

Thanking God for the effect of the Gospel

Colossians 1:3-8

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A couple of years ago I was in a conversation with one of the young married couples from our church. They were from different countries and described how their difference in cultural backgrounds had caused troubles at times. They told of how on one occasion, they were visiting with the extended family. The bride's grandfather suspected that the new groom already had something against him because he never came over to visit with him. When the problem was explained to the groom he was surprised. In his more formal culture the grandchildren would never approach the grandparents to talk. That was not their place. If they were to talk, the conversation always had to be initiated by the grandparent. So, with this in mind the groom was respectfully waiting for the grandfather.

As we read the book of Colossians, Paul is probably more like the informal, compassionate, approachable, spiritual grandfather. He, very likely, had disciples Epaphras, who had then started the church in Colossae. Paul had never actually met the people of this church, but he writes with compassion, gives advice, and expresses gratitude for all that God has done in their lives. Following in the line of so many grandparents that I have met, his heart seems to overflow with love for this young church.

In today's sermon we will continue with where we left off last week. Join me as we learn from Colossians 1:3-8.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,

The salvation of those in Colossae was such a monumental event that it continually kept Paul in a place of Thanksgiving. Maybe you have someone in your life like this as well. You prayed for them. You cared for them and even shared with them, for years, until one day the light of Christ dawned on their lives and they believed in Jesus. And now, every time it comes to mind, your heart is overcome with awe and thanksgiving.

Paul was doing the same thing. He was thanking God because that is where the credit was due. As we read in Romans, none of us are good. None of us seek God on our own. We each were spiritually dead, wicked, blind, rebellious slaves to sin. The only way that the Christians in Colossae were saved

is because of the death and resurrection of Christ. God drew them to Himself, the Spirit convicted them of sin, and God granted them faith. Their conversion, like ours, was the work of God, and because of that all thanks and glory could only go to God.

Paul mentioned the Lord Jesus Christ. That was a dangerous phrase in the days of the Roman Empire, when only Caesar was to be lord. But yet that was the proclamation of the Christians. Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings. As we read in Philippians 2:9-11, *"God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

As believers, the factual position of Christ is Lord of our lives. At the same time, there are still areas which we struggle to submit to Him. When we turned from our sin and put our faith in Jesus Christ, we bowed our hearts to Christ as Lord of our lives. We surrendered all our rights and gave Him full ownership and dominion over every part of who we are.

In some ways it is like a person who buys an older home so they can refurbish it. As soon as they sign the contract and pay the money the house is theirs, but it is only through the following months that every part is cleaned out and every room restored. Only then have they really made it theirs.

This is the process through which every believer must pass. Once we put our faith in Jesus Christ He becomes our Lord and Savior. It is in the following years, one day at a time, that God grows our maturity in Him and more and more areas of our lives are brought under the functional lordship of Christ. At salvation Christ is factually our Lord. As we mature in Christ He functionally becomes our Lord.

⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Paul gave thanks in prayer because of what he had heard was happening in the church in Colossae. Paul had not been there when the church began, but word had spread about what God was doing in their midst.

Paul heard of their faith. How do we hear one's faith? Can you actually hear faith? Faith is like the wind. You can't actually see it, but you can see the results of it. Paul was thanking God for their faith that was being confirmed by the love that they had for other believers.

It reminds us of the scriptures that talk of recognizing a good tree because of its good fruit or true faith by the good works that it bears. A heart changed will result in a life changed. When people are truly changed it will become evident to others. Paul had heard of their faith and the love that they had for all the saints and he rejoiced.

Paul uses the word *"saints"* here. Now the word "saint" is not a word reserved only for martyrs, overly pious people or those who have done miracles. Paul was using the word saints for all who have been made righteous in Christ. All who have turned from their sin in repentance and put their faith in Jesus Christ. It is in that great exchange that Christ took upon Himself the sin of man and we received the righteousness of God. I know that is mind-blowing, but that is what has happened.

When God now looks at us, He sees the righteousness of Christ. Because of this, they and we are saints.

That is one of the main purposes of this letter from Paul to those in the church in Colossae. We must get our identity right if we are going to live right. That is the only way we will be able to live holy lives consistently. The fact is that we are now righteous in Christ. We are children of God. We are new creatures with a new nature, but we have such ingrained habits of living life our own way, without submitting to God. If we are not diligent to cast off our old life and nurture the new, we will continue to struggle with sin and not take hold of the lordship of Christ that is already ours.

As we think about Paul's mentioning of the word saints, we must not overlook the word *"all"*. Their faith had resulted in a love for all the saints. Not just the saints who were like them. Not just the saints who were easy to get along with. Not just the saints who could later care for them in return. Their faith resulted in a love for all the saints.

We need to take note of this. Take some time to evaluate this in our own lives. Has our faith in God resulted in a selfless love for others, or only in a selfish, convenient love that in some way will benefit us in return? A true love of God will result in a selfless love of *"all"* the saints. As Christians this is one of the ways that the world will know that we belong to Christ. As we read in John 13:34b-35, *"As I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

The reason for their love for all the saints was because of the hope laid up for them in heaven. They saw each other from an eternal perspective, as children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. They no longer identified each other as master or slave, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile. In Christ they found the resources to love each other as He had loved us. They realized that all other relationships would eventually pass away, but those who were in Christ would commune together for eternity. They were not perfect in their relationships, but they knew that there would finally be a day, where sin would pass away and they would rejoice in the presence of Christ, together, forever. With this in mind, they loved their fellow saints because of the hope laid up for them in heaven.

How many times do we lack the love for our fellow saints because we are not thinking with eternity in mind? We live in the present and lose perspective of eternity and what really matters. We forget how the story ends and begin to turn inward and focus more on self and less on others. We hoard material things that will not last and seek recognition that does not matter. We forget the gracious love that we have received and cease to love others as Christ has loved us.

They had heard this truth of the hope of heaven in the gospel, and as they fixed their eyes on heaven they were drawn to give and not hoard, sacrifice and not defend, serve and not lord over, for they now saw the true reality of God, where the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. This was the gospel taking effect in their lives.

Living for eternity brings much-needed purpose and mission to life. C.S. Lewis once said, *"If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who*

thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.”¹

For the church in Colossae, their hope was laid up in heaven. For the Christians in Colossae, their hope was definitely not in the government where Caesar was lord. Or amidst their society which sought after materialism, pleasure and pagan gods. They were the minority. The precious few. Their hope was in the conviction of things not yet seen, the promises that were still yet to come.

We see this eternal hope lived out in the lives of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, as they fearlessly refused to worship the statue of the king and were thrown into the fiery furnace. We see this eternal hope as Queen Esther risked her life by entering the throne room of the king without an invitation. We see this eternal hope in the book of Acts as Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, as Stephen was being stoned to death for preaching the gospel to the religious leaders of his day. We even see this eternal hope in Jesus, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

In Christ we have an eternal hope that upholds us in the midst of trials and tribulation.

As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Where is your hope? Who do you trust in? When all else fails, to whom do you cry? I recently heard a story from one of our church families. They were shopping in one of these big *Carrefour* stores. Their very young son got lost. Mom thought he was with Dad, and Dad thought he was with Mom. For the child it was quite traumatic. Surrounded by huge rows of shelves, you can picture this small boy frantically looking for his parents. Eventually the son found his way and came running back to his mom and dad. When asked about what happened, the little son told how he had prayed to God. As parents, we dread these moments when our children are separated from us, but it is precious to hear a little one who is already learning to put his hope in God. May we, too, turn quickly to God as our hope in our time of need.

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel,

The word *“hear”* in Paul’s day was more than just the mechanics of receiving sound vibrations in one’s eardrum. To hear meant to listen and then to do. If you did not do, then you did not really hear.

Hearing was not just hearing with your ears, it was hearing with your heart. It is like when a parent says to a child, "Did you hear me?" They are not really asking about hearing, they are asking for obedience. In biblical times, when it talks of those who had ears to hear, it is referring to those who heard, understood, submitted and obeyed.

¹ C.S. Lewis, quoted in Francis Chan, *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 75.

Jesus said, *“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”* Hearing always included obeying. If you didn’t obey, you hadn’t really heard.

Those in the church in Colossae had heard the gospel, not just with their ears, not just with their minds, but with their hearts . . . and believed. But what is the gospel? If you were asked what is the gospel, what would you say? Some might say it is doing good things for others. Some would answer that it is trying to be a good person. Some might say that it is praying and reading your Bible. Some might say that the gospel means being spiritual and loving others. None of those are correct. If we are going to be lights of the world and salt of the earth, we must be able to answer this question.

The word *“gospel”* means good news. So, what is the good news? To appreciate the good news we must first understand the bad news. We all have rebelled and sinned against a holy God (Romans 3:23). Because of our sin we are separated from God in both the present and for eternity in hell, a place of forever torment and suffering. But now the good news . . . Seeing our desperate need, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to save us. Jesus took on the form of a man, did not sin, and willingly gave His holy life to die in our place, to pay for our sin. On the third day he rose from the dead, proving that the penalty for our sin had been fully paid. So that now, whoever will turn from their sin and believe in Jesus Christ will be reconciled to God and will live forever with Him in heaven.

Our sin separated us from God. Christ’s death paid for our sin. All who will repent and believe will be forgiven and reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:21, Romans 6:23, Romans 5:8, John 3:16).

⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you,

Paul then continued talking of the gospel. The gospel has come to you. God always initiates. God moves towards us and enables us to move towards Him. He draws us to Himself when we could not come near to Him on our own. He grants faith so we can believe. He convicts us of sin so that we may repent. He brings us to the ends of ourselves so we might more fully put our trust in Him. Through Epaphras and others God had brought the gospel to those in Colossae, and God continues to do the same today.

It must have been an encouragement. The church in Colossae was not alone. They surely felt like the minority. They were greatly outnumbered and maybe even had experienced different forms of persecution. Maybe they were the only Christians in their family or the only Christian where they worked, but Paul reassures them that this gospel that had transformed their lives was doing the same in lives all around the world.

The gospel was spreading, bearing fruit and increasing. It was not owned by one group or culture. Faith in Christ was not just for the Jews. Jesus had come to save people of all nations. It is not an American religion, or British religion, or Nigerian religion or Spanish religion. It is a relationship with Jesus Christ that has been made available by the Creator of all nations to the people of all nations. That is the powerful result of the preached gospel. It continued bearing fruit in the lives of those in the church in Colossae, but surely they were encouraged when they heard that they were not alone. Christ was bearing fruit in churches and lives around the world... And it was increasing.

That is the encouragement we gain when we come together. Maybe you know of no other Christians in your school. Maybe you know of no other Christian at your work. Maybe you are the only

Christian in your home or in your neighborhood. As we come together each Sunday and sit with other believers, we are reminded that we are not alone. As we hear the prayers and the testimonies of God's people, we are strengthened to go out into the world once again and be salt and light. As we participate in one of the online prayer groups or Bible studies, we are strengthened by the faith of others.

The gospel has come and not only to us in Madrid. The wind of the Spirit is blowing across countries like Iran, Afghanistan, Nepal and other places in the world. Indeed in the whole world the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing.

since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

The gospel continued to bear fruit in their lives as well. It was not something whose effect stopped at salvation. The gospel continued to work in them and through them as they grew in faith in Jesus Christ. Since the first day, when they had heard it from Epaphras, until now Paul continued to hear good things about them and their love in the Spirit.

Epaphras had preached the gospel, the Father had revealed the grace of God in truth, and they had believed. The Spirit of Christ who now lived in them was birthing in them a love for which only He could be given the credit for. This was and is the truest effect of the gospel in our lives. And as we see it we can only be left with a heart of gratitude for all that the Lord Jesus has done in our lives.

Discussion questions:

1. What about this sermon do you find most interesting?
2. What person in your life do you continue to thank God for their salvation?
3. As Christians, the factual position of Jesus Christ is as Lord of our lives. Functionally is that true? What areas of your life do you find it difficult to submit to Christ completely?
4. When life is at its worst, in what do most people tend to place their trust?
5. What do you put your hope in?
6. How does our hope of heaven help us to love all the saints?
7. In your own words, what is the gospel?
8. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon?
9. What do you think you need to do in response to this sermon?
10. How can we pray for you?