

November 9, 2014
Rick Myatt

TROPHIES JUST WON'T DO Colossians 1:1-2

Laurie has a magnet on our refrigerator that says "It's not an empty nest until the kids' stuff is out of the garage. If that's true we don't have an empty nest yet, but we're getting there. Recently we took a box full of trophies to Goodwill. Laurie was almost gleeful as she gave them away. There's something for us to learn from the fact that these trophies end up being something we gladly throw away, but that's a lesson for another day. The trophies were mostly from Toby's hockey playing days. In several cases everyone on the team got one. Yeah that makes it a really valued treasure, doesn't it? All it says is, congratulations, you have a pulse. Those trophies are of no value to Toby because all they proved was that he was there. That's what happens when everyone gets a trophy. We have a group among us that doesn't want anyone to feel bad so they insist everyone get a trophy, with the result that the trophies become meaningless. If everyone is special then no one is really special.

That message is frustrating for us because within all of us there is a longing to be special and a sense that we are intended to be special. Most of us have to learn how to handle the fact that the world thinks we not special and that we are worthy of no notice whatsoever. Though that feels like an affront to us, we just have to put on our big boy pants and deal with it. Sadly, my social security number is more important than my name and pretty much everywhere I go in this world I am told that I am one of 7 billion, a person worthy of no particular value or notice.

Wouldn't it be great if in fact we were as special and worthy of note as we always kind of thought we ought to be? Today we are beginning a series of sermons I call "Roots" because it is all about what we need to be rooted in to have the kind of life we were created to live. We will find out today that in fact there are some amazing things about each one of us who are followers of Jesus Christ. These truths can give us a whole new sense of who we are. We will catch a glimpse of these truths in Colossians 1:1-2.

BACKGROUND

In the south central region of what is now called Turkey there was a city on the Lycus River named Colossae. It had been a thriving commercial and agricultural center in the past but in the first century it was in decline. It was situated in a seismically active area and within a couple of years of the writing of the letter we

are going to look at in coming months a massive earthquake struck the Lycus River valley. Scholars suspect that Colossae was destroyed by the quake because there is no record or mention of the town after it took place. Colossae simply disappeared from history.

A community of believers in Jesus, a church, had sprung up in Colossae sometime between 55 and 57 A.D. At that time Paul the apostle was in Ephesus about 100 miles away. Paul stayed there for more than 2 years and according to Acts 19:10 during that period, “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” People were becoming believers in Jesus in Ephesus and going out to towns and cities in the surrounding area and telling them about the Lord. One of those was a man named Epaphras, who was from Colossae. He helped start a church there in his home town.

This letter was written sometime around 60 A.D. Paul was a prisoner, probably in Rome, and Epaphras was imprisoned with him. He told Paul some of his concerns for the Colossian Christians. They were not wandering from the faith or buying wholesale into false teaching like the Galatians, but they were a little fuzzy about some things, especially the thing with the Law of Moses. These people came out of a pagan background in which they knew nothing of the God of Israel, had no knowledge at all of Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets. They knew zero about Israel’s Messiah. The concept of one God was foreign to them. It is fairly amazing that they put their faith in Jesus the Messiah who was God with us. But once they did believe in him they had huge gaps in their knowledge of God and of the gospel of grace. When they heard about the ancient Law of Moses they wondered if, since it was from God, they needed to keep those laws. So Paul wrote this letter to encourage them and to give them some authoritative instruction about just what this faith in Jesus meant and how to live in light of it. He especially wanted to clear up any questions they had about the Law of Moses.

There are people who say this letter wasn’t written by Paul. They say this because of two reasons. This claim originally started because of the weaker of the two reasons. The weaker reason is they claim that this letter was written to combat the rise of Gnosticism, a philosophical corruption of real Christianity. But Gnosticism didn’t show up in the church until the second century B. C. long after Paul’s death, therefore Paul couldn’t have written the letter. Here’s the problem with that analysis: the letter wasn’t written to combat Gnosticism at all. That idea cropped up in the 1800’s, but more recent scholars have come to mostly reject it. So the whole premise of that argument is faulty.

Some scholars started with that faulty premise, assumed Paul didn't write the letter, then looked for evidence to back up that claim. They believed they found it in the word usage in this letter because the vocabulary is somewhat different than Paul's other letters. There is some variation in vocabulary from some of Paul's letters. However, as I read this letter in its original language it appears to me that this difference is pretty subjective. In other words, a lot of it is in the eye of the beholder. When I study the book I do not find myself thinking, "wow, this is really different. Who wrote this?" In fact there are several places that are quite characteristic of Paul. There is some variation, but it is not as pronounced as some critics would have us believe.

Second what variation exists should be expected. People addressing different audiences will typically use different words. If you analyzed the vocabulary I use in addressing you in a sermon it would not be exactly the same as the vocabulary I would use talking to my family around the table at Christmas. It must be remembered that Paul had never been to Colossae and had never met many of these people. Would you not expect if a person was writing to people he had never met that his word usage would be a little different from a letter to old and dear friends? It is also important to remember that the evidence from ancient writers is strong and consistent in attributing this letter to Paul.

THE WILL OF GOD IS AT WORK IN US

This is a standard opening of a letter from Paul. It tells us it is from Paul and Timothy, an apostle of Christ and his associate, and is written to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ in Colossae. Grace and peace are Paul's way of saying "greetings." As typical as this opening salutation may be there are two little phrases that are particularly worthy of note in it. The first is "by the will of God." Paul established his credentials with that statement. He was an apostle, one sent with a message, not because he volunteered for the position or applied for the job and was accepted, but by the will of God. God chose him to play that role. The Colossians weren't sure who to look to for authoritative instruction about the nature of faith and life in Christ. That Paul had been chosen by God to play a key leadership role in the church meant he was one who had authority to instruct them in the truth.

It is obvious that the will of God was responsible for Paul's position. Paul would never have volunteered to even be a believer in Jesus on his own. Remember that he hated Jesus and despised all those who believed in him. Paul was part of the group that murdered Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Acts 9:1 tells us that sometime later, "Saul (Paul's Hebrew name) was still breathing out murderous

threats against the Lord's disciples." He wasn't just threatening Christians. His threats were murderous. This was the air that he breathed. He was inflamed in his hatred for Jesus followers.

In his defense before Agrippa Paul said in Acts 26:9-11. "I...was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."

Paul was not just one more person who did not believe in Jesus. In his own words he was *obsessed* with stamping out any trace of faith in Jesus. He didn't merely outgrow that obsession. He was violently yanked out of it, pretty much against his will.

I have decided this year to contribute considerable sums of money toward a charitable cause. There is a desperate need out there that is so great my little donation will not even make a dent in it, yet I feel that I have to do something about it. The charity that I refer to is our Federal government. It is in desperate straits, teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. I've been sending the government money because I fear if I don't they won't be able to keep paying the \$440,000 per year it takes to employ people on Capitol Hill to push the buttons on the fully automatic elevators. They will not be able to continue to do important things like spend \$998,798 to ship 2 washers that cost 19 cents apiece from South Carolina to Texas. It makes me weep to think such things might not be continued, so I am giving to this noble cause.

You and I both know the truth is I'm not *choosing* to give to the government. I have no choice. I'm forced under threat of punishment by the government to give it money. Paul's conversion to believing in Jesus was closer to that category than it was to a voluntary decision. God confronted him and essentially dragged him kicking and screaming into his kingdom. He became a believer in Jesus, which prior to that time was the last thing he wanted to be, by the will of God.

But God didn't stop there. In Acts 26:16-18 we see that when Jesus confronted Paul he said, "I have appeared to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn

them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.” Paul was fine with God sending him to his own people, but Gentiles? The last thing Paul wanted to do was go tell Gentiles about anything, much less Jesus Christ. He would never have chosen to do that. Paul had no illusions about his role as an apostle mostly to Gentile people. That assignment was given him directly by Jesus, and that’s the only reason he would ever have done it. He didn’t volunteer, he didn’t enlist, he was drafted.

In Galatians 1:15-16 Paul said, “when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man.” Did you catch that? God had set him apart from birth. It was all God’s doing. This was not a lifelong dream of Paul’s. He didn’t decide as a boy that he was going to grow up and tell the despised unclean Gentiles about some person named Jesus. Neither did he wake up one day as a believer in Jesus and say, “I’ve got a great idea! The Gentiles need to know about Jesus. I’ll go tell them.” God, in his will, had that planned all along.

In Ephesians 1:11 Paul wrote, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” He works out everything according to his will. Everything! Including Paul becoming first a believer in Jesus and then an apostle to the Gentiles.

Nice history lesson, Rick. So glad to know that God worked so decisively and definitely in Paul’s life, but what does that have to do with us today? This is not merely a history lesson. It speaks to us as well. Philippians 2:13 says, “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” God is the one at work. It is by his will that you are a believer in Jesus, and it is by his will that you are where you are today, just as was true for Paul. We know this because we know he works “everything” according to his will.

This has some implications for us. For instance, you are who you are by the will of God. We must not take this idea to an extreme. If you are a crook or serially unfaithful to your spouse you cannot say, “I am this way because it is how God made me.”

However, it is important to remember that you are a believer in Jesus by the will of God. Though it is not as glaring and obvious as it was in Paul’s case, you would not be a child of God had God not worked to make that happen. Ephesians 1:4 says God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world. You have been set apart by

God from birth just as Paul was. This has some huge implications for your security in Christ. It is common for Christians to fret about whether they are doing enough, whether they are obedient enough to God to be accepted into his kingdom. You are a believer in Jesus by the will of God. You are not going to foul that up. It was God's work all along, not yours, so your failure can't ruin it.

One implication of the will of God is that you are who you are by the will of God. Psalm 139:13-14 says to God, "You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful." In verse 16 David wrote, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." God's will has been at work creating you and making a life for you. All the days ordained for you were written in God's book before even one of them came to be. We've been walking a path that was already traced out for us.

Last year *Science Friday* (April 4, 2013), ran an article titled "Would Usain Bolt Run More Slowly With The Name Usain Plod?" It was written by New York University professor Adam Alter. He has been researching "Nominative Determinism." That means "name driven outcomes." He discussed the power that names seem to have in shaping destiny. For instance, the current Lord Chief Justice of England is Justice Igor Judge. So that means he's Judge Judge. A colleague of his in the Court of Appeals is named Lord Justice Laws. Layne Beachly is a seven time world champion surfer. There is a professional tennis player from Israel named Anna Smashnova. Derek Kickett is an Australian Rules Football player. Daniel Snowman is the author of a book about the Arctic and Antarctica. Alter concluded "Researchers have shown that our names take root deep within our mental worlds, drawing us magnetically towards the concepts they embody."

I know some examples of that theory. James Thrash played football in the NFL and so does Whitney Mercilous. He's an outside linebacker for Houston. Wouldn't you want a linebacker to be merciless? The problem with the theory is there is also a player for the Rams named Michael Hoomanawanui. No idea what that means. Of more concern is that the Jacksonville Jaguars have a 6 foot 5 inch, 300 pound tackle named Guy Whimper. I feel pretty confident that he didn't end up in the NFL because his name was his destiny. What possible destiny could the name Rick Myatt draw a person to? It clearly does not bode any particular destiny as far as I can see. My point here is you are not who you are mainly because of your name. You are who you are because of the will of God. And God's works are wonderful. You are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Recently I was struggling with some of my shortcomings. I see them quite clearly. Some of them I can do something about, but a lot of them are deeply embedded in me. I feel a little like Achilles in the movie *Troy*. He was asked why he chose to become a warrior. He said, "I chose nothing. I was born and this is what I am." I kind of feel that way myself. I wish I was of some practical use around our house. When it comes to financial matters I hear people talking about those things and they might as well be speaking Chinese. It makes no sense to me. I feel like I ought to be more outgoing and have more impact on people I know. When it comes to my job, wow, the catalog of weaknesses and shortcomings is massive. As I was struggling with my shortcomings I found myself thinking I should have accomplished more in my life to this date. But when I think that I am what I am by the will of God and I am where I am by the will of God I can rejoice in all that happens in my life. I can be at peace with who and where I am. I can see those shortcomings and I can say, "Apparently this is what God wanted, and so it is just fine." I can be at peace with who I am and with where I am in life.

In my years in ministry a time or two I've had people express concern that I'm too down on myself. Let me make clear that while I do get down on myself sometimes and see my shortcomings all too acutely, I don't fret about that much. I believe I am what and where I am by the will of God. God has apparently some use for me as I am, so that's all right. In fact it is this truth that enables me to see and even find humorous my failings.

This is a big deal. In an interview on National Public Radio Paul McCartney said, "It seems to me that no matter how famous (you are), no matter how accomplished or how many awards you get, you're always still thinking there's somebody out there who's better than you. I'm often reading a magazine and hearing about someone's new record and I think, 'Oh, boy, that's gonna be better than me.'" He admitted that he should be able to look at what he's accomplished, at all the accolades and say, "Come on, Paul, that's enough," but he can't. If he can't, who can? No trophy is ever going to give us the security in who we are that we need. A trophy will help briefly, but it's kind of like novocaine. You have the pain of that sense of insecurity and it briefly deadens the pain, but the novocaine wears off and you are back to hurting. But we can relax and be at peace with who and where we are because we are here by the will of God.

WE ARE IN CHRIST

Notice that Paul described the believers as people who are "in Christ." When we talk about identity this is the bottom line. You may be an American, a Californian, a Korean American, an African American, a Swedish American, an Italian

American, you may be an accountant, a teacher, a sales representative, a business owner, an engineer, an athlete, a musician, a single person, a married person or any number of other ways of identifying yourself. But as a follower of Jesus the bottom line is that you are “in Christ.” That’s who you are.

Scottish theologian Sinclair Ferguson says, “The New Testament’s most frequent, and indeed most basic, description of the believer is that he or she is a person ‘in Christ.’” But “in Christ” is an interesting expression. What does it mean? About 10 or 12 years ago I received a letter in the mail that surprised me. It began by congratulating me. It said because of my involvement and in recognition of my abilities in the sport of fishing I had been granted membership in the National Association of Fishermen. It included a membership card and informed me that I was now granted all the privileges that accrue to members of the association, but called on me to carry out the responsibilities that come with membership.

This was a surprise to me, for I have probably been fishing twice in my adult life and I have no ability or interest in the activity. It also left me puzzled about what privileges membership granted me because they weren’t enumerated, and I certainly had no idea what behavior was expected of me as a member. Most of all I was surprised because I had never applied for membership. In fact I’d never heard of the association. Having said that, being in the association meant I was not identified with it. I had a card that proved it, and with that came privileges and responsibilities. Being in Christ is kind of like that. If you have put your faith in Jesus you are now a card carrying follower of Jesus, identified with him. Being in Christ has privileges and it has some responsibilities.

Bishop Handley Moule in his studies on Colossians wrote of the Christians there, “They moved about Colossae ‘in Christ.’ They worked, served, kept the house, followed the business, met the neighbors, entered into their sorrows and joys...suffered their abuse and insults...all ‘in Christ.’ They carried about with them a private atmosphere, which was not of Asia but of heaven. To them Christ was their inner home, the...invisible but real resting place...And what a rich gain for poor Colossae, that they, being in Him, were in it.”

In his book, *The Hope of Glory*, Sam Storms wrote, “You may be *at work, at play, over seas, under the weather, out of money*, but you are always and unchangeably *in Christ*. You may be *down in the dumps, over the hill or beside yourself*, but you are always and unchangeably *in Christ*.”

Think about what it means to be “in Christ.” In Christ you have been given grace. 2 Timothy 1:9 says God has saved us and called us to a holy life not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. “This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.”

You have been redeemed. Ephesians 1:7 says “in him (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (vol. V, p. 49), says, “Redemption is deliverance from bondage, a release of someone or something from an alien power that has a claim upon it.” A classic example would be a slave whose freedom is purchased as a gift. He is redeemed. In Christ we have been redeemed. God has bought our freedom from fear of condemnation, hopelessness and uselessness.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says in Christ God’s righteousness is credited to you. That would be like in the financial world if somehow Bill Gates said to me “my finances are now yours. My \$82 billion will be credited to your account.” So I call up my bank account online and look in my checking account and I see a dollar sign and a number followed by 9 zeroes. Suppose that it actually rains here and our roof leaks. A roofer comes out and says “I’ve got bad news. You’re going to need a whole new roof. It’s going to cost you \$15,000 to replace it.” In the past I might fret about all that. But then I would do some calculation. I would subtract that \$15,000 from that number with all those zeroes in my bank account. Then you know what I would do? I would laugh! I’d call the guy and say, “Hey, is there a deluxe roof I can put up there? Are there any extras I can add?” I’ve got way more than I need so I wouldn’t feel even a hint of stress. That’s how it is with God’s righteousness. God says because I am “in Christ” he has now credited his righteousness into my righteousness account. Hey, in Christ I personally am feeling pretty rich.

There’s so much. In Christ you are a new creation according to 2 Corinthians 5:17. In Christ you are guaranteed eternal life according to Romans 6:23. In Christ you are seated in the heavenly places according to Ephesians 2:6

We see in 1 Corinthians 1:2 that we are “sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Ah, there’s that sanctified word. Boy a lot of Christians foul up that idea. It’s pretty simple. It means you have been set apart. That idea of being set apart has two obvious implications. It speaks to privilege and to purpose. There are those ideas of privilege and responsibilities again. Last year Laurie and I were at Disneyland. Yes, I know, we’re a bit odd because we like to spend absurd sums of money to go through the day dodging crowds and avoiding the stroller brigade in order to buy

stratospherically priced food, stand in lines for rides that last a couple of minutes, and mostly line the pockets of the Disney corporation. I can't explain it. I blame it on global warming. Anyway, in the evening we had decided we wanted to watch the big fireworks show over the castle. We staked out a spot on the sidewalk where we would stand for an hour in order to have a good vantage point from which to watch the fireworks. There were thousands of people around us all with the same idea. While waiting we engaged a couple of young Disney employees in conversation. As we neared the time for the show one of those young girls walked over to us and said, "please come with me." She unhooked the crowd control rope we had been standing next to so we could go with her. We had no idea why she wanted us to come with her. I thought maybe she knew of a better vantage point. As we walked with her she said, "We have some VIP seating for the fireworks show. I have arranged for you to sit there." Sure enough in a roped off area in the perfect viewing spot for the show they had benches set up. The girl told us we could sit on any of the benches. All around us were those thousands of people who were standing to get obstructed views of the show. We sat and enjoyed a perfect, unobstructed view because we were VIPs. We were set apart from those masses of people. I really liked it. But the curious thing is that we aren't really VIPs at all. There is nothing special about us. We had done exactly zero to earn VIP status.

I know that is true because we went back to Disneyland in August as part of our celebration of our 35th anniversary. I thought they were aware that we VIPs were back again because while we were in one store we got a call from Mickey Mouse himself wishing us a happy anniversary. Obviously only the most important people get calls from the star mouse. But that evening we went to the area in front of the castle for the fireworks show and said to one of the employees, "Hey, we're back." We got a blank stare in return. I said, "It's us. You know, the VIPs." Nothing. No special recognition or VIP seating. That's because we aren't important or special. We only got that special treatment on that one occasion because of the grace and kindness of a Disney employee who set us apart.

We were sanctified that day. We were set apart to receive a privilege that we did not deserve. In Christ we have been set apart to receive an infinitely greater and more precious privilege that we deserve even less than Laurie and I merited VIP status at Disneyland. We have been set apart to be children of God with an astounding inheritance that awaits us in his kingdom. Everywhere we go, no matter what we do, regardless of what people may think of us, every moment of our lives you and I are set apart as God's VIPs, given an astounding privilege.

But to be sanctified is also to be set apart for a purpose. Paul knew he was set apart to tell Gentiles about Jesus. You and I are also set apart for a purpose. Last December when Laurie and I went to visit Carissa and Michael in Mississippi we began our trip home by flying from Meridian Regional Airport to Atlanta on a Silver Airways flight. Silver Airways is a regional airline that gave Laurie and me a little bit of uneasiness. There were a couple of incidents that were unusual. One of them was when a man asked Laurie about why the flight was delayed, and we realized later he was the co-pilot. Laurie had a little problem with TSA and ended up having to check in her carry on bag. The TSA agent said she would do it for her and asked for her ID. She told us to go ahead and board the plane and said she'd bring the ID out to us. So we were sitting on the plane, it was all loaded, ready to go, but Laurie was without her ID. We had informed the flight attendant about the situation. It got resolved when the pilot came out of the cockpit, left the plane and went into the terminal to retrieve Laurie's ID. I appreciated his effort, but come one, what kind of operation is this? The pilot is sanctified. He's set apart for a purpose. They give him a uniform to designate his special important status. He flies the plane. Nothing happens without him. It's not his job to chase down passenger ID's. He is set apart for an essential purpose.

I was grateful that in that case the pilot diverted from his real calling to help us out, but what is important is that he doesn't ever get distracted from his real job. It is fine to help solve a problem occasionally, but not to be so involved in lots of extraneous stuff that he loses track of actually flying the airplane.

You and I are set apart in Christ. Everywhere we go, in everything we do because we are in Christ we have a special unique and powerful purpose. We are here to display the glory of God. We are to make known his character by our words and our actions. We are to be a little taste of his kingdom for people to experience. We are set apart for that purpose. That's what it means to be in Christ. We may do other things not directly related to that purpose, but we must never get so involved in them that we get diverted from the purpose for which we have been set apart, manifesting the grace and glory of God for all of creation to see.

In the eyes of the world I'm utterly unimportant. But in Christ, I am sanctified. I am set apart for a special privilege and purpose. So maybe the world doesn't know it, but I'm all right with that. Because I know who I am in Christ and I know I matter infinitely to God.