

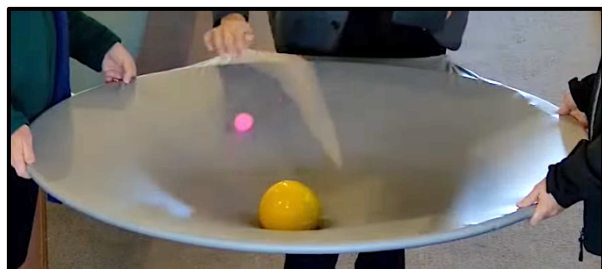


Glory and Gravity

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.
Colossians 1:1-2 ESV**

Good morning and Happy New Year! I have the privilege of delivering the first five sermons of the year 2022. In these five sermons, we will begin a new sermon series from a part of the Bible PBCC hasn't studied closely for some time. I'd like to introduce this new series and its major theme with a demonstration of the natural phenomenon we call "gravity." Please welcome my assistants this morning – they are going to hold up this circular plane made out of an elastic tablecloth. This elastic plane represents the fabric of space-time; in reality, this would be three-dimensional, not flat – so whatever you see happening on this tablecloth, try to imagine it in three-dimensions. Albert Einstein theorized that objects with mass bend space-time around them; the greater the mass, the greater the bending, and the more likely it is that other objects will feel the effects of that bending. The effect of that bending is what we call 'gravity.'

We can demonstrate the bending of space-time with this tablecloth and these ping pong balls – or rather, we can demonstrate the lack of bending. These ping pong – sorry, table tennis – balls have very little mass – they are hollow, and what is solid about them isn't very dense. So when I place them on the fabric of space-time, they have almost no effect on it – they just sit there on its surface, and if they do roll, they roll in a straight line.



The medicine ball, however, is much larger and mostly filled with sand – about three pounds of sand. When I set this ball on the fabric of space-time, it bends it much more than a table tennis ball would. It creates what is referred to as a ‘gravity well.’ And if I add the table tennis balls back into this system, you can see that the bending of space-time causes them to curve around and eventually fall into the gravity well, until they get as close to the center of the medicine ball as they can get. The greater the mass of an object, the greater its ability to draw other, lower-mass objects to itself. And that concludes our demonstration! Let’s say thank you to our assistants.

So why are we talking about gravity this morning? What does gravity have to do with the start of a new study? Well, it turns out, a lot, because the text we will be studying is all about the glory of Jesus Christ. And for the Biblical authors, there was a direct connection between glory and gravity.

Much of the Bible was written in Ancient Hebrew, and even the parts that weren’t, were written by people who had studied the Ancient Hebrew parts. In Ancient Hebrew, the word for “gravity” or “weightiness” is כָּבֵד (*kōved* – not to be confused with “COVID”). It turns out that if you keep the consonants (the ‘root’ of the word) and change the vowels, you get כְּבוֹד (*kābôd*) the Hebrew word for “glory, honor, majesty”. And because of the way Hebrew works, this means there is a conceptual link between gravity, weightiness and glory. When we think of the word “glory”, we typically imagine something bright and shining; the Biblical authors, however, also thought of things that were heavy and substantial, things that would be hard to move, things with mass – things that could bend reality around themselves and draw others into their center.

(As a side note, if anyone observes that you’ve gained a little weight this holiday season, you have Biblical support for a body-positive attitude: You didn’t gain weight, you gained glory!)

Glory and gravity were related in the mindset of the Biblical authors – so throughout the Bible, we see the glory of God expressed not only in the light and life emanating from His person, but in His immovable, unchangeable, undeniable presence, in His presence which demands and deserves the surrender and submission of all reality around Him. God is the Person of greatest mass, of greatest weight, of greatest gravity in or outside of space-time, in or outside of Creation.

As the Psalmist put it:

**His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.**

**The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
before the Lord of all the earth.**

**The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
and all the peoples see his glory. (Ps 97:4-6)**

The glory of God bends reality around Him – even “*mountains melt like wax before the LORD*” – His gravity draws all reality to Himself. And that includes not only the mountains but also the human heart. That includes our hearts, our minds, our lives, our churches, our work, our families, our world. And as reality bends around His glory, all things find their proper place, the orbit for which they were created.

That is what the study we are beginning today is ultimately about: Bending our lives around the glory of God, recentering ourselves around the glory of God. And that glory has been most fully revealed not in astrophysics or the solar system – no, the glory of God has been most fully revealed in Christ Jesus. It is around Christ’s glory that we center ourselves.

I can think of no better theme for us to focus on as our planet continues its orbit around the sun into the year 2022. I can think of no better theme for people like us, who have spent the past several years or more watching the world around us spinning faster and farther out of control, spinning itself into pieces, like a spinning plate that has lost its center on the tip of a finger, leaving us bracing for when it all comes crashing and shattering on the ground.

Perhaps, for some or even many of us, the plate has already shattered, our world has already been broken to pieces, pieces with jagged edges that no longer come together in a recognizable way. For some or many of us, maybe even all of us, our world has lost its center, and the parts of our lives that were once held together are now fragmented. And maybe that loss of center is showing up in our hearts, in the way we feel: maybe some of us feel more anxious, more uncertain, than before; maybe some of us feel more depressed, more disconnected; maybe we feel less hope, less joy, less peace. Maybe we are grieving that loss of center, grieving and stunned and even angry at how things have fallen – and keep falling – so far apart. And maybe we are tired of trying to pick up the pieces, of trying to fit them together.

But into this mess, into the wreckage of a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, job insecurity, unpredictable school schedules, the constant threat of infection and disruption, chaos in our society, violence on social media, racial oppression, emotional abuse, spiritual darkness – into all this, the Word of God comes to us, and reminds us of who is truly at the center of all things, and how He truly holds all things together. And out of the wreckage we can rebuild, we can rebuild lives recentered on God, lives held together by the gravitational pull of Christ Jesus, who puts all things in their proper place.

So let's take one more moment and pray over today's sermon, and the series of which it is just the first part, that exactly this would happen: that as we look into God's Word we would be rebuilt, slowly but surely, for the first or the thousandth time, as people centered on Christ, centered on His glory, pulled together by His gravity. Let's pray.

Paul's Letter to the Colossians

If you haven't already guessed it by now, the new study we are beginning today is in the Letter to the Colossians. You can find this letter in the New Testament after Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians; if you start seeing T-names, you've gone too far! We don't write or read too many letters these days, so it might be helpful to think of this letter as something like one of those multi-paragraph emails you get from your best friend updating you on all kinds of things, sharing deep thoughts they had since the last time they saw you, and asking for help with this or that project.

The Header

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father. (Col 1:1-2 ESV)**

Every email begins with a header, which identifies who sent the email and the intended recipients of the email. This letter starts the same way; its first two verses serve the same purpose as an email header. This is where we will begin our study of the Letter to the Colossians.

Whenever you open an email, scanning through the header takes about three seconds – so why are we using a week just to look at this letter's opening? Why am I preaching a sermon from the first-century equivalent of an email header? Because the

impact of Christ's gravity on the lives of God's people can – and should – be felt even in the smallest details of daily life. In every letter attributed to Paul in the New Testament, we can feel the pull of Christ's gravity on his life even in the way he wrote his headers, his letter openings – and the first two verses of his Letter to the Colossians are no exception. These two verses can be divided into **three parts**: A part identifying the **senders**, a part identifying the **recipients**, and a brief word of **greeting**, and each part points to Christ, as I hope we will see this morning.

*The Sender(s)*¹

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father. (Col 1:1-2)**

Verse 1 identifies the authors of this letter as *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.”* Although both Paul and Timothy are named here as senders, it is unlikely that Paul and Timothy contributed equally to its content. You see, in those days, it was common for letters to be written by dictation. The final verse of this letter (4:18), confirms for us that Paul did not write most of this letter himself, with his own hand: *“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.”* By saying that he wrote just this verse *“with [his] own hand,”* Paul implied that he hadn't written the rest of the letter that way – and that is where Timothy came into the picture. Timothy likely served as Paul's secretary and took dictation as Paul worked out what he wanted to say in the letter. Of course, Timothy would have agreed with the content of what Paul dictated, so whether Timothy's inclusion in verse 1 is proof that he took Paul's dictation or that he was simply united with Paul in the letter's message, his name belongs right where it is. That being said, for the remainder of this series, I will be referring to the author of this letter as Paul, since he appears to be the primary source of its content.

So what did Paul have to say about himself? Paul identified himself in verse 1 as *“an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”* The English word “apostle” comes from the Greek word *ἀπόστολος*, which simply means “messenger” or “delegate,” a person who was sent by another to deliver their message on their behalf and with their full

¹ G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon* (BECNT); Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 1-8; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, 2008), 28-46.

authority; when a person heard something from an apostle, it was as if they were hearing from the apostle's sender directly. In this case, Christ was the sender and, "*by the will of God*," Paul was the "*apostle*".

And many of us know how Paul became an apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul had had a dramatic conversion experience: Paul had once been Saul, a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish religious leadership in the first century who specialized in the study of God's Word. Saul had persecuted Christians, hunting them down, imprisoning them, and even approving of their execution. But on one of his hunts, while on the road to Damascus, Christ Jesus appeared to Saul and gave Saul a glimpse of His Resurrection Glory – and His glory completely overwhelmed him. Saul's life was rearranged by the gravity of Christ Jesus' glory, and what was rebuilt in Saul's place was Paul, a believer in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And Christ laid upon Paul a new calling: Not to stamp out the Gospel but to spread it.

The gravity of Christ rearranged Paul's life – and it reshaped and reoriented his self-identification, down to the greetings he wrote in his letters. What once might have read, "Saul, Pharisee Extraordinaire, Preserver of Judaism," was replaced by "**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.**" Already in the first verse of this letter, in the seemingly rote detail of jotting down the return address, we see the impact, the gravitational pull, of Christ on Paul's life.

The Recipients²

And that brings us to the second part of the letter opening. The first line of Verse 2 identifies the recipients of this letter: "**To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.**"

Colossae was a city in southwest Asia Minor that had once been an important center for business and commerce. For some time, the city had sat on the intersection of major highways that crisscrossed the region. But when some of those highways were rerouted through Laodicea about twelve miles to the northwest, Colossae began to lessen in significance. Colossae's time in the sun, however, had left an enduring impact on the city's population: People from all over the Roman Empire had ended up in Colossae in their pursuit of wealth and opportunity, and they brought with them a wide variety of perspectives, cultures, languages, philosophies, and religions.

² Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 9; Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 26-28.



The people of Colossae worshiped all kinds of beings – everything from the Greco-Roman gods to local historical heroes to members of the Egyptian pantheon. There was even a large group of Jews living in Colossae and practicing their religion. It is likely that these religions had at least some influence on each other; and it is even possible that some of these religions began to mix with one another. By Paul’s day, Colossae was a cosmopolitan city boasting a proud history and a diversity of cultural and religious perspectives – does this sound familiar? Does this sound a little like, say, the South Bay? Cupertino? San Jose?

Amid all this multiculturalism were the Colossian Christians, *“the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.”* Once again, we see the gravitational pull of Christ in the opening of this letter: Christ is at the center of their identification. The primary thing the recipients of this letter shared in common was their devotion to Jesus – they had been set apart for God as His **“saints”**, His holy ones, and had proven **“faithful”**, so far, in their commitment to Christ.

The Greeting: Grace and Peace

Now we come to the third part of the letter opening, Paul’s greeting to the Colossians at the end of **verse 2: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”** It would be easy for us – especially for those of us who have grown up in the church speaking Christianese – to see this greeting from Paul as a disposable, throwaway line, as Christian small talk. But for Paul, words like “grace” and “peace” represented life-changing realities – realities he had experienced for himself, up close and personally.

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For Paul, the word “grace” referred to the unmerited, unearned, undeserved, and unending favor of God, His unfailing love, manifested by His unchanging commitment to His people. When Paul wished for “**God the Father**” to send to the Colossians His “**grace**,” his hope was that the Colossians would know how deeply loved they were by God, that the Holy Spirit would open the eyes of their hearts to see the goodness of God towards them – and as they saw and received more and more of this goodness and love, that they would be strengthened and empowered to persevere in the faith.

This is how grace functions in the lives of God’s people, as Paul spelled out to his apprentice Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:11-13)

This is God’s grace to us: Not only the forgiveness of our sins, but Spirit-empowered *“training ... to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions”*; not only mercy for our mistakes, but transformation from the inside-out; not only release from our pasts, but hope for the future, for *“the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”*

Grace saves us and trains us and fills us with hope for the future – this is the grace Paul wished upon the Colossians. And he also wished for them to receive the peace that accompanies grace. When we receive the grace of God into our lives, we find ourselves surrounded and supported by the love of God: Our past is forgiven and our future is secured – so our present is made peaceful. Even if that peace is mixed with pain, we know that pain is neither punishment nor permanent. Grace assures us of God’s unfailing love for us and points us to the promises He will not fail to fulfill. So we can say that where grace thrives, peace prevails.

Paul wished both grace and peace upon the Colossians – and this was Paul’s heart for all his fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord, wherever they happened to be throughout the world: He wished “**grace [...] and peace from God**” to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians (yes, even to them!), the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Thessalonians, to his pastoral apprentices Timothy and Titus, and to his friend and coworker Philemon.

In every one of these greetings, Paul credited “*God our Father*” as the source – and in all but one of these greetings, Paul also credited “*the Lord Jesus Christ*” alongside “*God our Father*”. Which letter was the exception? Perhaps surprisingly, this letter, Paul’s Letter to the Colossians! In this letter, and in only this letter, Christ Jesus is left out of the greeting: “**Grace to you and peace from God our Father [period.]**” Why? Why did Paul leave Christ out of the blessing?

Well, it is usually risky to attempt to explain something’s absence from a text; we can work with the words on the page, what we see in front of us – but it is hard to explain why something we would like to be there isn’t actually there. But in this case, I think the rest of the letter speaks for itself and suggests an answer, an explanation for why Paul left Christ Jesus out of this greeting. It has to do with why Paul wrote this letter in the first place.

The Body

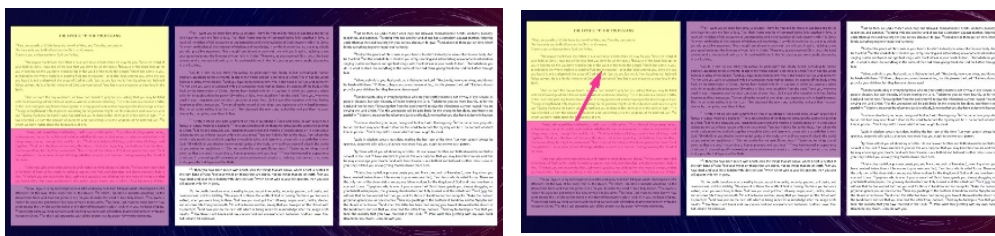


The body of the letter to the Colossians can be broken into four main parts: The first part spans verses 1-14 and includes the opening, the two verses we’ve been looking at, and an introduction to the body of the letter; skipping the second section for a moment, the third section of the letter, spanning Colossians 1:24-2:23, is where we learn the reason Paul wrote the letter in the first place. Living as they did in a city that was home to a wide variety of religions and philosophies, it turns out that the Colossian Christians were encountering individuals or groups of people who were trying to pull them away from their faith in Jesus Christ. These would-be influencers promised the

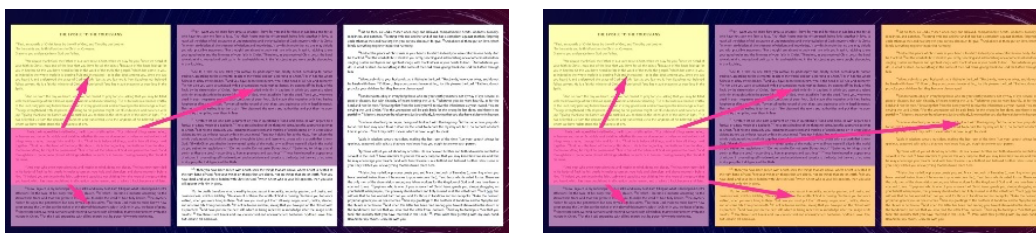
Colossian Christians a version of the grace and peace they were already enjoying: If they listened to what they taught, the influencers promised, they could be happier, more secure, and closer to God.

So what was Paul to do about these influencers? How would he counter the offer from these influencers, these promises of greater spirituality, greater access to God, greater transformation, greater righteousness? Paul's strategy was simple: Remind the Colossians of what God had already given them, of who God had already given to them, and of how this gift, this Person, can do all and more than what these influencers promised. Paul's strategy was to remind the Colossians of who they already had received into their lives.

This is the point of the **second section of the letter**, Colossians 1:15-23. In this passage, Paul reminded the Colossian Christians of who it was they worshiped, of who it was they had attached themselves to, of who was living in their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit, of who was going to see them through this life and bring them home to glory in the Eternal Kingdom of God. Simply put, Colossians 1:15-23 is a passage about the glory of Jesus Christ.



This passage serves as the center of gravity for the whole letter: The first part of this letter is about the impact Christ had already had on the Colossian Christians' lives; the third part is about Christ's superiority to the religions and philosophies on offer in Colossae; and the fourth and final section, spanning chapters three and four, is about the transformation Christ brings about in the lives of His people, starting from the individual and moving to their local church, their family, their work, and ultimately the world around them.



At the center of all this is Jesus Christ; it is Christ Jesus' glory that holds it all together, that makes it all possible; it was Christ's glory that shaped and directed and empowered the change and the hope in the Colossian Christians' hearts. It's because of Jesus that the Colossian Christians had changed, were changing, and would continue to change; it's because of Jesus that the Colossian Christians had been forgiven, were being filled with love, and would hold onto hope until the very end.

And so we can say that the glory of Jesus Christ is at the center of this letter; it is the center of Paul's message to the Colossian Christians; and it is the answer to our question about Paul's greeting to the Colossian Christians: Why did Paul leave out "**the Lord Jesus Christ**" from the blessing of "**grace [...] and peace**"? Because the Lord Jesus Christ is the "**grace [...] and peace from God our Father.**" He is the one through whom we receive grace, and He is the one through whom we receive peace; He is grace and peace in our lives. In every other letter written by Paul, grace and peace come from "**God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**" – but here, arguably more than in any other letter Paul wrote, Paul presents Christ Jesus as the grace and peace God has given, as the content of this blessing. As we said again and again during Advent Season, Christ is the gift!

Application

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.
Colossians 1:1-2 ESV

In conclusions, in these two verses at the opening of this letter we can already feel the gravitational pull of Christ: We are reminded of how Paul's life was transformed by his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus; we are reminded of Christ's gravitational pull among the Colossians as witnessed in their enduring faith in a majority non-Christian culture; and we are reminded of the grace and peace God brings into the lives of His people when Christ is at the center of their lives.

As I read these two verses, I can't help but ask myself, "Where is my center? What is the center of gravity for my life? What is the one thing that pulls the pieces of my mind, the pieces of my heart, the pieces of my life, my family, my work, my world –

what pulls these things together? Is it the gravitational pull of Christ? Or is it various competing objects, competing things of seemingly great mass and importance, pulling me in all kinds of directions? Where can I feel the pull of Christ in my life? What parts of my life are in orbit around His glory, and what are not? What is still trying to resist His gravity?"

Even as I ask these questions of myself, I wonder how they might apply to our church as well: "Is Christ the center of our church? Is the gravitational pull of His glory shaping who we are as a body? Is His glory directing what we do as a body? How we spend our resources? How we respond to the world around us? Is our church characterized by the grace and peace that comes from God through Christ? What is orbiting His glory, and what isn't?"

These are big questions to attach to two verses, to be sure – but these are the questions that I hope will be raised again and again throughout our study of Paul's Letter to the Colossians. And in raising these questions, I am not suggesting that the answers are all negative – I raise them, not because I have a taste for criticality or because I enjoy doing the hard work of reflection and repentance myself, but because we live in a world that is fragmented and splintered in a thousand directions, and nearly all of them fall away from Christ's glory. And amid the fallenness of this world, our natural instinct is to fall with it, to fall to the gravitational pull of worldliness, of greed, of anger, of instant gratification, the pull of worldly success and wealth, the pull of power and control and manipulation, the pull of distraction and repression and entertainment, the pull of Sin and of Death and, yes, of Satan, **"the prince of the power of the air"** (Ephesians 2:2). These things do not have the glory Christ does, as we will see over the course of this letter – but imagined gravity is just as effective as real substance when it comes to how we live our lives and what we put at the center of them.

We must ask these questions of ourselves, we must ask ourselves where our center is, and whose gravitational pull we submit to in our lives. We must ask ourselves these questions as individuals and as a church, not in the voice of the accuser, not in the voice of the adversary, but in the voice of love, the same love that moved Paul to seek **"grace [...] and peace"** for the Colossians, the same love that moved Christ to seek grace and peace for this world, to pick up its broken pieces, and to rebuild us around His glory.

That is my hope, brothers and sisters – my hope for this series, and for every series and individual sermon you hear delivered from this stage: That we, individually and as a church, would be continually rebuilt around the glory of Jesus Christ; that we would be continually re-centered and reoriented around His gravitational pull; that the pieces of our lives would find their proper place in orbit around His reality; and that through it all, we would be filled with **“grace [...] and peace from God our Father”**.

I personally believe that this is what God has already been doing. As my spiritual director likes to say, “God is always previous” – He has already been at work in PBCC, and I believe one of the things He has been doing is gently but consistently turning our attention to the glory of Jesus Christ. God has magnified Christ in Bernard’s preaching from the Book of Daniel; God has focused our attention on Christ through Shawn’s preaching through the Gospel of John; God centered Christ through our team preaching during the Advent Series; and those of us who have participated in Brian’s Bible studies in the Book of Ruth have been shown Christ in incipient form, born, eventually, from the faithfulness of a Moabite woman and a middle-aged man. Now God has brought us to Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, where Christ is put on display at the center of all things. It is clear to me that God is wanting us to take special care, as Paul would later put it in this letter, to **“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God”** (Col 3:1b).

And what better time to do this than the beginning of the new year? Than the middle of a pandemic that just won’t end? Than the end of the Advent season, in which we celebrated the arrival of Jesus Christ two thousand years ago – what better time than now to bring to God the pieces of our lives, however broken or whole they may appear to be, and to let Christ pull them together into all they were meant to be?

Conclusion

In the coming weeks, we will take a closer look at the impact Christ has on the lives of God’s people; and we will be reminded that re-centering our lives around His glory is a journey that stretches out over a lifetime; and we will, God-willing, think and feel more deeply about the glory of Christ as the center of the universe and of the Church. But for today, we begin with the question, which I encourage all of us to roll over in our minds throughout the coming week: “Where is my center? Where do I feel

the gravitational pull of Christ in my life? Where do I need to feel the gravity of Christ?" It is our commitment to surrendering to His gravity – instantly, totally, humbly, like table tennis balls on a tablecloth – that identifies us as God's people. And it is what we signify whenever we partake of the Lord's Table, to which we now come.

Eugene Kwon

Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

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