

Entering a Life of Hope

(Colossians 1:1-8)



MAIN POINT

For Paul, the pivotal piece to making sense of what is happening in the lives of the Colossians, and for that matter, the impact the gospel is having all over the world of his day comes down to this, a life of hope was now available. The way into this life is by hearing and understanding the grace of God in truth. Because what happens when people begin to take possession of the life-giving hope presented in the gospel, made available through Jesus, new life springs forth from their inner being.

This hope that Jesus brings fills one with a joyous anticipation of good because of the goodness and generosity of God now available to them in the tangible circumstances of their lives. This new divine principle moved these early Jesus followers out in action because of an unwavering confidence in Him that expressed itself in a costly love for all those near them. It was nothing but the love of God that had filled them to overflowing and then spilled out, touching the lives of others.

INTRODUCTION: THE LETTER OF COLOSSIANS

This is one of Paul's shortest letters, and is also one of his most hopeful books because he is writing to a church that is just discovering what it was like to believe in Jesus and follow him. He seems to be filled with amazement as he encourages them to explore the treasures available in the gospel, to order their lives accordingly, and learn how to thank God for the amazing things done for them. The driving force behind their thankfulness to God is Jesus Christ. For when thankfulness flows from a full knowledge and understanding about who Jesus is and what he has accomplished, everything else naturally falls into place.

The recipients of this letter were members of a fairly young church in Colossae, a town located on the banks of the river Lycus about 100 miles from Ephesus in south-east Asia Minor - now modern day Turkey. At one point it had been an important town, but it had been upstaged by its neighbors Laodicea, ten miles away, and Hierapolis, six miles beyond that. Paul, who seems to have concentrated his efforts on major population centers, had not visited the town personally. The Christian community there owes its beginning under God to his fellow-worker Epaphras, a member of his ministry team who brought the good news of Jesus to those in Colossae and then news of a new church from Colossae to Paul.

As we take a step back from this prayer of thanksgiving, we see that in one sense it is about the Colossian church, but in another sense it is about God and the way He has acted in their lives.

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

(3) We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, (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. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, (6) 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, (7) just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf (8) and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. - (Colossians 1:1-8)



KEY VERSE

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, (6) 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, - (Colossians 1:5b-6)

Q So, what might it look like, to use Paul’s language in verse 6, “to not understand the grace of God in truth”? Can you identify any barriers that hinder you from allowing the grace of God to come home to you as a living reality in the substance of your life? How does this prevent you from experiencing the hope that Jesus seeks to make available to you?

COLOSSIANS OUTLINE

- 1 | Opening Greeting (1:1-2)
- 2 | Introduction of Paul and His Theme (1:3-2:5)
 - A | Thanksgiving (1:3-8)
 - B | Prayer & meditation (1:9-23)
 - C | Paul’s Ministry and his reasons for writing (1:24-29)
- 3 | The Appeal for Christian Maturity (2:6-4:6)
- 4 | Final Greetings (4:7-18)

(Bold indicates current lesson)

1:2b - ‘Grace’ sees God acting in the life of the Christian to accomplish what is impossible on one’s own effort.

STUDY NOTES

1 COLOSSIAN 1:1-2: OPENING GREETING

Normally today, the sender of a letter places their name at the end. In Paul’s day, it came at the beginning, and was followed by a greeting to the recipients. The form is ‘Paul; to the church in Colossae; greetings’. But Paul has, as was his practice, expanded the traditional greeting to set, early on, the landscape for what he wishes to say.

Colossians 1:1-2

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

(1:2a) “To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ”

What Paul is establishing here is the tremendous blessing available to those who are part of the family of God, those faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. The word ‘faithful’ is best understood in the sense of ‘firmly committed’ or ‘steadfast’ in Christ. To be described as both in ‘Christ’ and in ‘Colossae’ is to be located firmly in the purposes of God, as a member of his true people and of that particular earthly community where they are called to follow Christ.

(1:2b) “Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”

As this letter unfolds, it is clear that Paul is writing with one great desire, it is that they should grow into full Christian maturity. In this we grasp what is being extended in this greeting. ‘Grace’ sees God acting in the life and growth of the Christian to accomplish what is impossible on one’s own. ‘Peace’ with the overtones of the Hebrew word ‘shalom’, includes not merely personal peace of mind and heart, but the wider blessings of all that is good for those who belong to God’s covenant family because of their loving confidence in the Son, Jesus Christ.



2 COLOSSIAN 1:3-2:5: INTRODUCTION OF PAUL AND HIS THEME

This section of the letter is to be understood as a complex whole in which Paul moves to the heart of his intended message at its conclusion. In seeking to introduce himself to this young church, Paul also wants them to see this letter as simply an expression of the ministry he received from God.

In essence, he is saying: this is how I am thanking God for you (1:3-8), this is how I am praying for you (1:9-23), and this is what I am doing for you (1:24-2:5). In addition, as he seeks to deepen their understanding of God and his purposes, he tells the church that he thanks God for founding it (1:3-8), that he wants them to thank God for his great plan of salvation (1:9-20), and to appreciate where they fit into it (1:21-23) as well as the role of his own ministry within it (1:24-2:5). This leads to the 'therefore' of Colossians 2:6, now he is ready to build on this carefully-laid foundation, bringing together God's gospel, the Colossian situation and his own role in this work.

We've grasped the importance of Colossians 1:3-2:5 when we are prepared to give Colossians 2:6 its full weight. Now, when Paul mentions 'Christ', it carries with it a rich and deep meaning: it is the Christ of 1:15-20, in whom is true maturity (1:28), who is himself 'the mystery of God' (2:2). This large view of Christ is meant to be kept at the forefront of our mind as this letter unfolds.

A Colossian 1:3-8 – Thanksgiving

Paul is able to address the Colossians as part of God's family and extends to them the expectation of God's grace and peace to be given to them because he knows that God has already been at work amongst them. He is truly thankful to God for their commitment and steadfastness to Christ.

After the initial statement that he is in constant prayer for them (1:3), he outlines what it is that he thanks God for when he remembers them (1:4-5), and how it is that these things have come about (1:6-8). This gives us valuable insight into Paul's understanding of how God's grace operates.

The gospel is the good news about a person. Jesus has come into the world, he has made a way for all people to enter into a life of interaction with God and his kingdom. Those commissioned are to proclaim it, where its truth is recognized and its command obeyed, it bears fruit. Paul is giving a framework of understanding from which the Colossians will be able to make sense of what God is doing in their lives.

Colossians 1:3-8

(3) We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, (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. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, (6) 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, (7) just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf (8) and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

(1:3) We always thank God...when we pray for you

Paul is constantly praying about the church in Colossae, they have been the source of much thanksgiving to the Father as he and his colleagues remember on an ongoing basis in their prayers.

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1-3 - In seeing Jesus as our teacher, it is he that will help us become people of faith, love, and hope.

1:4a - This faith in Jesus has this element of confidence in him that moves a person to action.

1:4b - One of the surest signs of the grace of God at work was the fact that a loving community was created out of nothing.

What is at the very heart of his thankfulness are the signs of new life which is springing up in Colossae. Here Paul draws together the three foundational components of faith, love, and hope not as a mere formula, but is a genuine statement in which each word expresses an important aspect of Jesus' nature and character, and as a result, communicates with clarity what God is like. In seeing Jesus as our teacher, it is he that will help us become people of faith, love, and hope. For though Judaism knew God as Father, the precise nature of his love could not be conceived until it had been revealed in the cross-shaped life and death of the Messiah.

(1:4a) ...your faith in Christ Jesus

The first thing Paul thanks God for is their faith in Christ Jesus. This faith in Jesus has this element of confidence in him that moves a person to action. Sometimes what we see as the struggle of faith is really the struggle to act as if we had faith when in fact we do not. Martin Luther says, in the Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans:

"Faith is not that human illusion and dream that some people think it is.... Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace." (3)

(1:4b) ...love that you have for all the saints

The next reason that prompts Paul thankfulness is love of God that sprang forth from their lives. One of the surest signs of the grace of God at work was the fact that a loving community was created out of nothing. It was a love that was not restricted to those with whom one had a natural affinity, but extends to all the saints. This seems to be what Paul singles out in verse 8 as the main element in the news brought to him by Epaphras.

(1:5a) ...because of the hope laid up for you in heaven

In an attempt to clarify how hope is connected with the previous verse, the NIV paraphrases it in this way: 'the faith and love that spring from the hope ...' This seems to capture Paul's underlying meaning well. Paul understood that these two aspects of life with Christ are rooted in the hope that is both laid up for them and made available to them from the unseen realm of heaven.

(1:5b) Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel

Paul uses the mention of hope as a bridge to describe how this new life came about. This 'hope' had come to the Colossians in the word of truth, the gospel. 'The gospel', for Paul, is an announcement, a proclamation, whose importance lies in the truth of its content.

As Jesus announced the gospel, one is invited to rethink their thinking on the basis of this new opportunity, life with God, in his kingdom, is now available through confidence in and discipleship to Jesus. It is a command to be obeyed and a power that is let loose in the world. It cannot be reduced to terms of persuasiveness or even the conviction of the messenger. And it works, of itself, to overthrow falsehood in the lives of individuals and communities.



(1:6a) ...which has come to you

As Paul looks at the young church, what he sees is God at work in their midst: a new type of life has broken out among them through 'the gospel'. Here, he is referring to the divine life that moves them to risk and sacrifice because of their confidence in Jesus. The gospel 'has come to you': God has reached out to them, has visited them with his saving power, and the fruit that is being produced and growing is the same type all over the world.

It is completely in line with Paul's rethinking of Jewish belief in the light of the gospel that he should transfer to that gospel ideas belonging to the creation, and the divinely intended re-creation, of the world. God is doing through the gospel what he always intended to do. He is sowing good seed in the world, and preparing to reap a harvest of human lives recreated to reflect his glory.
(2)

(1:6b) ...as also it does among you

Paul does not merely mean that 'among them' there is evidence of individual changed lives; he sees that 'in them' as a community the gospel has been at work to create a corporate life and love which is God's will for his family. In our individualistic age we do well to remind ourselves how often Paul's 'you' is plural – and that not merely referring to a collection of individuals, but indicating a corporate unity within Christ's body.

(1:6c) ...since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth

Paul describes the effect of Epaphras' preaching in Colossae not in terms of some emotional response, nor even of people 'accepting Christ into their hearts'; but of hearing truth and understanding it. The word here translated 'understood' indicates that the response sought is an intelligent thinking through and recognition of what is truly being offered by God.

The wonderful news that needs to be grasped is that the living Christ has come to them through the message they heard, and what he desires is to make his home with them. When the magnitude of this offer is received, in both hear and understand the possibility of God's action in their lives as a living reality, a life of unwavering faith in Christ and costly love for all God's people is the inevitable outcome.

(1:7)...you learned it from Epaphras

God's grace, his action is seen in this: when one acts in alignment with God and his purposes, the results of those actions are incommensurate with the effort or the talent of the individual God is working through. And so, as Epaphras works, God works with him; as he preaches, God opens the understanding of the hearers; as he lays before them the facts of Jesus, they recognize those facts as true. Like a man who suddenly learns that he has inherited a fortune, the Colossians are possessed of new knowledge, a new type of life which cannot but revolutionize their lives as they seek to live into this new reality.

(1:8) ...told us of your love in the Spirit

This is no mere human affection, it is God's type of love which has broken out in their midst. It is a love created by the Spirit that becomes their own through the miracle of grace. This enables them to give to one another, a love that wills the good of others and is reflective of God's own act of love on Calvary.

1:6c - The wonderful news that needs to be grasped is that the living Christ has come to them through the message they heard, and what he desires is to make his home with them.

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