

## “Not What You Were Expecting?”

a sermon

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Colossians 1:1–14

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The passage of scripture that I read a few minutes ago is, as I said, from a letter. And what a letter! Heartfelt, deep, moving. I read only a piece of this whole letter. Can you imagine getting a letter that had even just that little piece? We’d probably be quite stunned, for who expects such a letter? Clearly, most of us these days don’t get letters like this, usually, nor do we write them.

Of course, letter writing has become somewhat uncommon. A real letter — thoughtfully composed, written out, addressed, stamped, and sent — is a rare thing, perhaps even precious, should the letter be crafted from kindness or even love. (There are, of course, thoughtful and well-crafted letters written in anger. I myself have written one or two.)

Sure, there are still plenty of business letters sent, these composed using boilerplate language designed to protect the sender and confuse the recipient. But the personal letter has been diminished, and the communication it once accomplished has now been replaced by the e-mail, and more recently by the tweet and the Facebook status update, short little bursts of self expression.

Sure, these *can* be meaningful and heartfelt. I’ve received beautiful, touching e-mails. I’d like to think I’ve written many, but you have to ask the recipients of those e-mails to get a more accurate report.

Even so, electronic correspondence (especially the Facebook status updates and the Twitter microblogs) most times are carelessly or even frantically dashed off with little thought, and consequently have little depth and import. Too often these feel like a poor substitute for a real letter.

Gee, don’t I sound like an old fuddy-duddy. Probably not what you expected from a computer nerd like me.

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When I read these letters from the Bible, like Colossians, I sometimes feel a little regret that we don’t communicate as deeply and richly by letter any more. Of course, I don’t know that such letters were common, that a letter of the length and depth of Colossians was something that happened all the time. Actually, I suspect it was not. I think it’s likely that, at the very least, the arrival of such a letter was a big deal. People sent and received letters all the time, but with letters of this size and substance, well, they did not expect such letters often, so when one came along, it was quite an event.

Such was the case with the big letters that were sent to churches in the early years of Christianity’s growth, especially the letters that eventually came to be included in the Bible. When these letters arrived at a congregation (whether it be from Paul, or Peter,

or some other apostle or pastor), they were read, out loud, to the whole congregation. It wasn't just a few verses they read, as I did with Colossians. No, they read the whole letter, from start to finish. This was the teacher's hoped-for communication to the flock, a blessing of great magnitude — they all knew it — and they would pay great attention to it, even if it did take some time to do. Lunch, or the football game, could just wait! It's what they expected.

They had other expectations, too, expectations gained from their experience with letters in general. They expected at the beginning to hear who the letter was from, kind of like the return address: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother."

And then they expected to hear named the ones to whom the letter was being sent: "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae."

And then there would be a greeting, like we would say "Dear Sue" or "My loving husband" or "Hey there, fish face." (Okay, they would never say that last one.) Usually the greeting in letters of that day would be simply that word, "Greeting." As in "From Bob. To Sue. Greeting." But with the letters that now are in the Bible, the greeting has a bit more depth, and so in Colossians it is "Grace to you and peace from God our Father."

(That should sound familiar to you. I say something like that just about every Sunday, at the beginning of the worship service. Perhaps you've even come to expect it.)

This was all expected. Everything to this point was just what the Christians in Colossae would expect in a letter like this one, even if such a letter were a rare event. What came next was not entirely expected, although it was, truly, very nice. For what we find next in this letter are beautifully warm words of appreciation for these friends in Colossae, words that, more or less, say this:

"When we pray we always thank God for you and the faith you have in Jesus Christ, which we've heard about from our friend Epaphras, who tells us of your love in the Spirit."

That's what they heard in this letter, just as it gets rolling, once the expected preliminaries are over. They hear that Paul and Timothy are praying for them and thanking God for their faith and their love.

Like I said, this was nice to hear. And maybe it wasn't really unexpected. It must have seemed right that such affirming words would appear in that letter. Letters often have positive words, just as much then as today. But what's different about this letter, unlike letters they would have gotten from relatives and friends, was the *focus*. You see, it's not the *Colossians* who are thanked. It's *God* who is thanked. There's celebration of the faith and love of the Colossians, to be sure, but there is *praise*, not of them, but of *God*.

And that's an important difference. For their faith and love are not accomplishments of these people, but a gift from God. And so it is God who must be thanked, not them.

We would do well to note that. For us, too, faith is not an accomplishment, it is a gift. And as much as love and spiritual growth are to be celebrated, such celebration is right and good only when the praise is given to God, and our thanks is directed to God in prayer.

Speaking of prayer, the prayer in Colossians continues. I can't say whether this is expected. But I find it striking, not that the prayer continues, but what Paul prays for. You see, what I find here, in what the prayer asks, is more that cuts somewhat across expect-

tations, at least our own. What expectations? Well, expectations about what it means to be a Christian, *those* expectations, the expectations about the benefits of being a Christian, the purpose and point of being a Christian.

And so Paul prays for his friends. But notice what he doesn't pray for. He doesn't pray for their comfort. He doesn't pray for their happiness. He doesn't pray for their self-fulfillment. No, what he prays for is none of those things that we might expect.

"Why not?" we might ask with some indignation. After all, isn't the point of being a Christian to be happy? Isn't it to find self-fulfillment? What about the joy and peace we're promised, which we tend to feel is the whole point of this Jesus gig anyway.

Well, this is tough. But let's try to lay aside our expectations for just a little bit, and notice what Paul does pray for. He prays that his friends may be filled with knowledge of God's will.

Let me say that again: he prays that his friends may be filled with the knowledge of God's will, that they come to know, more and more, deeper and deeper, greater and greater, what it is that God wills.

Now isn't that the oddest thing! He prays for this, that God would fill his friends with knowledge of God's will. And what does he not bother to pray for? For comfort. For success. For effectiveness in matters temporal or even spiritual. He prays for none of these. Instead, he prays that they be filled with knowledge of God's will.

Why? Why does he pray for this? Well, he tells us why, in what he says next. He prays for this so they may lead lives worthy of the Lord, lives that please God and bear fruit.

That's a mighty important reason why, a terribly important purpose, one that, again, may be unexpected. For we live in a world that is so oriented toward personal fulfillment and comfort. I suspect that the Colossians did, too. And it might not occur to us (or them) that the point of being filled with the knowledge of God's will, much like the point of being a Christian, has very little to do with us and our own happiness. It's not so we can feel good about ourselves (although that may happen). It's not so we can feel fulfilled (although, again, this might be one result.) The *point* of it is so we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, lives that please God and bear fruit.

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Wouldn't you know it, but the prayer continues. And we find that there is more that is being asked for in the prayer, more for which Paul prays. And this is it: that his friends be made strong. That's right, that they may be made strong.

Now, maybe that sounds a little more assuring, even comforting and comfortable. To be made strong sounds like something that would be pretty cool. We might think that it would result in great personal benefit. Don't we all want to be made strong, or at least a little stronger than we are?

But notice what Paul prays for just after that, so close after it, in fact, that it seems one thing must clarify the other: he also prays that his friends be prepared to endure everything joyfully while praising God.

"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father."

Now, I think that's really unexpected.

You see, the strength that's the object of this prayer is a strength to endure. This prayer asks for these two things together: "God, please give them strength," and "God, prepare them to endure." For tough times were ahead for the Colossians — indeed, they were already in the midst of those times. These were not merely times of inconvenience or discomfort. These were times in which their faith in Jesus Christ attracted hostility and abuse from others. Their belief that Jesus had died and risen and in him they were to find salvation, this they could expect to be greeted with anything from indifference to violence. And in that environment, they would need strength, spiritual strength, the kind of strength that would enable them to endure in the faith, to endure with joy and thanksgiving to God.

So, what they heard in this special letter, well, we don't know if it was expected or not, but it certainly was what they needed. They needed this radical focus on God. They needed this subversive orientation toward Jesus. They needed this subordination of their own needs and goodness and capability and noteworthy faith, a subordination of these to God, who had blessed them not for their comfort but for God's own glory.

They needed this, even if they did not expect it. They needed this.

And so do we.

We need to focus radically on God.

We need to be reoriented toward Jesus in such a way that our values no longer fit so easily with those of the prevailing culture and, truly, even seem subversive.

We need *our* own needs and goodness and capabilities and remarkable faith (whether it be quiet or demonstrative) to be subordinated to God, who has blessed *us* not for our comfort but for God's own glory.

And if that is not what we expect, then maybe our expectations need to be changed.

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Truly:

may we be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

so that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as we bear fruit in every good work and as we grow in the knowledge of God.

May we be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may we be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.