that says something about himself, just in case someone might not know who he is. He introduces himself as an apostle, a special messenger of Christ. Of

course, there were many people who doubted his apostleship, for he was not one of the twelve who were with Jesus for three years. However, after His ascension, Jesus appeared to Paul in person one day on the road to Damascus. It gives him the authority of Jesus and of course the authority of God. Paul eventually becomes a true emissary when his congregation in Antioch sends him to the heathen lands to preach the Gospel.

Because Paul's eyes were weak, he dictated his letters to a secretary who did the writing for him. However, Paul was not the true writer. Indeed, we know today that the Holy Spirit was actually the true Author of this letter, just like all the other books in the Bible. Paul also mentioned a co-author, Timothy. We do not know exactly where he fit in. Maybe

he co-wrote the letter? Or was he perhaps the secretary?

Paul did not just write this letter to a community in general. This is a very personal letter, addressed to his own "blood family". Indeed, they are "God's people", but it goes much deeper than just that, because they are also his "brothers", his immediate family. We can never know what it really means, until we realize how a hugely important role the family bond played in the population around the Mediterranean. The family was a close, unbreakable unit. They would defend their family members with their lives at all costs, even if the person was wrong! So when Paul calls them brothers, he emphasizes how strong the bond was between him and the believers of Colossae, even though he had never met them in person before. Despite this, however, there was still that bond that



bound them together as a "family". We see also in the letter each time these family terms, such as father, brothers, and inheritance.

Given the importance of close family ties, this way of addressing is precisely telling of the bond that binds them as Christians. Also in the blessing greeting, Paul calls God "our Father", which means that God, like a Father, takes care of all the brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul is therefore a child who asks his Father to be good to the other children. Will our Father ever refuse it?

Paul mentions that the people living in Colossae are God's people. By that he means that Colossae is indeed their earthly abode, but at the same time their spiritual abode is actually in Christ!

However, God has miraculously provided that this personal letter be

preserved and recorded in our Bible today. It is therefore addressed just as personally to me and you and everyone who reads it today. Yes, we are still close relatives of Paul as the Colossians were. Even more: you and I are also close relatives of each other! There is the unbreakable family bond of Jesus that binds us together today and makes each other brothers and sisters in Jesus, even though there are often big differences in our appearance, how we think and react. Let us love one another with true brotherly love, just as Paul prescribed it to us and as Jesus lived it as an example for us.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, that I too can be part of that blessed family of God. Teach me to truly love my spiritual brothers and sisters intensely.

## **Fruits of Gratitude**

### **Colossians 1: 3-8**

There is a fierce battle on the rugby field. The Willd Boars master the ball from the loose scrum, and then Gerry is ready to plant that ball behind the goal line. The problem is that he does not have the ball. This precious object is firmly in Pete's grip, where he tries to worm himself loose from his opponents. "Pete, here Pete! Please pass it to me!" Gerry pleads.

Then Pete throws the ball to Gerry. Gratefully Gerry looks his teammate in the eye: "Thank you Pete, I have been waiting all afternoon to get the ball. Thank you for giving me the honour of being able to handle the ball, I truly appreciate it! You are a true friend!"

Absurd! Laughable! That's not how you play rugby, is it? Long before Gerry could say his "thank you" he had already been brought down flat! You do not say thank you to your teammate during a rugby match, because everyone is only doing their duty! After all, that's what is expected of him. Sincere thanks to God only.

The family members of the Middle East from 2000 years ago also did not usually say thank you to each other. There the family was absolutely everything and all the family members were dependent on each other. They did all sorts of things for each other without ever saying "thank you", because it is expected that things will naturally happen. The same was true for larger groups, a family group, tribe or even a nation.

If a congregation functions properly, every congregation member has his task

- something he does with passion. Then there is no need for thanking over and over again. Then you have to thank God for keeping the church on fire so that they function productively. This is why Paul did not thank the people in the congregation, but rather thanked God for the congregation, for their faith and love for fellow-believers that was so obvious.

There is no doubt that there were problems in the congregation, because Epraphas came to Paul for help with these problems. Paul, however, did not react by accusing them of all kinds of irregularities. He first had to earn the right to speak to them. He explained to the congregation that they, like him, were part of God's Gospel that flourished throughout the world. He then joined their love and faith and then described what actually happens when the Gospel is preached. It is like fruit on

a tree, fruit of love and faith. The question is: where does the fruit come from? It starts at the roots without which the fruit will never be able to exist. We can describe it as God's grace.

How does Paul's argument work?

In verse 4 he mentions that they have faith and love based on hope, which of course stems from the Gospel they have heard. The Gospel, however, not only came to them, but it spread throughout the world and it blooms and bears fruit. However, the origin of it all is the grace of God. This is the path that the Gospel walks.

Faith and love consist of a vertical as well as a horizontal relationship. Faith, or trust in Jesus is vertical, because you have accepted with all your heart who He is and what He has done and still does. On the horizontal level, your faith

works by reaching out to fellow-believers in love. It is not an emotional kind of love, but a voluntary obligation to care for each other, just as it happens within a family, where parents and children care for each other. Of course, the Holy Spirit gives you the power for this, because out of your own strength it is impossible!

However, an extremely important element is needed to be able to believe and love, namely Christian hope. This hope is not something uncertain, but it stands firm as one of God's infallible promises. Yes of course you do not know when that what you are hoping for will happen, but that it will happen, is a definite fact. After all, God guarantees it! This is why Paul says that hope is kept in heaven.

What happens when someone is touched by the Gospel? If we look at nature, we see that when you plant a

seed, it starts to grow and it eventually bears fruit and spreads. Exactly the same thing happens with the Gospel. When it is planted in someone's heart, the end result is that it grows, bears fruit and spreads. It is, by the way, not the task of the pastor to spread the Gospel, but that of every believer. Paul tells the church in Colossae that this is happening all over the world and that it should not be otherwise in their church. Then he also speaks directly to you and me, because it should not be different in our congregation either. Every believer has the task of bearing fruit of love blossoming in our lives and of spreading the Gospel.

The question is: do we ever do that?

Prayer:

Lord, please make me and my congregation fruitful, and give us the fire



of Your Holy Spirit in our hearts to carry  
out the wonderful Gospel of Jesus!

## **Singing in a Choir**

### **Colossians 1: 9-14**

I do not get excited about TV shows. However, there was one a few years ago that got me really excited: Varsity Sing. The wonderful harmonies and heavenly music gave me goosebumps and often even tears of affliction!

For as long as I can remember, I have been involved in choral singing. In primary school I started singing in a choir and later I sang in various church choirs and thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it. One I especially enjoyed singing in was the Rubato Choir, an interchurch choir group from Ballito that unfortunately had to cease to exist a few years ago. To sing choir was for me probably one of the biggest highlights of my life. Now, however, I must be content

to just sing with the congregation in church!

Of course, a performance is the highlight for a choir, but every rehearsal excited me and I thoroughly enjoyed each one. Singing alone is not exactly exciting right now, but singing along with others who are all enthusiastic makes me excited. Hearing how the wonderful harmonies flow around you to form a piece of music that gives you goosebumps is something that excites me a lot.

However, it is wonderful to have a choir leader you can trust, especially if he has composed the music himself. To know that he knows every voice through and through, because he wrote each one personally. Each choir member clings to his lips to learn and master a piece of music. He teaches you exactly what feeling he desires and what sounds the choir should produce. And when

someone sings wrong, he is lovingly corrected. When he conducts, everyone in the choir follows him closely and everyone tries to sing exactly as he conducts.

It is a process to train a choir from scratch to one that produces the sweetest sounds with feeling and harmony. It is also a process by which God's believers are trained to sing in His heavenly choir. No, I'm not talking about the choir of one day, but the choir that is already singing here on earth in the world. And indeed, there is also a variety of voices in this choir of God. There are altos and sopranos, bases, tenors and baritones. We all have different gifts, but together we form a unit that in harmony can take our breath away.

Like an ordinary choir, we cannot just suddenly start singing and make heavenly music. There needs to be

training and hard training. Each of us must listen very carefully to the instructions of the Great Choir Master. All the instructions are of course already written down in the big "Choir Book", the Bible, so we can constantly look up exactly what the Choir Leader wants from us. But because He personally wrote the Book of Songs, it is of utmost importance to listen to exactly what intonations He expects from us.

The longer you work with a choir leader, the easier it becomes to just look at his facial expression and know exactly what he wants you to do. The better I get to know the Great Choir Master, the easier it becomes for me to know what He wants me to do. When I stay away from a choir rehearsal or two, I quickly start to forget how to sing. Regular attendance at God's choir rehearsals is just as

important so that my memory will stay fresh and I can stay on my toes.

If someone sings solo, it's not choir anymore. The charm of choral singing lies precisely in the fact that the voices flow together to form a harmony. And the same is true of God's choir, that believers work together to do what God desires. I have just said how excited I am about a choir rehearsal. Believers excite each other to come together for a practice. I jump up and down every Sunday from exuberance and I cannot wait for it to be time for the worship service, because then I see everyone again and we talk and strengthen each other. That practice together is one big celebration! And so also I enjoy Bible study opportunities and Saturday mornings drinking coffee and hanging out with the men of our congregation.

Every occasion where I can be with other believers is a feast for me!

But one thing you need to understand clearly. A choir practices with one goal in mind: to give a performance when they are ready. The choir of God cannot just practice all the time either! You have to work towards a goal: to deliver a performance.

This morning my prayer for you is that you will not just try to sing a solo somewhere in the shower, but that you will become part of the choir, if you are not already. Familiarize yourself with every note and word in the Choir Book. There will definitely be terms you do not understand. Join a Bible school or Bible study group. There you will learn what the terms mean, so that you can better understand the instructions of the Choir Leader.

And lastly, do not just exercise - take an active part!

Prayer:

Lord, I'm so excited about every choir rehearsal. Thank you for that great delicacy that you have given us. Please give me the zeal and want to participate in many performances!



## **The Earth Is Destroyed!**

### **Colossians 1: 15-20**

There is an imbalance in creation!

What a terrible thing to say! A few years ago, the then Minister of Environmental Affairs, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, made the shocking statement that the most beautiful Cape would turn into a Karoo landscape in a few decades, and that there would be no question of the beautiful vineyards for which that landscape is so world famous. He does not even mention the incredible Cape fynbos - surely it will disappear too! Vineyards can be replaced, but the fynbos, which only occurs here - it is irreplaceable!

With great concern we see how nature begins to change at an alarming rate. Fear envelops our hearts when we look

at the natural phenomena. Climate change is showing it's colours worldwide and we feel so powerless. Terrible droughts wreak havoc on our farms while at the same time devastating floods plunge the country into chaos, as has just happened in KwaZulu-Natal. What did we do with the earth? Here and there someone desperately tries to save what is to be saved, but everything feels so powerless! The superiority one fights against is so overwhelmingly large. With horror we see millions of years old glaciers in the North Pole starting to melt and crumble. And we know that we as humans are largely responsible for this. If only we ..... We've ruined everything in just a few years and trying to fix our mess now is a totally impossible affair. Everything looks so lost! The earth is on a downhill path at an astonishing speed.

My family and I were relaxing once in Mitchell Park in Durban. It is a beautiful garden in the city, and the city fathers, in their wisdom, also established a bird park there years ago. With great melancholy I look at the many colourful birds that spend their lives in wire cages. Also the other animals, such as marmosets, raccoons, giant turtles, all enclosed in cages so that people could admire them. What struck me most was a family of meerkats in a beautifully decorated cage. One guy was lying on the sand with his belly up, as if lying in the Kalahari's sun and baking, tragically deprived of the wide sandy plains where he could dig for scorpions and bugs in the dunes.

In stark contrast to my pitch-black Jeremiah, the hymn that Paul sings for the Colossians is a hymn of praise where the Son of God is glorified.

It is not only on a material level where man has interfered and ruined everything, but also on a spiritual level. The people of Paul's time, for example, wanted to see their gods. They wanted concrete proof of the existence of those gods. Thus "human" gods such as Diana, Zeus, Venus and all their minions were created. However, Paul comes to say in this moving poem that this bunch is totally meaningless. Although God cannot be seen, He is still visible in Jesus who is exalted above all powers and human gods. Jesus is even exalted above creation, for after all, everything was created by Him. What's more: everything - the whole creation is maintained by Him!

And now we may want to ask Jesus: if He then maintains creation, why does He allow man to destroy His creation?

Of course, we do not have answers to the many troubling questions that often plague your mind, but one thing I do know: God is in control. The earth is but an insignificant part of God's mighty creation. Even the universe we explore with our mighty telescopes is a speck of God's handiwork. Even greater than all this is heaven, God's abode. There is everything so much different and bigger and more glorious than the sad earth that we are destroying at an alarming rate. Indeed, Jesus foretold that He would put an end to the earth and that you and I would live with Him in the indescribable beauty of heaven. Though we are co-responsible for this destruction of the earth, Jesus, in His great mercy, effected reconciliation for us, so that we may taste that wonderful glory with Him.

Yes, with fear and trembling we stare at the end that is on the way, the end of our life that is so inevitable, the horror of death. The end of the earth puts a strain on our hearts. But Jesus rose from the dead and prepared for us the way to the brand new, wonderful life that awaits us. Where then is the sting of death? With that in mind, we can only look with interest at the efforts of mankind to try to destroy the earth before God does. The involuntary question that comes to mind is: is man not perhaps trying to play God?

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for Your wonderful creation that we can still enjoy, for the flowers, the field, the blue sky and the stars that You have made. But I look forward with great longing to heaven which is still so much more beautiful,

and untouched by our people's urge to  
destroy!

## **Reconciled with God**

### **Colossians 1: 21-23**

In three verses Paul describes what the Colossians were like, how they are now after Jesus' atonement and how they should be further on.

Paul begins by reminding them of what they were before, before they knew God. This is not a pretty picture because they were hostile to God. No normal person ever wants to hear that he is an enemy of God! Yet Paul claims that they were God's enemies. Indeed, even a “good” person, someone who leads a beautiful and peaceful life, can be an enemy of God. The fact is that if you do not truly worship and serve God, then you are automatically part of the ranks of the devil and we know that the devil is God's greatest adversary and enemy!



One of the great problems that such an enmity causes is that it builds a wall between you and God. You are, in other words, removed from God. Paul therefore writes to the Colossians that they were far from God. One of the great characteristics of such a life far from God is a sinful way of life. It can mean one of many things, such as an obvious sinful life where you recklessly violate God's law. However, it can also be a secret sinful life, where your outward appearance is very beautiful, but you are dirty on the inside. Or it could just be that you are not doing what God asks of you.

However, when someone is willing to walk the full path with God and place his full trust in God alone, wonderful things happen in your life. The greatest miracle, however, is that a person who is a total enemy of God is snatched from the dirty, dark pool of lostness and washed clean

by Jesus' precious blood in order to become acceptable to God. Yes, such a person can even be adopted as God's own child! There are many legends of people who can testify to this, people who have moved from a life of sinful enmity towards God to redeemed and useful citizens in the Kingdom of God.

Paul also writes here to the Colossians of similar things that happened to them. Although they were at first far from God and lived in enmity with God, God brought about reconciliation and made peace with them. He gave His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross so that in this way He took upon Himself the punishment for sin that they should actually receive and thus paid the full price so that they could receive forgiveness. The wonderful thing is that God totally forgave the sin in which they

were plagued and made them "spotless and blameless."

But it is not only the people of Colossae who benefit from it. You and I benefit from it in exactly the same way today. We can have that same atonement if we only believe in Jesus as Saviour.

However, God is also now asking the Colossians to provide a return. They can't just sit down now and do nothing! They must remain steadfast in the faith, "firmly established and steadfast, without moving away from the hope that the gospel brings." (v.23). In other words, like a pole planted firmly! Of course, these things also apply to you and me today.

However, we must understand very well that this "consideration" we provide has absolutely nothing to do with our salvation. With our very best efforts, we

cannot bring about our own salvation, or buy God's favour with it. It is purely by grace that we are saved. Jesus did absolutely everything necessary for our salvation. We do these things only for one single reason, to say thankyou for what God has already done for us.

Paul warns the Colossians to stand firm and strong in the faith and not to let go of the faith. The question is, how do you do it? One of the biggest reasons why people begin to waver and become detached from their faith is when they begin to become lukewarm and no longer practice fellowship with other believers. "I watch church on TV" is a very common excuse to stay away from worship services. There is nothing wrong with watching church on TV, but it should never be a substitute for a live gathering for you, unless it cannot be helped. One of the main functions of worship and

other gatherings is precisely so that believers can strengthen and support one another. The message is very important, but it is only one of the elements of a worship service. If you only watch the message on TV, you are missing out on all the rest.

If we do not stand firm in our faith, we will be torn apart and engulfed by the enemy. Let's do everything necessary to stand firm.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for people like Paul who could set an example for us to work hard in Your Kingdom. Help me to be alive and submissive to You, and to always stand firm in the faith You have given me.

## **Useful in the Kingdom**

### **Colossians 1: 24-29**

South Africa's beloved farmer-preacher, Uncle Angus Buchan, had a very shaky start to his preaching career. Most people were very sceptical about this simple farmer who wanted to preach. When Angus began to spread the Word, people (even pastors!) slammed doors in his face. However, he did not give up, and God Himself opened doors wide for him. A child of God who takes his faith seriously can usually expect opposition, because the devil is not happy about it when someone takes his faith seriously. Indeed, people have tried on several occasions to slam doors in my face with this internet ministry, but God is great and omnipotent, even much greater than the people who are trying to stop the

Gospel! He opened many large doors, so I often had to watch in amazement as miracles happened and the Word of God spread throughout the world.

A few years ago, the Dutch Reformed Church of KwaZulu-Natal began to train ordinary members to preach. I was very privileged to be able to attend this training. And again, virtually every person who completed the training was greeted with opposition. Many congregation members refused to accept them simply because they were not ordained pastors. I myself have experienced such opposition and I have even experienced that some people refuse to attend the worship service that day when I preach.

However, when Paul speaks of suffering, we cannot really join in the conversation, because what he went through for the sake of the gospel is nothing less than a

thriller. To begin with, he was in jail while writing this letter. He was imprisoned several times, often under very dire and painful circumstances. He was chased away like a bad dog several times, and he was even stoned on occasion - stoned until people thought he was dead. Miraculously, he survived it! And then he was also whipped a few times - beaten with a whip until he was broken. Then he was chained to his back with those raw wounds and his feet were locked in blocks in a dirty dungeon.

Are you and I really willing to endure a little suffering for the sake of the Gospel? Are we willing to stand up when the holy Name of God is abused? Are we willing to confess Jesus' Name in all circumstances? Even when friendship is compromised? Or when it could harm my business? Would I even risk my life for the Gospel? If we just listen to the



stories told by organizations like Open Doors, about the persecution that believers are willing to go through in some Muslim countries, then you can stand in amazement!

However, there is another point that Paul wants to bring home to us, and that has implications for pastors as well as church members.

Paul sees his commission to teach people so that they can reach spiritual maturity. Today, therefore, it is usually the task that every pastor has. The deeper meaning of this is that the greatest task of these church leaders is to train Christian believers to be full-fledged disciples of Jesus, disciples who, among other things will carry the Word of God, each in his own special way.

There are legions of possibilities on how to do this. Some are going to do home visits and see to people's spiritual needs. Others visit the elderly who are often very lonely and hungry for company. Someone else again can encourage people, especially those who are grieving or suffering. Others may intercede or lead a cell group or send encouraging messages. In our congregation we have a team that has a service for the Zulu-speaking domestic workers in our town every Saturday. There is wonderful singing and praying together and then a message. We distribute free Bibles to them and give food and something to drink. Each member of the team has a different task. Mine is to deliver the message. Petro leads the praise and worship and Ria does the organizing. The ladies from the church's pancake team provide us with

delicious food and other congregation members provide Bibles so that everyone who attends the services can own their own Bible. Yes, indeed, some of the homeless people attending the services can hold a Bible here for the first time in their lives! And so we carry the gospel message forth together.

There are many ways in which each of us can be helpful in God's Kingdom, helping each one to carry forth the gospel message in his own way. This is not the job of a pastor, but ordinary members like you and me. Find your niche in God's Kingdom!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for people like Paul and Angus who came to set an example for us on how to resist suffering, and to be truly useful in Your Kingdom. Please give

me the insight, zeal and creativity to truly  
be a useful citizen of Your Kingdom.

## A Solid Foundation

### Colossians 2: 1-7

I have worked as a draughtsman for many years and I have sometimes received interesting requests, to design buildings that are often very different from just the ordinary dwelling-house. So a few years ago I received a request from a lifeguard club in Ballito to design a building for them on the beach, from where they could watch the people frolicking in the sea. They were not happy that the building stood **ALONGSIDE** the beach. No, it had to stand right **ON** the beach! I started considering all options how you would anchor this building in such a way that a rough sea might not undermine its foundations, and eventually I got advice from an engineer. His immediate answer

was that he would be satisfied with nothing less than that the foundations be anchored on solid rock.

Money to build the place was very tight, but the man was adamant and so the endless digging began in the loose sand for solid rock. After a great struggle and a lot of sweating by the poor builder, the foundations were finally thrown on a solid rock below the water level and so the construction work could begin.

Not far from this little building, someone else planned a large, expensive building soon after, very close to the beach but high up on the dune. When the construction work started, the city engineer paid a visit and he recommended that the building's foundations rest on concrete pillars that were sunk to solid rock. For the developer it was just too much effort and money for a building far above sea level

that was safe – or was it? And so he followed his own head!

Ballito's infamous storm came in March 2007 and the lifeguard building was peppered with giant waves. It's windows were smashed and everything inside the building was destroyed, but the building itself remained firmly standing on it's rock foundation. The other building was less "fortunate" because the sea came and washed away all the sand of the "mountain" on which it was built. Although not a single wave even hit the building, it collapsed.

You can compare your faith with building. The Holy Spirit gives you that precious gift called "faith." With this gift you have a "ticket" to eternal life, in Jesus Christ who paid for it. However, this gift of faith is very special, because you cannot just wrap it up and store it somewhere in a cupboard! No, it needs

to be used, trained and properly established. All too often, Christians build their house of faith just as cheaply-cheaply, without first laying proper foundations. Being able to truly establish your faith is not easy! It takes hard work! I have often encountered believers complaining about their problems. At first glance you see that the biggest problem is that the person does not have a foundation under his faith building.

The question is: how do I build that foundation? There are a few elements involved: The first and most important is prayer. Prayer is your channel of communication with God. Make sure there is a proper connection. Praying does not necessarily mean just worshipping God in your inner room. This means that throughout the day, even at work, you also pinch off moments and speak to Him quietly, just



talking. Be aware of God's presence wherever you go.

The second element is to want to know more about this wonderful God and His will for your life. Study His word. There are so many wonderful Bible study guides available. I use The Bible Millennium very intensively, because it is an all-in-one study guide. Join a Bible school or Bible study group. Our congregation has such a group where the discussions are broadcast weekly on Youtube. Take a look at [bit.ly/bgkbyb](http://bit.ly/bgkbyb) This is a great way to make your foundation truly solid. By the way, just reading a devotional daily is not a Bible study .....

The third element in building your house of faith is to put into practice the power you gain in prayer and the knowledge and insight you gain in your Bible study. Practice the things you have learned.

How do you do that? The first step is to communicate regularly with other Christians and to strengthen one another. You do this at church, cell groups, men's gatherings, etc. However, it should not stop at that as this is only the workshop where you learn and get inspiration. You must also put your shoulder to the wheel and pass on your knowledge to others. Practice your Christian love outwardly in your own unique way. In this way you not only help to expand the Kingdom of God, but the bonus is that you further strengthen the foundation for your own faith.

Storms in life are inevitable. The Christian believer whose house of faith was built so cheaply will suffer great damage when the storm comes, but the one who worked hard on that foundation and established it on Christ, will stand.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the zeal to be of service in Your Kingdom today, and constantly remind me of Your presence. Also help me to strengthen the foundation for my faith.

## Trapped

### Colossians 2: 8-19

Our lives today are dominated by so many unnecessary things, the creations of our own greed. Now just look at, for example, how a TV set dominates our lives! Often we get so addicted to soap operas that we never miss a single episode! Other important things then often get in the way, just because the soapie comes first!

We had a pastor in our congregation years ago who was so attached to Dallas. Often he interrupted his home visits to come and see my Dallas first. On one occasion, he interrupted a meeting and all the elders had to watch Dallas with him. Only then could we resume the meeting.

The day the internet became a reality, it opened up a whole new world for us, especially when Uncle Google made its debut that day, 35 years ago. Being able to travel through the wonder world of the World Wide Web often makes you gasp for breath. But at the same time, it holds its dangers. You can become so carried away by the wonders of the web, that it takes up all your precious time. On top of that, you can get entangled in the dangerous things like pornography!

Then there is our daily communication system. The phone was already bad enough and often drove you crazy. But then came the cellphone! Initially, it was just your telephone that you could carry with you wherever you went.

Then the smartphone makes its appearance and brings with it an even bigger evil: social media! Each phone is geared to handle WhatsApp, Internet,

Facebook and a thousand other apps. These days, you can hardly have a meaningful conversation with someone somewhere in a quiet cafe, because at some point a cell phone will interrupt the conversation, often for something that could have waited. They dominate our lives!

Our modern shopping malls with all their hair salons and variety of shops can keep you busy for hours. It is especially the Fair generation that is totally enchanted by the wonder-world of a shopping complex, often to the poor man's bitter frustration!

Life was so much simpler when I was young. There were no TVs, cell phones, internet or shopping complexes. The farm telephone rang only once or twice a day, and the only "soapie" was the Du Plooy's from Soetmelksvlei on the radio. Being a child was fun and full of

adventure because we could swim naked in the farm dam, make war with a clay-stick, hunt with a catty, feast on fruit in the orchard, make clay oxen and just be a child!

My biggest longing today is to be able to escape somewhere, without all this stuff that can make a noise, around a campfire and be close to my God. My heart longs for silence!

Your spiritual life is often so full of gimmicks that you forget about the very basic things. It was precisely Paul's great concern about the many gimmicks that the Christians in Colossae wanted to carry with them in their life of faith. Faith in Jesus was not enough for their salvation. There were all kinds of legalistic religious rules that they had to follow first. Paul warned them against deceptive theories and arguments that threatened to totally seduce them, such

as philosophies about the so-called "art of living." Often they had to satisfy "spiritual powers" before they could reach God. Many people kept clinging to all sorts of rules like what you may eat and drink. There were all kinds of holy days like the new moon feast and the Sabbath. Some people even honoured angels and visions to show how humble and religious they were!

Today it is not much different. In church life we sometimes get so caught up in all sorts of commissions and often trifles, that we totally live beyond Jesus. A spiritual worker's life is often so crowded with all kinds of obligations and organizations, that he does not get to the basics. Unfortunately, congregational work usually falls on the shoulders of only a few willing congregation members. The danger then also comes that these willing ones become so



caught up in their duties, that Jesus gets neglected. Often they are forced to do things simply because no one else is willing to help. I myself have found myself in such situations several times and I am very grateful to the Good Samaritans who were willing to come to my rescue in the end. The danger of such a life is that you can become so preoccupied with the Things of God that you no longer reach the God of the Things!

There must be a very fine balance in a believer's life. At the very top of the list is Jesus. He is the Axis around which everything revolves. He alone gives you salvation. All the other things you add may have only one reason: to say thank you for Jesus' great gift. If you then celebrate, fast or working in your congregation out of gratitude to Jesus - then it makes sense!

Prayer:

Lord, please free me from all the unnecessary baggage in my life and bring me back to Jesus, the only Source of true life.

## Traditions

### **Colossians 2: 20-3: 4**

I walk into the church building. It's quiet. Deadly quiet! Somewhere someone coughs descreetly, smothered in her handkerchief. There is a heavy, thick atmosphere hanging over the "holy" building. I feel very uncomfortable. My tie strangles me and my suit, the very one in which I did my confession of faith, sits uncomfortably around my body. I sit down carefully on the hard pew. It creaks resoundingly! Someone turns around angrily and glares at me. I do not know where to look. At the back of the gallery, the organ plays heavy, incomprehensible death music. The atmosphere is gloomy.

An old lady with a huge flower arrangement on her head comes to sit right in front of me. I stretch my neck to

see if I can still see the pulpit. Suddenly the organist stops playing. The doors of the vestry swing open and the whole congregation rises like one man. The church council walks in with the pastor in front in his dignified, pitch black velvet gown and the rest all dressed in black suits and white ties. We sing: "Lord Jesus, we are together, gathered here at Your command."

Do you still remember? Thank goodness: those days are over! But it did not pass so easily. I still remember the night when we wrestled through an entire church council meeting, only about the dress of the church council. It was a heated debate and the sparks flew. The meeting was in Stanger and the perspiration ran down our backs as we, naturally dressed in our black suits and white ties in the sweltering, stuffy church building aired our fiery opinions

on what was appropriate. During the entire church council meeting, which lasted until after midnight, there was very little talk about kingdom work, because this single thing about tradition dominated everyone's minds!

Eventually, amid loud protests from some old hot heads, it was decided that tradition should make way for more sensible clothing. But the poor pastor is punished! He still had to wear his black suit, white tie and gown and sweat it out Sunday after Sunday on the sweltering pulpit!

Today we can only laugh about those simple traditions like the hat and everything that went with it!

These are exactly the things Paul is talking about in his letter to the congregation in Colossae. They were caught up in a web of traditions, such as

what they were allowed to eat and what not. It became a whole legal thing, because without obeying those laws, you were not part of the church. Even worse, you did not partake of salvation! Paul makes it very clear that this is a self-made religion that has absolutely no eternal value. I think if Paul were to live in our time, he would say exactly the same thing about that clothing debacle of the church council!

Paul makes this very clear to the Colossians, but at the same time to us today: "You died with Christ and are therefore dead to the legalistic religious rules of this world." And then he writes a little later, in chapter 3: "Since you have been raised from the dead with Christ, you must strive for the things above."

You will notice that two elements are involved here. First you have to get rid of the old useless traditions, but instead

there must be something that is exalted, because you not only died with Jesus, but you are LIVING with Him now! For example: what should the discussion about a church council meeting be about? If the conversation is not at least dominated by matters of spiritual value, such as mission, evangelism, mercy and the spiritual well-being of the congregation, then that church council has a big problem!

Let's move a little closer to our personal life: what things dominate my spiritual life? Do I go to church because tradition requires it? Do I read the Bible and pray because I was taught that way? Very beautiful and noble traditions, but if they are only a "law" in my life, then it is meaningless! If I just read the Bible because it's the right thing to do, then I might as well just leave it at that. If my faith life is truly alive, I will have a hunger

for the Word of God and if there is something that does not make sense, I will read about it in a Bible commentary or talk to an expert about it. Then the worship service, men's meeting, Bible study group etc. will take place. be an experience for me every time. These are going to be things I do NOT WANT to miss! Then it will no longer matter which pastor preaches on Sunday, because it is about an encounter with God that I share with my fellow-believers. Indeed, my prayer life will be different as well. It will not just be a “wish list” where I place my orders with God for this and that, but a real conversation with God.

Let's forget about the obsolete traditions, and truly begin to live!

Prayer:

Lord, there are so many old traditions that I still cling to. Please help me to get



rid of it, and focus my whole life only on  
You.

## **Renovated**

### **Colossians 3: 5-17**

In today's passage, Paul speaks very seriously to the congregation in Colossae. There are things in their lives that are old and decayed, and they need to be redone, made new.

Let me explain. I live on a farm about 25km from Ballito. The setup is an old compound dating back to the days when the Huletts organization owned giant sugar farms. Here are about thirty houses that were inhabited by the workers forty years ago. Today they are all dilapidated and totally uninhabitable. The windows of some are broken and others do not even have roofing sheets left on. Nature has taken over and weeds grow lushly around and even inside the cottages.

The owner has started repairing some of these cottages. New roofs have been installed, bathrooms and kitchens have been rebuilt. They are beautifully painted and gardened so that they can be useful and habitable again.

Paul describes in this passage how some of the Colossians need to be renewed. There are a large number of "weeds" and their buildings are often dilapidated. They must be literally stripped of the ugly things. He mentions a lot of filthy things, such as immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed and even idolatry!

If we look at these sins, there is one great element that dominates: self-interest! All of these things are focused on yourself. So you are the most important person in your own life. Everything revolves only around yourself! It is especially the sexual sins

that stand out, where your own urges are satisfied.

But it goes further, because now Paul is starting to touch on problems in our interpersonal relationships. Again, self-centredness is the main element in these problems. He mentions anger, rage, malice, slander, lies and foul language. So you should not say things that make other people feel uncomfortable or mislead someone. Then there is one that has become a major curse word today: racism! Paul explains that we must not discriminate between different races, nationalities or cultures. That's wrong!

Paul asks that we get rid of all that stuff and replace it with something completely different. After all, believers are God's new chosen people! He calls us "saints and beloved!" These are three tremendously strong words!

Think about it. We are chosen! Israel was at that time the chosen people, but now it is us, the believers. This means that God is our King and that we must therefore obey Him. Moreover, we stand in a unique relationship with God based on His gracious goodness. After all, it is God who has chosen us and not us who have chosen Him.

Because we are chosen, holy, and loved, our lives must look totally different. That old dirty, neglected "cane-cutters house" of ours must be renewed and the great characteristic of self-centredness must be replaced with Christ-centredness which is especially directed at our fellow-man. Thus Paul mentions qualities such as deep compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. "As the Lord forgave you,

so you also must forgive." (v. 13) It's a whole mouthful!

Now national borders and cultural differences are no longer important and it does not matter if someone is a Greek, a Jew or even a barbarian. Paul is talking about Scythians here. They were a people who were the epitome of rudeness. We must look past all these things and see only children of God.

Paul sums up all these qualities in one single little word: love. Small indeed, but this word has a huge meaning! It all starts with God's immeasurable love for us. Now we must live out this love for others. Love is not just about loyalty to other people and the obligation to fulfill your responsibility to them to the end. It involves much more. In verse 14 it is presented as the bond of perfection that inextricably binds fellow-believers. Believers are, in fact, obligated to care

for one another and to carry one another's affairs at heart.

So love is not just a feeling, it is much more. It is about truly caring in a practical, concrete way. So to say to someone: "I feel so sorry for you!" if the person is hungry actually means nothing. By giving him something to eat is to live out love. Jesus put love into practice during His ministry. He went out of His way to help people in various ways, despite often much opposition. He also made no distinction between people. In this way He also came to set an example for us of how this should be done. Let us follow His example!

Prayer:

Lord, there are still so many things in my life that are not right. Often I am still self-centred and unloving. Please help me to

truly live holy and live out love in a practical way.



## **Who's the Boss?**

### **Colossians 3: 18-4: 1**

I was a draughtsman for many years which kept me particularly busy designing houses. It sounds like a very pleasant occupation, but often it is packed full of frustrations, like when husband and wife cannot agree on what they want!

They walk into my office one fine day and the woman starts explaining about the house I have to design for them. "It has to be a Spanish style house", she explains, "I love a Spanish house - it's soooo romantic ....."

"No!" He shook his head violently. "It's not practical! A Bali style - that's what we want to build!"

And just there my nightmare begins! For the next half hour I sit speechless, without being able to get a single word in while they fight like cat and dog. Eventually I manage to swing the conversation to the layout inside. "Do you prefer an open-plan kitchen-lounge-diningroom?"

"Kitchen apart!" he says, very sure of his case.

"No, no, open plan! I want to talk to my guests in the living room while I cook. "

"No! I do not want to stare at a bunch of dirty dishes while watching TV!"

And then the sparks explode again! An hour later, the two walk out of my office still fighting and without me having the faintest idea what to design for them. That's one of the reasons I'm not drawings any plans today!

At the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he explains how a family should actually function. It is important to realize that his reasoning is based on the normal relationship of families of that time. They lived in a patriarchal system, where the man was the head of the family and his word was final. The woman, children and slaves had to obey his wishes. Paul could not just change the system, it would mean trouble! However, he wanted to put it into perspective with Christian principles. This means that the man was still the head of the house. Note: the HEAD, not the BOSS!

In any situation where several people are involved, it is essential that one person takes the lead. This is exactly what the man should do. So being submissive to the husband certainly does not mean that the wife should be

his slave! However, she must accept the man's guidance. She must make him a man and not make it difficult for him to fulfill his leadership role.

Unfortunately, it sometimes happens that a man abuses his position of power as a leader in the household and treats the rest like slaves and rags. In Paul's day, however, no one in society would have even raised an eyebrow about it, because that was the norm. It is precisely for this reason that Paul admonishes the husband to love his wife and act in such a way that she does not feel bitter.

We must remember that people did not marry each other in those years because they fell in love with each other. The father of the family arranged his children's marriages, often on financial grounds. A man therefore just had to be

satisfied with the woman he got and she also had no say in the matter.

However, loving alone is not enough, the man must also fulfill his obligations in the house otherwise he makes it very difficult for her. Remember, life was very different in those years. A woman could not simply take over a man's duties. So if the man did not fulfill his duties, he left his wife in a very difficult position. He therefore always had to act in such a way that she felt safe and secure and that she could truly be a woman in marriage.

Children were simply considered "property" who had to obey their father, no matter what happened. Often the father exploited this situation. This is why Paul admonished the father to act justly towards his children. He was not to harass and discourage them with unfair commands. But on the other hand,

children still had to remember that their father was the head of the household and that they had to respect him for it. That's what the Lord expected of them!

The slave situation also comes into play: it was a thorny issue when a slave was converted in a believer's house. Suddenly he became his boss (owner)'s brother in Christ! How did you handle such a situation?

As already stated, Paul did not want to change the system and that means today that we do not necessarily have to change our household, but put it in a Christian perspective. Our society is totally different than in Paul's time. Where in those years the woman was exclusively a housewife, she is now usually in a profession. Often the wife holds a higher position in the household than her husband and it even happens that the wife is the boss in the work

situation and her husband a subordinate. Within a family, such a situation must be handled with great care and compassion. The most important thing that should prevail in any marriage and any situation is true Christian love. Where love prevails in any marriage, the situation - however complicated it may be - sorts itself out.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I am praying this morning for an excess of love in my marriage. Please help me understand my spouse's unique situation, and deal with it with love and compassion.

## **Chocolate and Chillies**

### **Colossians 4: 2-18**

Taste is a wonderful thing. A friend once told me that one day while he was doing missionary work in Korea, someone brought him a traditional Korean dish that smelled so hot that a pinch made his toes curl up. As the smoke literally bubbles out of his nostrils, the man realized that the fragrant was quite pleasing to him! After a year or two in the country, he learned to love that hot dish and as a result, he eventually devoured it with great relish, while the Koreans stared at him wide-eyed in disbelief. “This man,” they thought, “must be cuckoos! No normal person can eat such hot food and then even pretend to enjoy it!”



Some people freak out over sweets - chocolatiers! She can consume a large block of chocolate and then feel like more! When ordering dessert, it should include the whole tutti, ice cream, chocolate sauce, caramel, strawberry syrup - all that is syrupy sweet!

At the other end of the spectrum, you get the salt candies again. They are now the guys who can devour biltong, salami, peanuts and all that is salty. For them, you are not just going to catch easily with a chocolate!

I like my food fragrant, with enough salt. Tasteless stuff is bland and very few people like it. My grandfather was one of those rare people - for example, his meat only had to be cooked in water, without salt or any seasonings. It must have tasted like a piece of rubber!

One's language - the things they say are also flavoured. I know people whose language is so spiced with the chillies and curry that it will even make a sailor blush. On the other hand, someone with sweet, syrupy talk actually makes me cringe. And the salt-strewn, high-spirited intellectually-stuffed conversations of some people who exalt themselves above any other being drive me to rage!

Paul is talking about our language today. He says in Col. 4: 6 that what you say should testify to good taste. Your words must literally be sprinkled with salt to give it a delicious taste - a Greek idiom. Think carefully about the language you use. How tasteful are the things you say? I know people who cannot say a single sentence without at least a few hot chillies, swear words. Usually they are the guys who also delight in vulgar jokes. It is pure bad taste to use spicy

language, even though some actors think it gives a good taste to a production! Now think carefully: will you use swear words and spicy language when you pray, talk to God? Of course not! What kind of question is that then? Your language use speaks volumes about your spiritual life.

This brings me to another point in Paul's conclusion: your conversation with God. He says readers should persevere in prayer. This is extremely important! Paul asks the congregation to intercede for him. At that point he is in jail and things look very bleak for his future. When he asks them to pray for him, it is not that he be released from prison, but that he may have more opportunities to preach the Word. What an unselfish request! Paul made peace with his captivity and the fact that he would never see the clear sky again. All he worries about is

that the Gospel is being carried out and he is doing everything in his power to advance this cause. Fortunately, he also knows that he is not alone. He is already an old man and he struggles to see. He cannot even see to write a letter. But even in this the Lord provided for him, for there is someone who writes down what he dictates. He does not let himself be put off by a trifle like near-blindness! He says it very pertinently that the congregation does not have to worry about him.

Paul put his signature at the bottom of the letter in large, clumsy letters, after conveying greetings to a group of people with whom he had worked over the years - people who became very dear to him while he preached the Word of God, often in appalling or extremely dangerous conditions. Love, joy and caring radiate from Paul's greeting as he

spends his last days in the horrors of the Roman prison.

Prayer:

Lord, I praise and glorify Your great Name this morning, and I want to thank a Paul who was willing to sacrifice absolutely everything - even his life - so that we may know Your Word today. Also make me willing to make sacrifices for the Gospel.