

A Prayer of Thanksgiving
Colossians 1:1-8
Tampa Covenant Church
17 September 2023

Proposition: We offer thanksgiving to God for the faith, love, and hope that's he's lavished on us through the grace of his gospel.

FCF: Living without faith, love and hope.

RHF: Through the person and work of Jesus Christ we have a sure, eternal hope through the gospel.

(#1) Series Introduction:

This morning we begin our fall series by looking at Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. Not much is known of this city during Paul's time. **(#2) Nonetheless**, it was located in the territory of Phrygia, a Roman province in Asia minor, which is now modern-day Turkey. As you see, it was situated along on the Lycus river, and part of the Lycus valley cities, which included Laodicea and Hierapolis.¹ Paul will mention these two cities in this letter. From reading Acts 18, we know Paul passed through the region of Phrygia, enroute to Ephesus on his 3rd missionary journey but he did not plant a church there. But as we'll see in today's text, Paul's connection to this church was through a man named Epaphras. He may have received the gospel under Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10) then returned to Colossae to plant this church and possibly the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

(#3 Blank) So, what is Paul doing writing to a congregation he didn't plant or know personally? Years later, at the end of Acts, Paul is under house arrest in Rome but Luke tells us he welcomed all who came to him. It's was probably around this time period, Epaphras visited him with updates concerning the churches. They were doing well as we'll see but there was a problem in the community. False teachings began to surface, which scholars identify as a blend of Jewish and Hellenistic (Greek) teachings.² The exact nature of these teachings have been hotly debated among scholars but the words Paul uses in refutation sorta gives us a clue that these teachings may have dealt with holding to Sabbath days, religious festivals, food regulations, new-moon celebrations in combination with Hellenistic pagan principles of wisdom, knowledge and the practice of ascetism.³ Whatever the situation, it's clear the apostle Paul wrote this letter out of care and concern for this newly founded church. And his emphatic answer to the false teachings was the supremacy of Christ over all things and the sufficiency of Christ in all things.

Our church is no different, like the church in Colossae, we too face a myriad of false teachings and cultural pressures that seek to draw us away from the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of his gospel. Thus, we pray Paul's letter to this church will serve to ground us in the truth of who Christ is and what he has done to secure our salvation because it's only in Christ true wisdom and knowledge is found. So, for the next 11 weeks we want to walk out of these doors knowing the truth and living it out by God's grace that Christ is indeed "over all and in all." May the Lord by his Spirit challenge us, rebuke us and grant us the courage and strength we need to trust in the truth of his word over everything this world has to offer. So, let's look to the LORD in prayer and then we'll look to his word.

Paul's Greeting:

As we open up this letter, **(#4) Paul greets** this church by identifying himself as an *Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*. Now, Paul wasn't one of the twelve but was commissioned directly by the LORD. In Acts 9, the LORD declared to Ananias that Paul (then Saul) "*was his chosen instrument to carry his name before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel.*" So, Paul isn't pulling a power play, rather he's clearly establishing his God given authority to refute the heretical teachings making its way into the church. Next, he refers to Timothy as "our brother," that means he's the Colossians' brother too. **(#5) And calls the** congregation "*saints and faithful brothers and (sisters), in Christ.*" This super important because it

speaks to our Christian identity. We're wholly separated to Christ and this faithfulness we're called to doesn't happen apart from our union with him. Thus, our identity is completely found in Christ. Think about it, Paul doesn't know anyone in this congregation, what's more he's of Jewish lineage but none of it mattered because they were all one in Christ. Finally, this commendation of grace and peace at the beginning of Paul's letters may come off as perfunctory but we shouldn't look at it that way because it serves to remind us that it's only through the unmerited favor of God in Christ we're able to experience true peace with God in this world.

Transition: So, Paul greets the church and now it's time to get to the heart of the matter. Put yourself in Paul's shoes, you're in prison and a pastor visits you with disturbing news concerning a church you've never visited. So, you sit to write to address these matters. After the salutation, what do you start? Instruction, advice, teaching, or comparison with other churches. Paul doesn't do that. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he starts with God; specifically, a prayer of thanksgiving to God. Simply because Paul knew the grace of God found in the gospel. (#6) So we want to take our time and unpack Paul's prayer of thanksgiving; First, for the church, then for the gospel. And in so doing, allow this text to renew our hearts in thanksgiving for grace of God at work through his gospel.

Thanksgiving for the Church: *Characterized by faith, hope and love*

(#7) Paul writes in v.3, "*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,*" In saying "we," Paul could be speaking collectively or individually.⁴ Now, if Paul is speaking for himself (many believe he is) then it gives us some great insight into his prayer life when we consider his circumstances. He's in chains! However, he's not wallowing in his circumstances but regularly and consistently interceding to God in prayer on behalf of others. We've all heard the old adage that prayer is as essential to the Christian as breathing is to life. But all too often prayer stands out as the one the Christian discipline requiring the most growth. Now this could be for many reasons. The fear of prayers going unanswered, plain old apathy or simply too busy to carve out time to commune with God. But one of the ways we can grow in prayer is by making sure our prayers are not just for ourselves but on also for others.

(#8) C.S. Lewis is helpful here, he said, "*I have two lists of names in my prayers, those for whose conversion, I pray, and those for whose conversion I give thanks. The little trickle of transferences from List A to List B is a great comfort.*"⁵ This is helpful but it's not unique to Lewis, this is what Paul is doing; he's giving thanks to God for those in Colossae who have trickled over from List A to List B. And what a sweet comfort it must have been given his circumstances. And Paul consistently laced his prayers with thanksgiving to God for his work of grace in this church even though he never met them. So, these prayers are not based on something he witnessed (#9) firsthand, he tells them in v.4, "*since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,* ⁵ *because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*"

We look at these verses and we see the familiar triad of Christian virtues: faith, love and hope. We can distinguish one from the other but we must realize they're inseparable in practice and essential to living the Christian life; no exceptions. Probably the most familiar text listing these virtues is 1 Cor 13, aka the Love chap⁶ where (#10) Paul concludes by saying, "*Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.*" The whole chapter reads well at weddings but I don't think Paul had weddings in mind when he penned the words. Rather, he devoted a whole chapter on love in addressing the division and dysfunction of the Corinthian church; especially in the use of spiritual gifts.

So, how is Paul employing the triad with this church? (#11) First, said he's heard of their faith in Christ Jesus. Earlier in v.2, he referred to them as "faithful brothers in Christ." The Key phrase is, "In Christ Jesus." Paul is helping us to realize it's simply not enough to call ourselves "persons of faith" when asked what do we believe. That could mean anything... If you're a Christian, having faith in Christ, means living

a life of complete trust and dependency in our crucified and risen Lord. He is the object of our faith and the sphere in which our faith operates. It's in him we live and move and have our being. Without him the only options remaining are putting faith in faith (our ability) or in someone or something else. And none of those options are very good nor are they biblical. (#12) **Second**, Paul is thankful for the love they have for the all the saints. Once again, Paul is very specific; it's not just "any ole love" but love for all the saints. Those for whom Christ died and rose again; all believers. Although, we may sometimes like to make exceptions in this area of the Christian life, there are none. In Rom 13, Paul tells the congregation to "Owe no one anything, except to love each other...." It simply means, as believers in Christ, we have an ongoing obligation of love to one another because that's how we flesh out our faith in Christ. It's not our common interests that form us into community...it's the love of Christ through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. #13 Paul mentions this very thing in v.8 in saying Epaphras told him of the love they have for one another but it wasn't something they conjured up...it was made possible through the spirit of God working in their lives.

(#14) **Finally**, Paul completes the triad by citing hope as the cause for the church's faith in Christ and love for the saints. (#15) **The Greek** word used for hope is "ἐλπίς" (elpis) and it has few basic sense meanings:⁷ *Confident expectation, that for which one hopes or the basis of hope*. Paul employs all three senses of the word in this first chapter but here he's using it in the 2nd sense. He's saying this hope heaven is an objective reality that is laid up for the Colossian church and us in heaven. In other words, it's a fact, it doesn't depend on the strength of our feelings because it's not based on optimism or a wish for it to be true; it's based on the promises of God for our future. It's an already; not yet hope, one that's ours now in Christ and will someday be fully realized at his return. It's the glorious future in the new heavens and new earth where we will live with resurrected bodies in the presence of our savior.

Transition: (#16) **So, Paul** thanks God in prayer for this vibrant church marked by faith, love and motivated by an objective hope laid up for them in heaven. And now he continues in thanksgiving for what has made it all possible. This brings us to the 2nd point, thanksgiving for the gospel.

Thanksgiving for the Gospel: *Contains the power to bear fruit*

(#17) **Paul says** in the back half of v.5, "Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which 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," Let's notice three things the Paul is thankful for concerning the gospel:

(#18) **The Gospel** is The Word of Truth: *The Content and reality of the Gospel*

Paul refers to the gospel as the word of truth⁸ the Colossians heard and in v.6 it's the grace of God in truth they understood.⁹ In other words, they heard the content¹⁰ and experienced the reality¹¹ of the gospel. The Greek word for gospel means good news. In antiquity the gospel referred to the good news of a successful military campaign or the birthday of a Caesar and whatever was news worthy in those days. But this good news Paul is referring to transcended any and all good news of his day.

This church heard the good news of the gospel facts: (#19) **A message** about God; who created the world and what he requires of us as our creator (glorify him), (#20) **message** about sin (Guilt before God; totally incapable reconciling ourself to him), (#21) **They heard** the good news of God's redeeming love in the person and work of Jesus Christ (sinless life, death, burial and resurrection), They received a summon to turn from sin and trust in Christ as their only hope in the world and rest upon him alone for salvation. (#22) **And in so** doing, they experienced the reality of God's grace in doing for them what they could not do for themselves and in giving them what they did not deserve; new life in Christ and peace with God. Understanding the context in which this letter was written, Paul is clearly telling this church they didn't need to seek out any new teaching. They had the Gospel!

(#23) The Gospel is Powerful: *Transcends and transforms*

Remember, Paul is writing to Gentiles, who he **(#24) describes in Eph 2** as the “*uncircumcised, separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope without God in the world.*” But of all of that changed when they heard and received the gospel because the gospel transcends all barriers. Knowing this, Paul put no limits on the gospel and neither should we. He’s clear in saying, the gospel wasn’t just bearing fruit and growing in the Colossian church; the same thing was happening throughout the known world and what was true then is true now.

(#25) One commentator said, “*The message of God’s love for all mankind and Jesus’ sacrificial death to redeem us by grace speaks in any language or culture. It speaks to the universal condition of every human being – male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile (and whatever other divisions humans may create.*”¹²

So, the power of the gospel not only transcends barriers; it also transforms our lives. As every day we are being conformed to the image of our savior. When we think of the three Christian virtues, we recognize they’re not something we are able to conjure up and put into practice on our own. Rather they come to us through the gospel and they increase in us through the gospel; only the gospel possesses that kind of transformation power. Tim Keller is famously said the gospel is the A-Z of the Christian life and

(#26) he also said this, “*It’s not the gospel saves us then we grow into maturity by trying hard to live according to biblical principles. Rather we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our minds, hearts, and lives by believing in the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on.*”¹³ And this happens in our lives when our faith is centered in Christ, our love rooted in Christ and our hope is fixed on Christ.

(#27) The Gospel Must be Proclaimed: *Faithfulness to our gospel call*

(#28) In v.7, Paul tells them they learned the truth and power of the gospel through Epaphras, who he describes as a beloved fellow servant and faithful minister on their behalf. And through his obedience to God in doing the work of an evangelist, sinners were saved by grace and a church was established. This is how the gospel goes out into the world; through Gospel proclamation.

Where is the Apostle Paul? He’s in prison, yet he was thankful that the gospel continued onward because it didn’t depend on him; it depended upon the LORD who called us by his grace, equipped us with his Spirit and sends every one of us out to go and proclaim his good news. But we don’t go alone because he promised to be with us always. Epaphras was not an apostle, he wasn’t commissioned directly from the LORD nor did he write scripture. But he made the cut...the mere mention of his name in scripture grants us a portrait of the ordinary means our LORD uses to accomplish his extraordinary purposes in the lives of others in the world. And this happens when we who have experienced the truth and power of the gospel see ourselves as fellow servants and faithful ministers of this good news.

(#29 Blank) Conclusion:

Church, here we are thousands of years removed from this letter and like the Apostle Paul we have a lot to be thankful for because the gospel is still bearing fruit in this church, other churches in our city, our state, our country and throughout the world. God has not abandoned us in this world; he’s still at work in bringing faith, love and hope to those who are struggling in despair; and he’s using us. So, let’s respond in thanksgiving to our God for the gospel work he continues to do in us and the gospel work he’s doing through us. This is our call and this is our mission because one day our eternal hope will be fully realized when our faith becomes sight as we behold the true lover of our souls; Jesus Christ our Lord and king. So, may our Lord grant us the grace we need to serve him and be faithful to him until he comes.

¹ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Colossians & Philemon*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 24.

² D.A. Carson & Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.), 524.

³ Carson and Moo maintain this “syncretistic” approach to the Christian faith may have seemed attractive to the newly formed congregation at Colossae, Ibid 524. In opposition to the view of Syncretistic practices, Garland writes, “The most streamlined view that adequately explains all the data is that newly formed Gentile Christians in Colossae were being badgered about their faith by contentious Jews who took affront over their claims.” David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary, Colossians/Philemon*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 27.

⁴ Beale notes Paul could be referring to Timothy as well but since Timothy is not mentioned in the remainder of the epistle, “it’s best to view Paul as the primary referent of the “we.” G.K. Beale, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Colossians and Philemon*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 34.

⁵ Randy Newman, *Mere Evangelism, 10 Insights from C.S. Lewis to Help You Share Your Faith*, (The Good Book Company, 2021), 106-107.

⁶ See also 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8. Paul emphasizes elements of the triad based on context. In this case he places emphasis on hope.

⁷ ἐλπίς (*elpis*), ἰδος (*idos*), **1. LN 25.59 hope**, a looking forward to in confident expectation (Ac 23:6, Col 1:23, 27); **2. LN 25.61 that for which one hopes, hope, something hoped for** (Ro 8:24; Col 1:5); **3. LN 25.62 basis for hope**, that which is the cause or reason for hoping (Col 1:27, 1Th 2:19).

⁸ According to Pao, the exact relationship between “the word” and “truth” is not clear; however, along with Pao, many scholars understand “truth” as an independent entity, and “the gospel” as an exegetical gentive in apposition to truth, meaning it emphasizes truth as the content and identifies gospel with truth. Pao, 53.

⁹ *Epiginōskō* sometimes relates to having exact or thorough knowledge of something or someone (Luke 1:4; Col 1:6), but other times its meaning is no different than *ginōskō* (Mark 6:54) Jeremiah K. Garrett, “*Knowledge*,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

¹⁰ “of the content of Christianity as the ultimate truth”, BDAG, 42.

¹¹ “an actual event or state, *reality*”, BDAG, 42-43.

¹² David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary, Colossians/Philemon*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 49.

¹³ Timothy Keller, *Center Church, Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 48.