

When we are faced with life's problems, with life's questions, where do we look for answers? Do we turn to Jesus to find the answers to our problems? Or do we turn to something else? And I suspect that as Christians, we would all probably say we turn to Jesus, because that's where we want to find our help. But Christians, the world presents us with all kinds of ideas, all kinds of answers to problems. And some of those answers might actually look very Christian. They may actually look like it's something that comes straight from the Bible. But when it comes down to it, they will ultimately lead us away from God. So the question we have to ask ourselves is: how do we know what is the truth? How can we tell the difference between what is actually from God and what isn't? Because that is the general question we have to ask ourselves as we begin our study of the book of Colossians. Because Colossians is dealing with that very issue of where do we turn to to find answers, where do we turn to when we need help. Do we turn to the Lord or do we turn somewhere else?

Because Paul in this letter is writing to a group of Christians who lived in a city called Colossae. Colossae was a very important city in what is now western Turkey, but it doesn't exist anymore. It's long since disappeared. But in Paul's time, it was a very important city. But the trouble was that Paul didn't actually know any of the Christians he was writing to. He never been to Colossae in his life. The only thing that he knew about them is what someone else had told him. We hear that in verse four, for example, when he says: "Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus." Notice he doesn't say, "since I knew about it" or "since I experienced it firsthand" or something. He says, "since I heard about your faith." So someone had to tell him about these Christians, about the problems they were going through. And that person was Epaphras, who we meet in verse seven. He's described as "our beloved fellow servant, a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf." Epaphras, for the lack of a better way of describing him, was their pastor. He was their teacher. And he had brought the Gospel to Colossae for the first time. And it seems that Epaphras was having some troubles, and he wanted to get Paul's help. And so he went to Paul, told him about the situation, and asked him to write to this congregation.

And that's what Paul is doing then. He is writing to this group of people, explaining to them and talking to them about all of their issues. And he can do that, because he is an apostle. He's been sent by Jesus himself. So he doesn't have to know them personally. He can speak to them as one who has seen the Lord. And that's why this book too, the book of Colossians, is not something that just talks about problems 2000 years ago and has no meaning for us today. This book comes to us from Paul and speaks to issues that we deal with in our own day. So we should pay attention, then, to what Paul has to tell us here.

Because the Colossians had a problem, and that problem was that they were listening to all kinds of ideas about how to deal with life's problems. And a lot of those ideas were coming from the world. Now, we're not told exactly what they were struggling with. We're not told exactly what they were listening to. But we get little hints here and there. We basically know from the whole letter that there were some false teachers among them. And these false teachers were presenting to them these ideas which sounded very, very Christian, which sounded like it came straight from the Bible, but was leading them away from Christ. We hear in chapter 2, verse 4, for example: "I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." Plausible arguments, things that sound reasonable. They weren't coming to these Colossians and telling them things that were totally crazy. They were telling them things that sounded pretty good, the

things that they might want to listen to, things that would actually answer their questions. And Paul goes on to say in verse 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition." Philosophy, again, it sounds very wise. It sounds very educated. It sounds very holy even. But Paul says it is empty. It leads to nothing, because it comes from men. It comes from human tradition. Or in chapter 2, verse 23: "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body." It appeared wise. It appeared holy. And right along with it came all of these extra practices, all of these little extra things they could do that would make them look even better. You want to be a good Christian? All you have to do is this. You want to fix all these problems in your life? All you have to do is follow what I'm teaching you. And that's what made it so attractive, because it made them appear holy. It made them appear righteous. It made them appear like they had it all figured out, and they were dealing with life's problems in a way that seemed good and right and biblical.

But the problem was that it was leading them away from Christ. It was leading them away from Christ and into the things of the world. Because I'm sure they thought of Christ as a kind of starting point. Like, "we can start with Jesus. That's good enough. But then you've got to go on to something more. You've got to add something in order to really be a Christian, in order to really get at the heart of what it means to follow after Christ." And so Christ was the beginning, yes, but he was not the end. And that was the very danger that the Colossians were struggling with. Because this is "what real Christians do." This is "what it really means to be a Christian," and therefore they are being led away right from Christ.

Now Paul wants to warn them against these things, but he's gentle with it. He's not coming at them yelling at them, telling them that they should be better. He's trying to lead them in a way which is gentle, in a way which is fatherly. That's why we hear him speaking very tenderly in the opening part of our letter. And he's also beginning to teach them what it means to follow after Christ. Because notice what he says right away in verse 2: "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae." That's not just an opening. That's not just a formal part of the letter. He means that. They are saints. They are faithful brothers. They are in Christ. Because they were being led away from all of these things by these false teachings. And so Paul wants to bring them back and say: "This is who you are. This is who you are in Jesus. This is what you already know. So come back to what you were first taught. Come back to what you know in the Gospel." And you hear in verse 5: "The hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the Gospel." The truth was not to be found in these worldly ideas, whatever they were. The truth was not to be found in thinking that they were somehow super-Christians. The truth was to be found in what they first heard, in the Gospel, the Gospel which came to them and brought the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus was not just the beginning of their faith, Paul is saying. He's also the end. He is also the middle. He is everything. Because Christ is everything when it comes to dealing with the troubles of this life. So don't listen, Paul is saying, to all of those false ideas! Listen to what you were first taught. Listen to Christ himself.

And Christians, this is also a danger for us today as well. Because we do have lots of troubles in this life that we need answers for. Whether that's a trouble in our personal life, whether that's a trouble in our family, whether that's trouble in the community, in the nation, whatever it may be, we want answers, even solutions, to these problems. But the world presents us with all kinds of

answers. And sometimes it even tries to present them as being very Christian, as if this is what it really meant to be Christian. Let me use an example, so you can see what I mean by this. Take a statement like: "Christians should support welfare programs." That's a very straightforward kind of statement. But it's a very problematic one, because it's actually two ideas welded together. On the one hand, you have the statement, the truth, that Christians should help the poor. That's true. We should help the poor, because God commands us to. He wants us to take care of those who need our help, whether it be the fatherless, whether it be the widow, whether it be the poor. Whoever it is that needs our help in that moment. God wants us to do something for them. That's true. But welded to that idea is another one that basically says: "The only way to do that is by organized welfare or by government programs." And that's where the problem comes in. Not that it's wrong to have organized welfare programs. If a Christian decides in good conscience that this is how they want to help the poor, there's nothing wrong with that at all. But the trouble comes in is when you try to make it sound like it's the only way that we can keep God's commandment. Because Christians can decide to help the poor in lots of different ways. Maybe we do it individually. Maybe we do it as a family. Maybe we do it in some major organization. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. But that trouble is with that word "should." The trouble with is with that word "must," as if anything less than this idea is somehow sub-Christian, as if you're not really living up to what it means to be a Christian. And that's what I mean by these ideas from the world going and trying to tell us what it means to be a Christian.

Let me use one that's probably going to be much more contentious. We hear in the news all the time these days about racial issues. There's all kinds of race problems in this nation. And the world is giving us all kinds of solutions about how to deal with these problems. And some of them may sound pretty good, because they usually present them in terms of justice. We want to find justice where there have been problems. We want to bring justice to the world. And justice is a Christian thing. We want to set things right. We want to do what is right. We want to help our neighbor and to set all things in the way that they should be. But it's when we take their ideas of what they mean by justice and attach it to what it means to be Christian that we run into trouble. Because very often they'll say things like guilt and sin is a racial thing, as if one whole group of people is responsible for all of the troubles of the world. That's not what the Bible says. Sin is something we are all guilty of. Sin is something that we all need to repent of. It's not just one group over another. Or maybe we're dealing with, they say that the only way to bring about justice is to totally destroy society, to tear it all down, and to try to rebuild it up into something else. That's equally problematic, though, because were not going to find justice in a worldly solution. We're not going to find justice by just tearing everything down and hoping for the best, maybe thinking we'll build something up in its place. We will find justice when we turn towards the Lord, when we turn towards him who can transform hearts, who can change things, so that we will find the things that we need to set right.

Now, I recognize that even talking about these things is going to cause some people to say that I'm being racist. Because you can't even criticize any of these things without incurring some kind of accusation. But the point is, Christians, that for that very reason, there are churches today who are latching onto these ideas and beginning to take all of these ideas and saying as if this is what it means to be a Christian. And that's a dangerous thing. We don't want to get our ideas of what justice is from the world. We want to find our ideas of justice from the one who brings true

justice: the Lord himself. That's what it means to look to Christ, to look to him as the answer to our problems.

And so let us not look, then, towards the world, and its supposed solutions, because they will only lead us away from the Lord. But let us listen to what God has to say. And then when we do that, when we trust in him, we will find our hope, not in the world, but in heaven and with our Lord Jesus Christ, who brings us that life-transforming Gospel. And then we will find the answers that we seek. So turn to him, Christians. Turned to him in the midst of all of your troubles, and you will find the answers you seek.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, help us always to turn towards you in the midst of every trouble, so that we may find the answers we seek not in the world, but in you who gives all good things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.