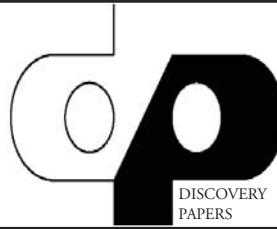


FINDING YOUR STORY IN CHRIST

SERIES: WALKING IN THE MYSTERY



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Colossians 4:7-18
8th Message
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What do you think of your life? Would you say that it is exciting? Mundane? Vibrant? Boring? Meaningful? Surprising?

Most of you know that I like movies. That should be pretty clear by now. I enjoy movies because they tell good stories—with interesting characters, unique plots, and humor. But when I saw this particular HBO commercial I was shocked. The scene is set in an office building with three people entering an elevator. They begin to ask each other about their weekends and the general consensus is that their weekends were not long enough and they're bored with their everyday lives. At the end of the commercial there is the statement: *The story you could be watching is better than the story you are in.* Think about what this statement is saying. Think about its implications.

Your life—your daily activities, your friends, your job, your contribution to the world, your thoughts, your interactions—all of this is your story. And HBO wants you to think that your story is boring. They want you to think that you have a mundane existence of miserable work weeks punctuated by all-too-brief moments of enjoyment on the weekends.

HBO wants to convince you to escape your story. To cast it aside in favor of a different story. A more interesting story. A more meaningful story. A better story.

Are they right? Is the story we could be watching better than the story that we are in? If they are right, that's pretty important. But if they are wrong

This is our last Sunday in a twelve-week series going through the Book of Colossians. We began this series last December with four weeks focusing on Advent and we've continued it for an additional eight weeks, focusing on the mystery of God. This has been a really meaningful series for me. I wasn't very familiar with Colossians before preparing this series and it has quickly become one of my favorite books of the New Testament. I've found that I've been preaching to myself during many of these weeks—I think I've gotten as much from Colossians as any of you have.

What I've appreciated most about this book is the

centrality of Christ. Of getting to understand who Christ is and then figuring out what that has to do with my life. The whole first part of the book focuses on who Christ is. We see this great cosmic picture of Christ and learn how he is supreme over everything. Then we see this cosmic Christ applied to our lives. We see the up there of Christ playing out in the down here of our lives. This starts out as we learn to walk in him, to be filled in him, and to see our relationships as a community transformed. Then the life of Christ moves out from this place. Our lives have changed, so our relationships at home look different. Our relationships at work look different. Christ is evident in all of them. Finally, last week we saw how walking in Christ reaches its final destination as we go out into the world and welcome outsiders into the community of faith. This is the progression of the Book of Colossians.

This week, we're finishing up the book with the last twelve verses. It's actually a fairly big chunk of text, but it mostly consists of greetings from Paul to various people that he has partnered with in ministry. After reading some of these names, we'll be looking in detail at some of the stories of the people that Paul mentions. Our ultimate goal is to find out something about our story by looking at theirs. This morning, we're going to be finding our story in Christ.

We're going to be reading from Colossians 4:7-18. We'll hear about an arrogant religious professional who gave everything up to walk in Christ. We'll hear about a disgruntled slave who was asked to swallow his pride and return home. We'll see a prominent doctor, a successful evangelist, and a simple scribe.

These people were trying to do what we've been talking about the past eight weeks. They were trying to walk in Christ. They were trying to figure out exactly how the cosmic Christ changed their lives. What I'm hoping we'll see as we hear their stories is how Christ lived out his life through them. We'll see them trying to walk in the mystery of Christ. And I hope we'll realize that it isn't always as pretty as we think it's supposed to be. We'll see that it involves misunderstandings, forgiveness, facing fears, and learning to work with people who let you down.

Ultimately, my hope is that as we look at these stories,

we'll find out that they aren't that different from our own. We'll see that even in the everyday issues we work through in our own lives, we can find the work of Christ. We can see that our little efforts at walking in the mystery of Christ are part of the same story of all these people at the end of the Book of Colossians. We can see that the everyday things of our lives are part of something much bigger. Finally, we can be convinced that the story we are in is much greater than any story we could ever watch. That, in fact, the story we are in is THE story. It's about the Creator of everything, the Redeemer of everything, and our lives lived out in him.

So let's start by reading the whole passage.

Colossians 4:7-18.

⁷Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. ⁹He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

¹⁰My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) ¹¹Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. ¹²Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. ¹³I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. ¹⁴Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. ¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

¹⁶After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

¹⁷Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord."

¹⁸I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.

Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Paul

Let's start out by talking about the apostle Paul, who was once called Saul. He's the guy that wrote this letter. He's the one who sends his greetings to all of these people and his story is one of the most remarkable.

He began as a conservative Jew. He was raised with everything and everyone had high expectations of him. He was like the Tiger Woods of Judaism, but without the scandal. It was all about being the best Jew. So when Christ claimed to be the Messiah, he knew that he had to destroy this movement that threatened his religion.

In Acts 8, we hear about the grisly death of Stephen, one of the first deacons of the first church in Jerusalem. A man of service. The Jews cornered him and stoned him to death. The community gathered together to see him die. Acts 8:1 says, "Saul was there, giving approval to his death." This was the kind of man that Paul once was.

But then everything changed for Saul. Christ, the one that we've been seeing all through the Book of Colossians, appeared to Saul. He told Saul to stop persecuting him and start serving him. The most surprising part of the story is not that Jesus appeared to Saul, but that Saul made a complete 180 degree turn around when he did. He immediately threw away everything he had. He threw away his power. He threw away his respect. He threw away his friends and his family, it's possible that Paul's wife left him when he became a Christian. He threw away his training. He threw away everything that made him who he was and he started trying to walk in Christ.

Within days, he became one of the most respected apostles who ever lived and wrote much of the New Testament.

No—that's not how the story goes. What really happened was that he went to Damascus and tried to preach about Christ, but it didn't work because he completely messed it up. He was humiliated and everyone wanted to kill him. His followers had to sneak him out of the city in a basket just to save his life. Paul was not a good preacher. So the church sent him back to where he had come from so he could learn how to be a Christian. He was sent back to Tarsus for roughly five to ten years. What happened as soon as Paul was out of the picture? The church had enormous success. I love how Acts 9:30-31 describes it, "When the brothers learned of this, they took [Paul] down

to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”

Ouch. As soon as they got rid of Paul, the church enjoyed a time of peace and it grew in numbers. Without Paul around, things went great.

But God wasn't done with him. After that preparation in Tarsus, he went on to become the apostle of the apostles. Between all his trips, he travelled close to 9000 miles by foot and by boat, in order to share the gospel. He wrote almost half of the entire New Testament. After an impressive failure, Paul went on to some impressive accomplishments.

Think about Paul's story and whether there are any parallels with your own. What have you given up to walk in Christ? Have you had to deal with shame for the way you used to live or for sin that used to dominate you? Have you tried to do something and completely messed up? Do things sometimes work better when you're not involved? What persecution have you suffered? Is it possible God still has plans for you?

Listen to the way Paul sounds in these greetings. These are not the words of a beaten down man who has been destroyed by all these circumstances. These are words of a passionate friend to his companions. He sent greetings to people that he had come to love. He talked about his companions with affection and admiration. He was part of a family now; a family of people who walked in Christ.

Has that been true for you? Who have you met in your journey with Christ that has made it all worth it? How have people ministered to you? What adventures have you had along the way?

For Paul, walking in Christ means giving everything up, failing miserably, being thrown in prison, and growing into a giant of faith.

Let's think about some of the other people Paul mentions here.

Tychicus

He starts out by talking about Tychicus. He's the scribe that was writing down Paul's words on parchment paper. He's the guy who was sent around 1200 miles to carry this letter to the believers in Colosse. Paul called him a beloved

brother. A faithful servant. A fellow slave. Apparently one of his great skills was that he had great penmanship.

We don't know a lot about this guy, but we know from Acts that he accompanied Paul on at least one of his journeys. We know that Paul sent him to various cities on his behalf. We know he was the scribe for Colossians and probably other letters as well.

Tychicus is part of the story. Not many people remember his name, but he played a role. He carried letters. He was sent thousands of miles to deliver messages. The apostle Paul counted him as a valued fellow worker.

For Tychicus, walking in Christ meant being a faithful scribe and messenger.

Maybe our story is coming alongside of someone like Tychicus came alongside of Paul. Many of us would rather be apostles—we'd rather write the letters than deliver them. But some of us have great penmanship and that's what we offer to God as we walk in Christ.

Onesimus

Paul also talks about Onesimus. Here is an interesting guy. Paul is sending Onesimus along with Tychicus. We don't find out much about who he is from this letter, but we have an entire letter in the New Testament devoted to Onesimus' situation. Paul wrote another letter, probably at the same time as he wrote Colossians that was to be delivered along with this letter. The letter to Philemon had specific instructions about this guy Onesimus.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave, and Philemon lived in the city of Colosse. But Onesimus had run away from his master. It is likely that he stole a bunch of money from Philemon and went to Rome where he could live anonymously in the big city. No doubt, he wanted to start a new life, to begin anew. But instead he ended up in a Roman jail, where he met a very passionate man named Paul.

In the course of that relationship, he became a follower of Christ. In fact, he became a very devout follower of Christ. Paul had great affection for him. So by the time he was released from that Roman jail, Paul convinced him that the right thing to do was to go back to his former master and make amends. So Paul wrote a letter to Philemon and asked him to receive Onesimus in forgiveness. Here's Philemon 15-16, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you

might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.”

So Paul asked Philemon to take back someone who had probably stolen money from him and abandoned him. He wanted him to forgive Onesimus, but more than that—to receive him as a brother in love.

Sometimes as we walk in Christ we hurt people. We have to ask for forgiveness. Can you imagine Onesimus, returning with a letter from Paul asking for Philemon’s forgiveness? Can you imagine the courage it took to return from a 1200 mile journey that he made to get as far away from Colosse as possible?

For Onesimus, walking in Christ means going home and asking for forgiveness.

Has someone ever hurt you? Intentionally? Has someone ever stolen from you or taken what you worked hard to acquire? Has someone ever abandoned you? Rejected you? Is it easy to forgive those kinds of offenses? Paul’s request is not a simple one. It’s not like Philemon can just say, “oh sure—it’s no problem.” What Onesimus did is a problem. It’s a big problem. The forgiveness that Paul is asking from Philemon is difficult. It’s costly.

For Philemon, walking in Christ means costly forgiveness.

Have you been asked to offer that kind of forgiveness? Is that part of your story? What wrongs have you suffered at the hands of others who follow Jesus? I’m sure you’ve been hurt. We all have. Can you forgive? What happens when you do?

Years after Paul wrote the letter to Philemon, a man named Ignatius was in jail and wrote a similar letter. He wrote a letter to the bishop of Ephesus, asking him if some of his friends could stay with him as they passed through. Do you know the name of that bishop? Onesimus. Forgiveness is a powerful thing. Who knows what can happen when real forgiveness is asked for and received.

John Mark

We’ve talked a bit about Paul—how walking in Christ led him to give up everything, caused him to make a fool of himself, and get thrown in prison. We’ve talked about Tychicus—how walking in Christ led him to contribute

in what may seem like a small way, but with great impact. We’ve talked about Onesimus—how walking in Christ led him to humble himself, ask for forgiveness, and move into a position of significant leadership in the church.

One of the other people Paul mentions is Mark in verse 10. This is almost certainly John Mark, the disciple who authored the gospel of Mark. He’s got an interesting story as well.

He traveled with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. They went on a dangerous boat ride and ended up in Perga according to Acts 13. When they got there, John Mark had had enough; he was done; he gave up on the trip. We don’t know why. Maybe he got sick. Maybe he was scared. Maybe he missed his family. We don’t know, but we do know that a few years later, when Paul and Barnabas were ready to embark on their second missionary journey, Mark became an issue of contention.

Barnabas wanted to give him another chance—everyone deserves a second chance, right? But Paul said no. He had given up on the mission once and he wasn’t going to risk taking him along again. Paul and Barnabas couldn’t figure out how to reconcile their differences, so they split up. Barnabas took Mark and went on his way and Paul took another person, named Silas, with him on his second journey. Paul simply wouldn’t have anything to do with John Mark.

Put yourself in Mark’s shoes for a minute. Have you ever given up on something? Thrown in the towel? We all have. And then you want to give it a another chance. Think about being the source of conflict between the apostle Paul and Barnabas. Think about them fighting about you.

These are real conflicts. There are hurt feelings; anger, judging of other people—all of those things. This is what happens in our community too isn’t it? One person can’t get along with another because of some issue in the past. We know about all of this. We know about hard feelings that accumulate over time, causing you to only see someone in light of the hurt their past has brought to your life. We know about the type of broken relationships that we see with Paul, Barnabas, and Mark.

What we also know about is the healing that forgiveness brings. Because here in Colossians, Paul sent greetings from Mark. Apparently Mark was with him wherever he was in prison and they reconciled. In the book of 2 Timothy, at the end of his life, Paul asked for Mark to come to him so he could minister to him. He had become that important to him.

For John Mark, walking in Christ meant giving up, being refused a second chance, and eventually being restored.

A few weeks ago, as a church, we commissioned Brent and Sarna Becker as missionaries from PBC to teach in an international school in Quito, Ecuador. While they were here, I was impressed by this very thing that we're noticing at the end of Colossians. Several years ago, Brent served as the high school pastor here at PBC. After what was an incredibly difficult and painful decision, the elders asked him to step down from that role.

That decision didn't come lightly, and it wasn't received lightly. There were hurt feelings on Brent's side, many high school parents, and maybe some of you. It was messy.

But now, years later, Brent is back in this church being sent out as a missionary. The elders are 100% behind the new season that God has laid out for him. He has returned to this church and found warmth and healing. I spoke to him this week to ask if I could use his story as an example. He told me that it was a great irony because he has always been profoundly impacted by the story of John Mark being turned away by Paul and then restored.

Do you see what I'm trying to get us to notice in all these stories? These are hard things, there are personal conflicts, there are failures, humiliations, and broken relationships. But there is also forgiveness, restoration, renewal, empowerment, and intimacy between brothers and sisters joined together as they try to walk in Christ. Are you getting a picture of how walking in Christ plays out for different people?

Others

Paul mentioned a lot of other people in this passage. He talked about Epaphras. He's the guy that founded the church at Colosse. We heard about him back in Colossians 1:7. He introduced these people to Christ and he was with Paul as Paul wrote a letter to help them stay on track.

For Epaphras, walking in Christ meant watching your story come full circle.

Paul talked about Luke, the doctor. He referred to him this way because being a doctor was a rare thing in those days. It was a position of extremely high status. So it was remarkable that Luke was a doctor and was a part of their community. This was a community that had to deal with people from very different socioeconomic classes. That's

what walking in Christ does—it brings very different people together.

For Luke, walking in Christ meant to hang out with people you wouldn't otherwise spend time with.

He also talked about Demas. He's important because he reminded us that there wasn't always a happy ending. In Philemon 24, Paul called Demas "his fellow-worker." But later, in 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul said that Demas, "in love with this present world, has deserted me."

Our stories will be surprising. Some who once deserted us will return. Others who once were faithful may desert us in the future. You never know where walking in Christ will take you.

Archippus and Us

The final person I want us to think about is Archippus. At the end of the letter, in the second to last verse, he was told, "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord." We don't know a whole lot about this guy. We know from the Book of Philemon that he was a part of Philemon's household—perhaps his son. So we don't know what work it was that Archippus received from the Lord. He may have received back Onesimus, the runaway slave. He may have had a formal role as a deacon or as a preacher of God's Word. We don't know for sure what his work was. We only know Paul's instruction to him that he would be faithful to complete it.

As we wrap up the Book of Colossians and see all these stories of different people walking in Christ and where it led them, I want us to take this phrase as our marching orders from this book. "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord." I want to suggest that these words be ringing in our ears as we close the Book of Colossians.

There are two things I want to emphasize about this phrase. First, we don't know what the work is that Archippus received from the Lord for a reason. Because it is his work and not ours. Each of us has our own work that God gives us.

This is what walking in Christ results in. It means that you are trying to live your life in the mystery of Christ. It means that God leads you and guides you into some role in the great story that he is writing. Maybe you're a scribe. Maybe you're an apostle. Maybe you're a doctor. Maybe you're an evangelist. You have some work from the Lord.

It might have to do with your kids, your job, your friends, or your community. It might change in different seasons of your life, but you have some work from the Lord.

You don't have to complete my work. You don't have to be faithful to whatever God has asked the person next to you to do. Walking in Christ means finding out what work God has given you and being faithful to that.

That's the second thing to notice. Walking in Christ requires faithfulness. Paul commends Epaphras for the hard work he does of praying regularly for the Colossians. It is so much easier to not walk in Christ than to follow him faithfully. The Christian life is not the easy choice. But it is the better choice. Don't give up the good for the easy. Find out what work God has given you and complete it. Endure. Forgive people, even if they steal your money and run away. Be willing to reconcile, even if they abandon you halfway through an important project.

Whatever work you receive from the Lord won't be easy. It will require you to be faithful in the face of difficult circumstances. We need this encouragement that Paul gives to Archippus. Complete the work you have received in the Lord.

Conclusion

This brings us to the end of the book. Colossians is a book that helps us to find our story in Christ, to become immersed in Christ, and to be filled. It helps us to find out how the mystery of God is played out in our lives, our homes, our jobs, and our communities.

When we do that, we take part in a tremendous story. We may be asked to give everything up. We may be humiliated. We may fail miserably. We may have to ask for forgiveness. We may have to relate to a group of people that are completely different from us.

Whatever the path God has for you, I can promise you that if you walk in Christ, your story will be better than anything you see on HBO. You will not live a meaningless life of pointless work with a few fun weekends scattered in its midst. You will be part of something. Part of the cosmic work that God does through Christ in the everyday parts of your lives.

The encouragement that we need is the encouragement that Paul gave the Colossians. Stay true. Keep it all focused on Christ. Walk in him. See to it that you complete the work that God has given you. As you do that, the story

that you are in will be far better than any you could be watching.

Amen and amen.

Colossians Interpretive Translation, 4:7-18

(7-9)

If you're wondering about how I'm doing, you'll hear about it from Tychicus. We love him as a brother and appreciate him as a faithful minister and fellow servant of the Lord. In fact, the main reason I sent him to you was so you could hear about how we're doing and that your faith may be strengthened. Onesimus is coming with him too. You know him as a fellow Colossian. Those two will tell you everything you want to know about how we're doing.

(10-11)

My friend here in prison, Aristarchus, says "Hello." Mark does too, the cousin of Barnabas. Don't forget what you already heard about Mark—that he has been restored and should be welcomed warmly. Jesus, who goes by Justus also says "Hello." These men are all fellow Jews. They have been such an encouragement to me because they are the only Jews that have worked alongside me to spread the news about the kingdom of God coming in Christ.

(12-14)

Epaphras, whom you know so well, says "Hello." He is so faithful in his service to Christ and he prays for you with such incredible intensity so that you may become mature believers and live your lives according to God's design for you. If you only knew how much he has gone through for your sake and for the sake of those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Finally, our close friend Luke, the doctor, says "Hello." And Demas too.

(15-16)

Say "Hello" to the fellow believers in Laodicea. Say "Hello" to Nympha and to the house-church that she so faithfully hosts. After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it. Ask them for the letter they received, so you can read it too.

(17)

Encourage Archippus not to lose momentum in the calling that the Lord has given him. Tell him to push on so that he can finish it.

(18)

And now, I've taken the pen from my scribe and written this last part myself. Remember me in prison. May you experience God's grace every day.