

# Paul's Thanksgiving

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[ 0 : 00 ] Last week we covered Colossians 1 verses 1 and 2 and did an overview of the entire book.

! Paul's purpose for writing the book was to refute heresies. Some of the heresies came from Jews living in the city. Other heresies came from Gentiles in the city, but regardless of the source, all the heresies had something in common.

They all tried to mislead believers into thinking that Christ plus something else is necessary for salvation. When we get to Colossians 1 verse 15, we'll start looking at Paul's arguments against the heresies.

We still have a ways to go before we get there, though, and the verses we cover tonight are still part of the letter's introduction. Tonight in verses 3 through 8, we'll see Paul's thanksgiving for the church at Colossae.

Then verses 9 through 14 have Paul's prayer for the church at Colossae. We'll get to those verses next week, but for now, let's read verses 3 through 8. Paul says, We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

[ 1 : 28 ] Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.

He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. The Apostle Paul was a great encourager, and this letter is a good example of the grace of thanksgiving.

In this section, which is actually one long sentence in the original Greek, Paul gives thanks for what Christ has done in the lives of the Colossian Christians. He also mentions thanksgiving in five other places in this letter.

And just to give you an overview of where those are, in 1.12, we will hear Paul pray for the recipients of this letter that they will be giving thanks to the Father. Of course, that echoes his own thanks here in verse 3.

Then in chapter 2, verse 7, we'll hear him exhort his Colossian readers to abound in thanksgiving. A little later, in chapter 3, verse 15, he will simply say, and be thankful.

[ 2 : 42 ] He'll underline those same simple words by speaking of the thankfulness in your hearts to God in chapter 3, verse 16, and then giving thanks to God the Father in 3.17.

Then in chapter 4, verse 2, he will urge them to be continually watchful in prayer, and he can't help but add with thanksgiving to that.

One reason why I wanted to highlight all of the thanksgiving references there is that they're even more remarkable when we remember that Paul wrote this letter from prison. Like Paul, we should be grateful for what God is doing in the lives of others.

As Christians, we're all members of one body. If one member of the body is strengthened, then this helps to strengthen the entire body. And if one church experiences a revival touch from God, it will help all the churches.

And in this expression of thanksgiving, we'll see Paul trace the stages in the spiritual experience of the Colossian believers. Because tonight's text is just one sentence in its original language, the verses lack clean divisions, but we're still going to break them up into three sections.

[ 3 : 54 ] You'll just see that the sections overlap somewhat. The ends of the first two sections actually introduce the main point of the following section. The first thing we will see tonight is the recipient deserving Paul's thanksgiving.

So again, that's the recipient deserving Paul's thanksgiving. We see that in verse 3 through the first part of verse 5.

And here are those verses again. They say, We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Whom does Paul thank there? You're right, he thanks God. Why do you think he doesn't thank the Colossians? Well, Paul actually recognizes that God is the one to whom thanks is owed, because salvation in all its parts is a gift from God.

The verses in this section sound very much like what Paul wrote in Ephesians 1, verses 15 and 16a. Listen to those verses from Ephesians.

[ 5 : 07 ] Again, this is 1, 15 through 16a. Paul wrote there, For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

John Calvin preached the following about those verses, but if we substitute Colossians for Ephesians, the same thing applies to our text here in Colossians. So, here is what Calvin wrote, but instead of where he talked about the Ephesians, I'm going to substitute Colossians there. He said, St. Paul did not play the hypocrite in giving thanks to God for the faith and love of the Colossians.

If every man was able to believe and have faith of his own accord, or could get it by some power of his own, the praise for it ought not to be given to God. For it would be but mockery to acknowledge ourselves indebted to him for what we have obtained, not from him, but from elsewhere.

But here, St. Paul blesses God's name for enlightening the Colossians in the faith and for framing their hearts to make them loving. It is to be concluded, therefore, that everything comes from God.

[ 6 : 26 ] You'll also notice in these verses that Paul describes God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul believes strongly in one God, the one known in connection with Christ, and he also drew attention to the fact that the Son is the way to the Father.

The phrase, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is even more remarkable than it first appears when we consider the context. Paul knew that God was the Father of Israel and that Israel was his Son. We've seen that just recently in Hosea 11.1 on Sunday morning. And Paul speaks of God here as the Father of Jesus Christ, whom he calls our Lord. These expressions are all pointers to the message that Paul had been taking around the Mediterranean world.

And that message included the following truths about Jesus. And of course, remember that Jesus was a Jewish man who lived, died, and rose from the dead about 30 years earlier in Jerusalem, which was 600 miles to the southeast of Colossae.

And the three truths are that he is the Christ, that is the long-promised Messiah of Israel. He is the Lord, that is the ruler of the world.

[ 7 : 40 ] And finally, he is the Son of God, and God therefore is his Father. The second thing to notice about Paul's Thanksgiving in verse 3 is that it is not about himself or his circumstances at all.

It is about you, the Colossians. So the very Jewish Paul says that we always thank God for a group that includes very Gentile Colossians. What had happened to cause this Jewish man to write these words to the group that had gathered to hear them in Philemon's house?

Well, we know that very early in the Bible we hear of the promise God made to Abraham, that God would bless not only Abraham's descendants, but through them also all the families of the earth.

Listen to the words of the first three verses of Genesis chapter 12. Genesis 12, 1 through 3 say, Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

[ 8 : 55 ] When Paul heard about what happened to this group that included Colossian Gentiles who had become believers, he understood that God's ancient promises concerning the nations were being realized, and that's why he gave thanks.

It was wonderful enough for Paul and other Jewish believers to be recognized and have Israel's Messiah be the one that was recognized, but it was no small thing to have the Gentiles included in this as well.

After all, the Gentiles were brought into the sphere and influence of the Messiah, and they now believe and trust and have confidence in that Jewish Messiah. So for Paul, that was an extraordinary wonder, and that's why he thanks God, too.

He also goes on to list three things about the Colossians for which he's thankful. He mentions their faith, their love, and their hope. Let's look at each one of these three in some detail.

Paul is thankful to God for the Colossian believers' faith in Christ Jesus. We see that the Colossian believers are holy brothers in Christ who have put their faith in the Lord of the Gospel.

[10:06] The Greek word translated faith there means to be persuaded that something is true, and not only be persuaded that it's true, but to trust in it yourself. So far from being just an intellectual trust, it also involves obedience.

In fact, the root word actually comes from the word meaning obey. The concept of obedience is equated with belief throughout the New Testament, and the Bible speaks of the obedience of faith as well.

We know that biblical faith is not a leap in the dark. It's based upon fact, and it's grounded in evidence. Remember that Hebrews 11.1 says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

And faith gives assurance and certainty about unseen realities. Saving faith is carefully defined in Scripture, and true saving faith contains repentance and obedience as its elements.

The repentance involved in saving faith has three elements. It has a turning to God, a turning from evil, and an intent to serve God. No change of mind can be called repentance without all three.

[11:24] We see that repentance is more than being sorry over sin. It also is a redirection of a will and our purposeful decision to pursue righteousness and godliness instead.

And we know that God has to grant that. Like repentance, obedience also is encompassed within the bounds of saving faith. The faith that saves involves more than intellectual ascent as well, and it involves emotional conviction too, but it also includes the resolution of the will to obey God and His commands and His laws.

Any definition of faith is incomplete without talking about what the object of faith is, and saving faith always has Christ Jesus as the object. And with Jesus as its object, our faith is secure as a house on a solid foundation or a boat safely at anchor.

Charles Spurgeon talked about the importance of faith's object by telling of two men in a boat.

Caught in severe rapids, they were being swept toward a waterfall. Some men on shore tried to save them by throwing them a rope.

One man caught a hold of the rope and was pulled safely onto the shore. The other, in the panic of the moment, grabbed hold of a seemingly more substantial log that was floating by.

[12:47] The man with the log was carried downstream over the rapids and was never seen again. Faith was represented by the rope linked to the shore, and that connected the person to safety, just as Jesus Christ connects us to safety.

In the remainder of this section, Paul lists two more things for which he gives thanks. At the end of verse 4, he writes to the Colossians about the love that you have for all the saints.

What Paul had heard was that these Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus now had a love for those who were the first believers in Jesus. In other words, the original Jewish Christians.

So the original Jewish Christians and the newer Gentile Christians have now been joined together as God's people. So for Paul, it was a real wonder that between these Gentiles and Jews, there should be love now.

And that's another reason for Paul to thank God. We see from these verses that the Colossians' love was non-selective. Apparently, there were no divisive cliques at Colossians, such as those that fractured the Corinthian church.

[13:56] Christ's love not only drew the Colossians to himself, but also to each other. We know that when we talk about love for the brethren, that doesn't mean that we're to feel the same emotional attachment toward everyone.

True biblical love is more than an emotion. It's sacrificial service to others because they have a need. We show godly love to someone when we sacrifice ourselves to meet that person's needs. We see in verse 5 that Paul also thanks God because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. The word translated laid up there also means in store or reserved.

So hope is the Christian's anchor connecting him inseparably to God's throne. Other New Testament writers also speak of the same hope.

And we'll look at a couple of those. Listen to Peter's words in 1 Peter 1, verses 3 through 5. Peter said, Here's what the writer to the Hebrews says about this hope.

[15:27] Hebrews 6.19 tells us, We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain.

The faith, hope, and love sound great for the Colossians, but why should we care about that today? Well, the answer to that is pretty simple. The truly thrilling thing, as far as we're concerned, is that the experience of the Colossians described here by Paul is the experience of Christian people today.

We may not be as aware as we should of the Jewish roots of our faith, but we have certainly come under the influence of the Messiah Jesus. And in doing so, we have come to faith in him, to a love that crosses boundaries, and to a hope that is beyond this world.

In other words, what calls Paul's remarkable thanksgiving to God is a reality known to Christian believers still today. Paul believed that the hope offered in Christ inspires assurance and as a result produces spiritual fruit.

The basis of believing Christ, which is faith, and serving others, which is love, is that this world is not the end. There's an afterlife where the deeds done here will be re-evaluated and rewarded.

[16:47] Christians have an understanding of the rewards and blessings of heaven. So the first section showed us the recipient of Paul's thanksgiving along with the things for which Paul is thankful.

In the second section, Paul expands on the hope that we just discussed. Verses 5b through the first part of verse 7 Show us the reason driving Paul's thanksgiving.

So the reason driving Paul's thanksgiving is what goes in your blank there. So here are those verses, and it's pretty clear what the reason driving your thanksgiving should be.

And Paul says, Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.

True believers' faith, love, and hope come from believing the gospel. That's why the gospel is the reason driving Paul's thanksgiving. Paul emphasized the fact that the Colossians should have had no need to seek some new teaching.

[18:02] The preachers of the gospel had given them the word of truth. We know that the term gospel means good news or good message. The good news, of course, is that Jesus Christ has solved the problem of sin through his death, burial, and resurrection.

This message of truth and good news bears fruit in the lives of believers and shouldn't be abandoned for the alluring lives of the false teachers. The gospel's message that God will forgive sins, deliver from sin's power, and provide eternal hope comes not only as a gracious offer, but also as a command to be obeyed.

And Paul was consumed with this message. Many today argue that the gospel has little, if anything, to do with heaven in the future.

Its primary focus should be earth in the present. We do need to embrace a gospel that provides direction for life on earth and a gospel that transforms relationships, pursues social justice and labors, and also pursues an expansion of the kingdom in this life.

So the gospel is about lordship over our life now by Jesus, but it isn't merely a way to escape the corruption of this world and go to heaven when we die.

[19:18] The gospel is most certainly and perhaps primarily concerned with life after death. It is most certainly concerned with the hope that is reserved for us in heaven and the glory of spending in eternity in God's presence.

We'll see when we get to Colossians 1.14 that the gospel is certainly about redemption and the forgiveness of sins. The gospel is something that the Colossians heard and understood.

The preparation and preaching of biblical texts that are true to the intent of the biblical authors and relevant to the lives of contemporary people is hard work. It's demanding of both time and energy and we're fortunate to have a pastor that spends time and energy to explain the text.

At the end of verse 5, Paul describes the gospel as the word of truth. The consistent testimony of scripture, like what we find in Colossians 1, is the truth that the gospel is absolute, it's accessible, and it's universally relevant for people in all times.

The truth of the gospel is a key that unlocks the mind from slavery to false idols. It's a light that dispels the darkness of bad thinking, and it transforms us to the kingdom of God's beloved Son and liberates and delivers us from the domain of darkness.

[ 20 : 43 ] Truth found in the gospel is the good news that God has become human in Jesus Christ and has lived and died and risen from the grave for the redemption of his people. This truth is now embodied and expressed for us in the written word of God, the scriptures.

And so we should hear it, we should study it, we should ingest it, and we should relish it. And above all else, by God's grace, we should let it transform our hearts and renew our minds and govern our steps every day.

Verse 6 tells us that the gospel has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

The gospel is dynamic. Even though the message comes through human messengers, Paul saw the gospel as being in motion. He saw it moving from place to place and incorporating gospel preachers into it.

It was not the property of those who preached it. The gospel belonged to God and it was God's way and still is God's way of saving his people. Paul tells us that the gospel is continuing to bear fruit and increase.

[ 21 : 58 ] And the terms teach that the gospel is productive. It accomplishes whatever work God intends. The advance of the gospel in reality is the advance of God's work in changing the lives of those who hear it and believe the proclamation.

Verse 6 also shows us that the gospel is universal and in that sense we mean that Christianity was not just another one of the local sects of the Roman Empire. It wasn't just a mere cult like the others at Colossae.

It was and still is the good news for the whole world. So the gospel transcends ethnic, geographic, cultural and political boundaries. And of course we've already talked about that and how they saw that at Colossae when you had the Jews and the Gentiles coming together to form the church. Listen to what Jesus said about the gospel being universal in Matthew 24, 14. He said, And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come.

So the gospel going throughout the Roman Empire foreshadowed its spread throughout the entire world. It's a message of hope for people in all cultures and the true church, the body of Christ, is made up of people from all over the world.

[ 23 : 20 ] We see that truth in Revelation 5, verses 8 through 12. Listen to Revelation 5, verses 8 through 12 and you'll see what I mean. Those verses say, And when he, talking about Jesus, had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

And they sang a new song, saying, Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign on the earth. Then I looked and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders and the voice of many angels numbering myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

Going back to our text tonight, we see in Colossians 1.6 that the gospel also has an individual aspect to go along with the universal aspect.

The gospel produces fruit both in the internal transformation of individuals and in the external growth of the church. The internal growth of individuals and the spiritual growth of them will lead to new converts being one to Christ.

[ 24 : 54 ] That was the pattern for the early church. The living gospel is the power that transforms lives and as it does so, the witness of those transformed lives produces fruit and that fruit includes new converts.

So as the gospel produces fruit in individual lives, its influence continues to spread. The end of verse 6 reminds us that grace is the very heart of the gospel.

Grace is God freely giving us the forgiveness of sin and eternal life which we do not deserve and can never earn. Christianity is much different than other religions.

Other religions assume that man can save himself by his good works. The reason that the Christian gospel is good news is because of the grace of God. God is willing and able to save all who will trust in Jesus.

A man named John Selden was a leading historian and legal authority in England and he had a library of over 8,000 volumes and he was recognized for his learning.

[ 26 : 02 ] When he was dying, he said to the archbishop, I have surveyed most of the learning that is among the sons of men and my study is filled with books and manuscripts on various subjects but at present I cannot recollect any passage out of all my books and papers whereon I can rest my soul save this from the sacred scriptures.

The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men. And of course that verse he quoted there is Titus 2.11. For the Colossians their faith, love, and hope came about on the day they heard the gospel and understood the grace of God in truth.

The beginning of verse 7 tells us that the Colossians learned the gospel from Epaphras and the first part of verse 7 says, just as you learned it talking about the gospel from Epaphras our beloved servant.

Although salvation is solely by God's grace he uses human channels as a means to get that grace to us. Jesus told the disciples in Acts 1.8 that they in the power of the Holy Spirit were to be his witnesses.

1 Corinthians 1.21 speaks of those who believe through hearing the message preached but perhaps no passage states this truth as forcefully as Romans 10.14.

[ 27 : 24 ] Romans 10.14 is the familiar verse that says Epaphras brought the good news of God's grace to the Colossian church.

They learned it from him and by referring to Epaphras as our beloved fellow servant Paul connects Epaphras' ministry with his own. Epaphras was Paul's representative at Colossae he was backed by Paul's authority and that of the Lord Jesus as well.

So even though Paul was imprisoned unable to go to the Colossians Epaphras ministered to them on Paul's behalf. We talked about some of the history of the city of Colossae last week but the most significant day in the history of Colossae was not the day that Xerxes rested in the city on his march against Greece and it wasn't the day that Cyrus marched his Greek army through the city.

The most significant day in the history of Colossae was the day that Epaphras came to town and planted the seed of the gospel. They may not have had banners unfurled in the winds and they may not have had trumpets blaring in the breeze but lives were changed and eternal destinies were altered when the gospel was planted there by Epaphras.

So we talked about the recipient deserving Paul's thanksgiving and the reason driving Paul's thanksgiving. The last thing we'll see from this section of scripture is the report deepening Paul's thanksgiving.

[ 29 : 05 ] So the report deepening Paul's thanksgiving is the last piece. Listen to the last part of verse 7 and then all of verse 8. Paul wrote he, talking about Epaphras again is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the spirit.

So how was Epaphras faithful? Well he not only won people to Christ but he taught them the word and he helped them grow. We'll see when we get to Colossians chapter 4 that he also prayed for them that they might become mature in Jesus Christ.

And when danger threatened the members of the church Epaphras went to Rome to get counsel from Paul. He loved his people and he wanted to protect them from false doctrines that would destroy their fellowship and hinder their spiritual development.

We should never forget that new Christians must be disciplined. Just as a newborn baby needs loving care and protection until he can care for himself new Christians also need loving care and discipling.

The Great Commission doesn't stop with the salvation of the lost. In that commission Jesus commanded us to teach converts the word as well. And that's what the fellowship of the local church is all about.

[ 30 : 28 ] The New Testament doesn't preach the kind of individual Christianity that's so common today. And by individual Christianity we're talking about people who ignore the local church and who find all their spiritual food in books, radio, TV, or recordings.

We also know from these verses that while Epaphras was visiting Paul in Rome, Epaphras told Paul about the Colossians' love in the Spirit. The phrase in the Spirit could also be translated by the Spirit or through the Spirit in the sense that it is the Spirit who is responsible for the power and the incentive and the steadfast commitment to fulfill whatever is in view.

So to experience and express love in the Spirit points us again to the divine origin of this love. It's a God-given love, one that can't be cranked up or willed into existence by mere human grits and determination.

We know that we're by nature selfish and guarded and absorbed with our own concerns. If we are to love as the Colossians loved, then it must happen in the Spirit.

And this type of love happens as the Spirit reminds us of Christ's love expressed on the cross and as the Spirit works to direct our thoughts from ourselves to the rest of the saints.

[ 31 : 51 ] It also happens as the Spirit awakens in us a recognition of the presence of Christ in other believers and it happens as the Spirit overcomes our inclination to harbor bitterness and unforgiveness toward those who have hurt us.

It also happens as the Spirit energizes our hearts to believe that it is truly more blessed to give than to receive. And we know that Paul in Galatians 5.22 defined this type of love as a fruit of the Spirit. So we see from these verses tonight that the church at Colossae was healthy in many respects. It had a living faith and an indiscriminate love for all Christians whether they were Jewish or Gentile. It also had a solid hope of eternal life through the gospel and these virtues are solid ground for genuine thanksgiving and we see that they moved even the Apostle Paul to give thanks.

Epaphras did what countless faithful ministers of Christ have done since that day. He began to teach the believers and the wonder that occurred in Colossae continues to happen as people in every place understand the grace of God in truth.

[ 33 : 04 ] So here are some questions just to think about and reflect upon as we leave tonight. Who did for you what Epaphras did for the Colossians?

You should be thankful for that person or those people. Then secondly, for whom have you been an Epaphras? And finally, can you therefore share in Paul's thrilled thankfulness to God?

The challenge for each of us is to be like Paul in Romans 1.16. And in Romans 1.16, Paul said, For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Thank you.