

Series: *Colossians: The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ*

Lesson: *Themes for Thanksgiving*

Text: *Colossians 1:1-8 (L1)*

Date: *Sunday, January 8, 2012*

*Colonial Hills
ABFC
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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TEACHING TIPS

- Select a few key ideas that you want folks to walk away meditating on. These should be truths/applications that you were struck with, since you will be better able to personally and passionately teach what you first have been challenged by. The main point of the lesson (encapsulated in the title and summarized by the main points) is a definitely “big idea” that you want to get across. In this way, you will avoid “missing the forest for the trees.” In other words, don’t try to focus on all my “trees” so that you miss being impacted by the forest. Pick a few trees, but be sure to see the forest.
- Ideas from fellow teachers:



BACKGROUND

The City of Colossae

Overshadowed by the 8,000 foot peak of Mount Cadmus, the city of Colossae formed a tri-city region with Laodicea and Hieropolis in the Lycus Valley, one hundred miles east of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). What had once been a booming city had in Paul’s day diminished in importance and size, due to the rerouting of the major Roman road through Laodicea. Colossae was predominantly gentile (2:13), but had a sizeable Jewish populace due to the implantation of Jews under Antiochus the Great (223-187 BC). Business ventures such as the wool trade and the nearby mineral baths also drew Jewish settlers to this fertile region known for its chalk deposits and earthquakes.

The Church at Colossae

Paul had apparently never been to this tri-city region (2:1). Rather, Epaphras had been the founder of this church. A native of Colossae (4:12), Epaphras was probably saved under Paul’s ministry when he visited Ephesus during the apostle’s lengthy stay there (cf. Acts 19:10; 26). He then evidently returned to his home town and started a church there.

The Colossian Heresy

Most Bible scholars view Colossians as Paul's response to a particular heresy (or heresies) that was jeopardizing the health of this young and vibrant Colossian church.¹ This heresy apparently "contained two basic elements—false Greek philosophy, and Judaistic legalism and ceremonialism."² The false Greek philosophy seems to have been a precursor to a second century heresy called Gnosticism. "According to Gnosticism, religion is purely internal, immaterial, and intellectual; it is not about objective truth but inner experience and so has no direct bearing on behavior or morals."³ This forerunner taught a salvation that involved Christ plus knowledge (cf. 1:28; 2:3, 18, 23; 3:16). This heresy held that God was good but matter was evil, it featured angels as intermediaries between God and humans, and it denied Jesus' deity (cf. 2:9), humanity (cf. 1:22), and sufficiency (cf. 1:28; 2:10).

Aspects of Judaistic legalism were also vivid in this Colossian heresy that added works to salvation (cf. 2:11; 3:11) and advocated asceticism (cf. 2:20-23) and ceremonialism (cf. 2:16-17). This false teaching was indeed dangerous, for it "sounded Scriptural...seemed real...[and] appeared righteous" (cf. 2:23).⁴

Talbert summarizes well the problems at hand:

"All this was presented as a form of advanced teaching for a spiritual elite. The Christians of Colossae were urged to go in for this progressive wisdom and knowledge (gnosis), to explore the deeper mysteries" in the quest for greater personal fulfillment. Paul's goal for them is, indeed, perfection (teleios); but this doesn't come through legalism or mystical experiences but through Scriptural teaching (1:28) and intercessory prayer (4:12). Paul wants them to find fulfillment. The verb "(ful)fill" also dominates Paul's argument, as he assures them that all fullness and fulfillment are to be found in Christ and in Christ alone (see 1:9, 19; 2:9, 10; 4:12). Ascetic practices cannot make one holier, and mystical experiences do not make one more spiritual. Christ is all there is and all we need. It doesn't get any higher or bigger than Him. There is nothing "beyond" Him. So, in the words of Samuel Rutherford, "fasten your grip on Christ."⁵

¹ Helpful overviews of this heresy include: John MacArthur, *Colossians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996); Layton Talbert, "Colossians: Living Life in Christ Alone" in *Frontline* magazine (July/August 2011 edition, pp. 30-32); D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994); and John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, vol. 2, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), pp. 667-68).

² MacArthur, Introduction.

³ Talbert, p. 31.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

The Writing of Colossians

In a stirring preface to his commentary on Colossians,⁶ John Phillips describes the cosmic battle between Satan's lies and God's truth throughout time. Phillips demonstrates that since Satan was unable to destroy the church,

There was only one thing to do with this formidable church—corrupt it. So, he took the truth of God and found agents to deny it, distort it, and debase it....He attacked the Word of God, the Son of God, and the Spirit of God. At Colossae, he attacked the deity of Christ first. Then came the additions—intellectualism, ritualism, legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. It made the head of poor Epaphras, pastor of the church, swim. He was soon out of his depth. Raw paganism was one thing; obsolete Judaism was another....the error that had invaded Colossae was too deep, too subtle for him.

Now Paul was in Rome, so Epaphras, faithful pastor and shepherd that he was, decided to head there. He would talk to Paul....only one man was intellectual enough and spiritual enough to unravel and refute the tangled web of truth and error that was snaring the simple souls whom Epaphras was seeking to shepherd for Christ....

Sure enough, Paul was willing, able, and eager to help. He seized his pen and went to work. To Satan's horror, what resulted was another divinely inspired, God-breathed, inerrant, flawless, living, powerful epistle to be added to the Word of God....So every possible distortion that Satan could dream up has been answered apostolically! He has no new ideas! All he can do now is rehash and juggle the same bankrupt lies and hope that people don't know their Bibles well enough to see through them.

The Theme of Colossians

As is demonstrated by the seventy-plus references to Christ in Colossians' ninety-five verses, the theme of this epistle is the sufficiency of Christ. In the words of D. A. Carson, Colossians "expounds the doctrine of the cosmic Christ"⁷ and is summarized in Colossians 3:11—"Christ is all, and in all." "It was Paul's desire in writing Colossians that we would realize that Christ has 'come to have first place in everything' (1:18)"⁸ or in the words of Charles Wesley (in "Jesus, Lover of My Soul"):

*Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find.*

⁶ Phillips, John. *Exploring Colossians & Philemon*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2002. Pp. 6-8.

⁷ Carson, Introduction.

⁸ MacArthur, Introduction.

A Summary of Colossians

We could generally break down this letter into three sections: personal (1:1-14), doctrinal (1:15-2:23), and practical (3:1-4:18). Some outlines further break down the doctrinal section into doctrine (1:15-2:7) and defense (2:8-2:23).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary provides the following helpful summary of the entire letter:⁹

Greetings, brothers (1:1-2). We thank God for your faith and love (1:3-8). And we ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will. We pray this so that you will be fruitful for Christ who has redeemed you (1:9-14). For Christ, our Creator and Head, is supreme in all things (1:15-20). And through Christ's death God has reconciled you who were aliens and enemies (1:21-23). So I rejoice that I can suffer for the church so that God's fullness can be known by the Gentiles (1:24-27). To this end we labor that everyone may be perfect in Christ (1:28-29). For all true wisdom and knowledge is found in Christ (2:1-5). Therefore, brothers, just as you began with Christ, continue in Him (2:6-7).

Now don't be deceived: God's fullness is in Christ alone and not in vain human philosophy (2:8-10). And since you have been identified with Christ in your baptism, you have no need to live under Jewish laws (2:11-17). And don't let anyone rob you of your prize by forsaking Christ your Head (2:18-19). For you died with Christ, so you need not submit to worldly (legalistic) rules (2:20-23). And since you were raised with Christ, you should set your hearts on heavenly things above (3:1-4). So put to death your sinful worldly practices (3:5-11). And clothe yourself with Christ's virtues (3:15-17).

In view of your new exalted identity with Christ, I exhort wives to submit to their husbands; husbands to love their wives; children to obey their parents; fathers not to embitter their children; slaves to obey their masters; and masters to be fair with their slaves (3:18-4:1).

Brothers, pray for me that I may preach this message effectively and clearly, and you live wisely toward outsiders (4:2-6). My coworkers in the gospel send greetings to you (4:7-15). Exchange letters with the Laodiceans and exhort Archippus to complete his ministry (4:16-18).

INTRODUCTION



Consider sharing a brief synopsis of the theme of the book so that this thanksgiving can be put into context—Paul is set on delineating the sufficiency of Christ, lest the Colossians be led astray from that, but he rejoices at the outset that they have experienced His sufficiency.

To create need, you could also consider one of the following two introductions:

(1). How do you live in a gospel-centered, Christ-focused manner toward those who aren't as gospel-centered as you? How do you live graciously toward those who aren't as mature or who seem to you to be legalistic, preoccupied with minutia, or off-point? For example, how should you respond to the Bible Conference or chapel speaker who seems to you to be too "fighting" in his ministry and preaching? Or to the one who always seems to be preaching issues, apparently never emphasizes unity, and appears too stuck on non-essentials? How should you respond to a younger or older believer who seems to major on the minors and miss the point of his/her union in Christ and mission from Christ?

You can still manifest a gospel-centered, Christ-focused perspective and attitude toward them. You can still be optimistic and positive in your evaluation of them.

Paul writes a letter to correct a legalistic, mystic, and experience-based heresy and to compel people to acknowledge the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ for salvation, sanctification, and satisfaction. And concerning these believers, Paul rejoices. He doesn't get frustrated, short, or caustic. He thanks God for their status in Christ. See, even when learning is slow and change is gradual, even when people don't "get it" like we think they should, we can, like Paul, stay positive and grateful and maintain a Christ-centered, gospel-reflecting response.

(2). The believers to whom Paul is writing in Colossians are facing the aggressive and biblically-sounding reasoning of false teachers. Undoubtedly, these young believers and unseasoned pastor, Epaphras, find themselves feeling inferior to the heretics, not knowing how to respond. So, as Paul arms them with truth and a gospel-centered reality, he starts by rejoicing in their maturity through Christ. They were not inferior to these deceivers; in Christ, they lacked nothing! They were complete in Him, and for this Paul rejoiced!

(3). When we evaluate the character and conduct of people, we generally tend toward pessimism. When a report card is brought home with all A's and one B-, we tend to harp on the B- and overlook the diligence and hard work that went into all the A's. When we see a believer that seems to be incorrectly focused on self-effort or ministers that seem to be concerned only for external issues, we tend to want to lambaste and replace them. Paul's response for these struggling Colossian believers couldn't have been more different. Rather

⁹ Walvoord, p. 668.

than criticizing them for wrestling with the incipient heresy round about them, rather than chastening them for not knowing how to rebuke the philosophies at hand, Paul begins by thinking positively and thanking God for what He had already accomplished in and through these believers.

As with all his epistles, Paul begins with a greeting. Currently accompanied by brother Timothy, Paul greets the “saints” “at Colossae,” referring to them as “faithful brothers [and sisters] in Christ.”¹⁰ Lest his letter be interpreted to simply be his opinion, Paul succinctly reminds them of his God-given authority, for he is “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” “What he writes in this letter is not merely his opinion, but God’s authoritative Word.”¹¹ Finally, Paul wishes them both the “grace” and the “peace” that come from God the Father.

Paul’s letter starts out quite positively, as he issues one lengthy sentence (vv. 3-8) of thanksgiving to God for His work in and through the Colossian believers. Paul often started his letters with praise to God and prayer for the believers to whom he was writing, and this letter follows that pattern. MacArthur explains, “Though he admires their true and continuing saving faith, which had separated them from sin to God, Paul certainly does not begin by flattering the Colossians. He gives thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul recognizes that God is the One who is owed thanks, because salvation in all its parts is a gift from Him (Eph. 2:8–9).”¹² These believers had experienced the sufficiency of Christ in salvation (vv. 4-5), and that reality was being increasingly experienced by them (v. 6). So Paul thanks God for graciously opening their understanding to the gospel.

In this first section of Colossians, Paul offers three themes for thanksgiving, three reasons for which he gave thanks to God when he considered the Colossian believers.¹³ For every child of God, these themes become tremendous fuel for the fire of our heavenly praise.

¹⁰ Paul is not suggested two groups of believers here, some “saints” and others “faithful brothers.” The Greek word for “and” (*kai*) often acts appositionally, as it does here, and can be translated with “even” or simply left untranslated.

¹¹ MacArthur, p. 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹³ These three themes can be summarized under one main heading—the gospel (i.e., “the word of truth,” “the gospel,” “the grace of God”). MacArthur states: “Following the salutation in verses 1 and 2, Paul’s words in verses 3–8 suggest seven aspects of the gospel: it is received by faith, results in love, rests in hope, reaches the world, reproduces fruit, is rooted in grace, and is reported by people” (p. 12).

THEIR MATURITY IN CHRIST (vv. 4-5)

Throughout his epistles, Paul uses a small phrase to encapsulate the glorious reality of what the gospel message is all about. That phrase is “in Christ.” God came “in Christ” to reconcile the world to Himself (II Corinthians 5:19), offering Himself as sin for us that we might become righteous “in Him” (II Corinthians 5:21). Therefore, “in Christ” we are a completely new creation (II Corinthians 5:17), enabled to do the good works for which we were created (Ephesians 2:10). We avoid condemnation (Romans 8:1) and enjoy eternal life “in Christ” (Romans 6:23). “In Christ” we have been blessed “with all spiritual blessings” (Ephesians 1:3), including redemption, forgiveness (Ephesians 1:7), and reconciliation (Ephesians 2:13). And “in Christ” we have already been spiritually raised and positioned into heavenly royalty (Ephesians 2:6).

For those who are “in Christ,” all that is His is ours (cf. Romans 8:32, 38-39)! Paul rejoices, then, that these Colossians were brothers and sisters “in Christ” (v. 2) for they had believed “in Christ” (v. 4) and had thus received all the benefits of salvation through Him. While they would spend the remainder of their life growing in that reality (cf. 1:28; 2:6-7; 2:10), by God’s grace and kindness (Ephesians 1:7-9), they had already been joined to Christ and were manifesting a level of maturity in Him.

Specifically, Paul rejoiced in three aspects of their union to Christ.

1. Faith in Christ

While faith itself is a gift from God (cf. John 6:65; Acts 11:18; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:29; II Timothy 2:25), it is the response that is required of all who will be saved. MacArthur provides a good explanation of faith.¹⁴

Pistis (faith) means to be persuaded that something is true and to trust in it.

Far more than mere intellectual assent, it involves obedience.

Pistis comes from the root word peitho (“obey”). The concept of obedience is equated with belief throughout the New Testament (cf. John 3:36; Acts 6:7; Rom. 15:18; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 5:9; 1 Pet. 4:17). The Bible also speaks of the obedience of faith (Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 16:26).¹⁵



According to the Bible, what other concepts are closely related to faith? *Obedience and repentance.* How do those terms help us understand the nature of saving faith? See the explanation.

¹⁴ MacArthur, pp. 14-15.

¹⁵ “Obedience is the hallmark of the true believer. ‘When a man obeys God he gives the only possible evidence that in his heart he believes God’ (W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1966], 3:124). Such obedience will of necessity be incomplete, since the flesh ever rears its ugly head (cf. Rom. 7:14–25). If not the perfection of

Biblical faith is not a “leap in the dark.” It is based on fact and grounded in evidence. It is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith gives assurance and certainty about unseen realities...It is supported by convincing evidence, both from Scripture and from the testimony of those Christians who have gone before us.

The biblical concept of “repentance”—a change of direction and purpose—is also an aspect of genuine saving faith (Mark 1:15; Acts 17:30; I Thessalonians 1:9).

Colossians 1:4 also objectifies “faith.” In our contemporary culture, faith and belief are usually promoted as desirable qualities, but they are usually abstract or humanistic in object. Faith that really matters and really saves is grounded “in Christ.” We are again helped by MacArthur’s explanation of faith’s object throughout the New Testament.

The relationship of faith to Jesus Christ is expressed in the New Testament by various Greek prepositions. Acts 16:31 uses the preposition epi, which suggests resting on a foundation. In Acts 20:21, eis is used, with the meaning of “to find a dwelling place in,” “to go into,” “to abide in,” or “to find a home.” Here in translates en and has the connotation of coming to a place of security and anchor. With Christ as its object, our faith is as secure as a house on a solid foundation, or a boat safely at anchor.¹⁶

Rather than distorting (Galatians 1:7) or disobeying (I Peter 4:17) the gospel and experiencing the eternal punishment of that decision (II Thessalonians 1:7-9), these believers had cast themselves in faith upon the only One who was sufficient and superior.

2. Love for believers

Paul also rejoiced because he had heard about their “love which ye have to all the saints.” Undoubtedly, this was the reason he had heard about their faith, for they had authenticated and publicized it through active love one

the believer’s life, however, it most certainly will be the direction. Faith, then, must never be severed from good works. Martin Luther summed up the biblical view of the link between saving faith and good works in these words: ‘Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works’ (Cited in Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], p. 362)” (Ibid., p. 16).

¹⁶ Ibid.

for another. In their character and lifestyle, these believers had well marketed their Savior, for as He had said, “By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). Their love was done in the obedience of faith, for Jesus had commanded them to love one another as He had loved them (John 13:34).

Perhaps no one better understood the natural link between faith and love as did the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” the apostle John. This theme dominates his first epistle (cf. 2:9-11; 3:10, 14-15; 4:20). His clearest teaching on faith’s love is in I John 4:7-11.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

Simply put, “We are saved by faith; we are saved to love.”¹⁷ The Colossians had been forgiven much and understood that; therefore, they loved much (cf. Luke 7:47). And for this authentic expression of faith, Paul gave God thanks!

3. Hope about eternity

Literally, verses 4-5 read, “...having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints, through the hope which is reserved for you in heaven.” In other words, the Colossian believers exercised faith and love through hope. One commentator explains, “After expressing thanksgiving for the Colossian Christians’ maturity in Christ, Paul presented the reason for their growth. It was their hope. Hope provided the basis for Christian growth since the most basic elements of faith toward God and love toward others grow out of hope. In reality, without hope there is no reason for faith or love.”¹⁸

Along with faith and love, hope is one component of the three great Christian virtues (I Corinthians 13:13; cf. I Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8). Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), which we believe by faith, and so we also look forward in hope to the full realization of that. According to verse 27, the content of this hope was “glory”—the culmination of Christ’s saving work (cf. I John 3:1-2). “The Christian...is willing to forsake the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸ Melick, Richard R. Melick. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, electronic ed., Logos Library System in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 32. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001. Pp. 196-97.

present glory, comfort, and satisfaction of this present world for the future glory that is his in Christ. In contrast to the ‘buy now—pay later’ attitude prevalent in the world, the Christian is willing to pay now and receive it later. What makes Christians willing to make such sacrifices? Hope, based on faith that the future holds something far better than the present. Paul writes in Romans 8:18, ‘I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.’¹⁹

These believers maintained an eternal perspective which made faith normal and love habitual. Therefore, Paul rejoiced in the power of Christ in Colossae.

Application: Paul begins an epistle in which he will counter a pretty severe heresy with a jubilant note of thanksgiving for the maturity of these believers in Christ. No matter how difficult sharing the truth may be, no matter how troublesome the errors may be, there was ample cause for rejoicing, because these believers had been joined to Christ through an active faith in the hope God had reserved for them.



Consider asking how this thanksgiving theme applies to our Christian ministry and living before sharing these thoughts.

Paul’s general attitude tended toward optimism. While he was bold, clear, and condemning at times, he was always joyful and encouraged by what God was doing through Christ. We can apply this first thanksgiving theme along two lines. First, no matter how dark the day, no matter how tough the temptation, we can give heartfelt thanks to God for our union to Christ and growth in maturity. He’s given us hope and faith. He’s personally loved us, so that we may reflect that same love to others. He’s assured us that glory awaits, and the best is yet to come. While feelings, circumstances, and desires change, by God’s grace we have entered “into Christ,” and that will never change!

Second, we have no reason to despair in our church. We often find ourselves frustrated with other believers or concerned about the slow growth and immaturity within our churches. While such a burden is certainly appropriate to feel (II Corinthians 11:28) and we should earnestly and passionately teach God’s truth so believers will grow, we can still be encouraged. What God has already accomplished within our church through Christ gives us enough reason to thank Him and expectantly anticipate what He will continue to do as we cooperate with Him in faith-filled obedience.

Transition: Not only did Paul thank God for the Colossian believers’ maturity in Christ, but his second theme for thanksgiving was the message of the gospel.

THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL (vv. 5-6)

These Colossians believers had been united to Christ, because they had responded in faith to the hopeful message of the “Word of Truth” or the “gospel” that had come unto them.²⁰ This had been a life-transforming message, bringing hope to their despair, faith to their disobedience, love to their selfishness, and life to their death. Had it not been for the message of the sufficiency and salvation of Christ in the proclamation of the gospel, these Colossians would have still been lost in their unbelief (cf. Romans 10:17). So, Paul thanks God for the gospel message that offers such hope in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Paul highlights two praise-worthy aspects of the gospel message in verses 5-6. Unfortunately, the KJV translation of these two verses seems to miss the original structure, so the following translation from the Greek is being offered.

...which [hope] you heard before in the Word of truth, [even] the gospel which is present in you; and just as²¹ in all the world it²² is bearing fruit and growing, so also²¹ [it is bearing fruit and growing] among you from²³ the day you heard [it]²² and experienced²⁴ the grace of God in truth.

1. What the gospel is doing

The gospel is “bearing fruit” and “growing.” The first term refers to the individual aspect of the gospel’s activity. The message of salvation contained in the gospel is not stagnant, but active. Christ’s power to save is not only instantaneous and dealing with sin’s penalty, but progressive and dealing with sin’s power. The grace of God in the gospel message is transformational (Titus 2:11-12). The gospel bears fruit individually as believers experience its power to transform them into the image of Christ throughout their lives. This individual fruit-bearing then results in a universal growth of the gospel as new converts are won to Christ. The transformed lives of believers attests to the saving power of Christ, and so His gospel message spreads as the church grows. MacArthur summarizes, “The living gospel is the power that transforms lives. As it does so, the witness of those transformed lives produces fruit, including new converts. So as the gospel produces fruit in individual lives, its influence spreads.”²⁵



How can the gospel be said to be growing? Is not the message itself complete? See explanation.

²⁰ “The gospel” stands in apposition to “the Word of truth” in verse 5 and should be translated, “... which you heard before in the Word of truth, [even] the gospel.”

²¹ The Greek construction is *kathos kai...kathos kai*, which is translated “just as... so also.”

²² I.e., the gospel.

²³ Or, since.

²⁴ The Greek word here is *epiginosko* and refers to a heightened/complete/thorough/exact knowledge/recognition/understanding of someone or something.

²⁵ MacArthur, p. 19.

¹⁹ MacArthur, p. 19.

2. Where the gospel is doing it

The gospel's power was being felt locally and universally. Paul's extensive travel and gospel-ministry had resulted in the fruitfulness and growth of the gospel's influence throughout "all the world," but he was particularly excited that right in Colossae, it continued to make an impact. The power of Christ experienced by those believers on the first day they "heard and experienced the grace of God" continued to grip them and grow them and go out of them in proclamation to others. Paul triumphed that the gospel was alive and active in Colossae!

Application: In a world of deepening darkness and expanding error, the power of Christ was being experienced and was increasing. The Colossians were living proof of that, and they had not stagnated! Christ was sufficient! And throughout the world, that same testimony was and is known. How thankful we should be for the gospel message—not just for its assurance that we've been delivered from the penalty and dominion of sin, but for its provision of a satisfying and abundant life in Christ! Praise God for grace, and may we never get over the wonder of it all.

If the gospel no longer thrills you the way it used to, then it is no longer "bearing fruit" and "growing" in your life. You've become distracted or apathetic; perhaps you've allowed some strains of the Colossian heresy to creep into your thinking and living. Friend, if this theme does not fuel your thanksgiving, run to the Scriptures and "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18).

Transition: As Paul begins to write to the Colossian believers, he takes a lengthy pause to rejoice in what the sufficient Christ has already done in that city. His thanksgiving flows out in three themes: first, he thanks God for their maturity in Christ; second, he rejoices in the message of the gospel; finally, he delights in the minister of grace, in this case Epaphras.



A great question of application to stress is, "Is the gospel still growing in you?" How can we make sure we're growing in the gospel—both in the knowledge of it and obedience to it? *Growing in the knowledge of the gospel is synonymous with growing in your knowledge of Christ & relationship with God (cf. II Peter 3:18) through His Word (cf. II Peter 2-4); growing in your obedience to the gospel (i.e., "fruit-bearing") is accomplished through preaching it to yourself in trials (cf. I Peter 1:3-9; James 1:2-4) & temptation (cf. James 1:13-18)*

THE MINISTER OF GRACE (vv. 7-8)

Romans 10:13-14 reads, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" Apart from those who were drawn to faith in Christ through their own reading of the Scriptures, all believers were introduced to Christ through the "preaching" of another believer. This was certainly true for these Colossian believers, for they had "learned [the gospel] of [or from]"²⁶ Epaphras."

Paul speaks very highly of Epaphras, for he was Paul's "dear fellow-servant" or beloved fellow slave. Paul had most likely been the "preacher" that had brought Christ's gospel to Epaphras' ears, and Epaphras would later join Paul as a "fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (Philemon 23). Paul also calls Epaphras "a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf," demonstrating that Epaphras was Paul's representative in ministry at Colossae. Since the imprisoned apostle could not personally minister in that city, he rejoiced in Epaphras' ministry in his place. Epaphras was a faithful minister of grace in at least two ways according to vv. 7-8.

1. Epaphras was an evangelist.

On a human level, the Colossian believers owed their understanding of the gospel to Epaphras, for he had taught it to them (v. 7). During Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Paul publicly and personally testified "both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Paul's evangelistic zeal apparently made an impact upon the new convert Epaphras, for he must have engaged in the same gospel-ministry in his home town, and with the Lord's blessing, a church was built. Churches are always and only built upon evangelism, the personal proclamation of the gospel message from one person to another whereby it may "bring forth fruit and increase" in lives and communities. Paul rejoices in this one man's faithful evangelism that had borne so much fruit.

2. Epaphras was an edifier.

According to verse 8, Epaphras had also been the one to reveal to Paul the fruit of the gospel in the Colossian church (i.e., their "love in the Spirit"). This no doubt greatly encouraged Paul's heart, but the reason that Epaphras was relating this to Paul in the first place was because he wanted to be able to continue to encourage his own church. He was apparently burdened by the new heresies arising, and he earnestly sought out Paul's help in keeping the Colossian believers grounded in the true grace of God

²⁶ The Greek preposition is *apo*, meaning "from."

(v. 6). Epaphras with a soul-winner and a soul-waterer. When he reaped a soul, he worked just as hard to root that soul. And for Epaphras' faithful ministry of grace in evangelism and edification, Paul thanked God!

Application: How grateful we should be for those faithful ministers who first whet our appetites for God's gracious salvation in Christ. Have you joined their ranks to share that same overwhelmingly good message with others? Are you active in "ministering grace to the hearers" in your daily interactions with believers (cf. Ephesians 4:29; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25)? If you are thankful for your Epaphras, are you not inconsistent and unloving when you refuse to be one?



The stress of the application here is to get us to start viewing ourselves as ministers of grace—saving grace to the unsaved; sanctifying grace to the saved. How do we get ourselves to think this way? *Suggestions.*

CONCLUSION

The sufficiency of Christ controls Paul, and in the first section of his letter to the Colossians, that reality spills out of him in a run-on sentence of thanksgiving. In these six verses, Paul considers three themes for thanksgiving that are as great a cause for rejoicing today as they were 2,000 years ago. We should thank God for our maturity in Christ through our union with Him; the message of the gospel that sparked our faith and continues to satisfy; and the ministers of grace who led us to Christ in the first place and who continue to point us to Christ (cf. Colossians 1:27-29).