

1. Priorities from Paul: Gratitude for God's grace

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[0 : 00] Our gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we thank you that we are able to meet in your name. We thank you, Lord, that we have the freedom and the peace that we can gather without fear.

We thank you, Lord, that because of your grace we are brothers and sisters in Christ, united in him. And we thank you, Lord, that all through this world the gospel is bearing fruit and growing. We thank you for the fruit it has borne in each of our lives, that in your time and according to your purpose you have given us new birth in Christ. You have redeemed us, you have transferred us into the kingdom of your beloved Son and forgiven us all our sins.

We thank you, Lord, that having begun a good work you are continuing it and transforming us to be more and more like him by the power of your Spirit. So we pray, Lord, that as we gather as your children in this, your place, you will help us to set our minds on heavenly things, things that are above.

Our hearts are full of cares, Lord, worries about our families, struggles and difficulties at work, concerns about money, anxieties about health.

[1 : 16] And we ask that as you command us, we might cast our burdens upon you because you care for us. We pray, Lord, that as we gather you will fill us with the knowledge of your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

We pray that we might bear fruit in every good work and increase in the knowledge of you, that we might know you better and live lives worthy of the calling. So we pray that as we gather in the name of Christ, you will speak to us by his Spirit and help us to grow as those who know you and who love you.

And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, over the next four weeks, I hope to do a short series in the short letter to the Colossians, really just looking at chapter 1, verses 1 to 14.

So we'll read that today and we'll study the passage over the next month. Colossians 1, verse 1 to 14, page, I think, 983.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy, our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.

[2 : 39] 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, of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, 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. And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good word and increasing in the knowledge of God.

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. And we thank God for his word.

Sometimes encouragements just come out of the blue. At the turn of the 19th century, there was a Scottish missionary called John Ross. He was born in Ballantore. Anyone been to Ballantore?

[4 : 23] Tiny, tiny village on the eastern seaboard, just above Tain. But he was born there, but he didn't live there very long. He moved, he and his wife, to China. And John Ross was a very gifted linguist.

He managed to learn Mandarin in five months. And if any of you have tried learning Mandarin, as I have, you'll realise that five months is a very short time. I couldn't even introduce myself after five months.

So he studied that, and he was evangelising the Chinese people. He was training Christian workers in China. And because the area he was in was next to Korea, he began to meet lots of Korean people.

And so he decided to learn Korean. And he did, and he decided to translate the Bible into Korean. That took him about ten years. And during that time, he was training Korean workers. And the country of Korea was closed to Western missionaries.

So he trained his Korean friends, and he gave them the different books of the Bible he'd translated. And he sent them into Korea, and in the various valleys around China, where Korean people lived. And after a little time, reports came back to him that all through these valleys, and all through the peninsula of Korea, churches were growing up.

[5 : 32] People were coming to faith in Christ. They were training and discipling each other, and sending out missionaries on their own. And John Ross was very encouraged that people he had never seen were coming to know Christ, and were themselves leading others to Christ.

A situation perhaps not dissimilar to the one Paul met in Colossae. The Apostle Paul is in prison, probably in Rome. And one day, while he's in prison, the jailer comes to him and says, Paul, you've got a visitor.

And he opens the door. And there before him is his friend Epaphras, who we're told in chapter 7, is a beloved fellow servant, and a faithful minister of Christ. Well, Paul must have been delighted, mustn't he?

He's your old friend when you're in jail. What a wonderful thing. And he would have said, come in Epaphras and have a sandwich, and let's catch up. And they would have spoken for a while. And then Epaphras had some news to tell him.

And he said, Paul, I've got some very good news for you. You see, after we went our separate ways, we're not entirely sure if they were friends, or if Epaphras had been converted by Paul, Epaphras went home to his hometown of Colossae.

[6 : 41] And he began to preach the gospel. He began to visit his old friends, and tell them he'd become a Christian. He began to organize meetings, perhaps. Maybe he changed his Facebook status. We're not sure what. But Epaphras began to preach the gospel in Colossae.

And before too long, a church was formed. A church that met every week to worship God through Jesus Christ. And he wanted to share that news with the Apostle Paul to encourage him that though he was in prison, though his feet were in shackles, the word of God was not bound.

And it was bearing fruit throughout the whole world. Well, Paul must have been delighted, mustn't he? What a great bit of news to get when you're sitting in prison. And so he writes a letter to the Colossians, firstly, to encourage them, to thank God for them, and to encourage them to continue in the faith.

They've begun very well. And Paul's concern was that they would continue to grow and mature and develop as believers. But secondly, he writes to warn them, because having begun well and having been focused upon Christ, there were some influences, perhaps some people in the church, who were trying to lead them away from faith in Christ.

As we read the letter, we get a hint that there was perhaps an influence on them to turn back to Judaism, or to turn to Judaism. Perhaps there was an influence from various pagan religions creeping in.

[8 : 03] Whatever it was, there was a danger that they would be led astray from Christ at an early stage in their Christian discipleship. So Paul writes to them to encourage them, to strengthen them, and to warn them.

And I wanted to study this little prayer today, and ask the question, what did Paul pray for this young church that faced these difficulties? We often say as Christians, don't we, well I'll pray for you.

Or we ask people to pray for us. And we're maybe not too specific about what we're actually asking people to do, what we intend to pray for them. And so this series I've called Priorities from Paul,

that's a title I've borrowed from a book by Don Carson.

And we just want to ask, what did Paul pray for his fellow believers at an early stage in their Christian walk? And what then can we pray for each other throughout the course of our weeks together?

Well we want to look at the passage in two bits. The first bit I've titled What Paul Heard from Epaphras. Verse 3, 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.

[9 : 16] What did Paul hear from Epaphras? Well he heard that the church was characterized by three things. Firstly, faith in Christ. Secondly, love for all the saints, that is each other.

And finally, they were a people of hope, and they had a hope laid up in heaven. So very briefly, they were people of faith. Faith meaning, more than simply a belief in Jesus Christ, but faith meaning a personal commitment and a trust in him.

They are in Christ. That's what Paul says in chapter 1. They had been united to Christ by their faith. They were in him, and he was in them. People in Christ.

And it's one thing to say you're a believer, isn't it? But sometimes we have to say, well what is the evidence? And in verse 4, Paul says, well I know your faith is genuine, because of the love that you have for all the saints.

They professed faith in Christ, but more than that, they demonstrated the genuineness of their faith, because they loved one another. You remember what Jesus said to his disciples, by this shall all men know that you are my followers, if you love one another.

[10 : 23] It is the mark of genuine Christian faith, love for other believers. And both these things, their faith and their love, were strengthened and encouraged, because of the hope laid up for them in heaven.

You see, there wasn't a whole lot of hope around in the pagan Gentile world. Not a lot of hope around in the contemporary world. But Paul says, they learned of a hope laid up for them in heaven. It's quite a picture, isn't it? That word laid up is used various other places in scripture. One place is in the parable of the rich fool. Luke chapter 12, you know the man who becomes very wealthy, and he plans to take early retirement, and he builds a big barn, and he fills it with all his goods, and probably buys various houses around the world, and so on.

And just before he retires, he says, I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

But God said to that man, fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God.

[11 : 42] Well, Paul says, God has laid up something for the believers, treasure of far greater worth than a barn full of expensive goods, something that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, something kept in heaven.

So the church in Colossae, those who had faith, those who were in Christ, those who loved one another, and who looked forward to receiving the hope which had been laid up for them, by God himself.

That is what Paul heard in prison, and he gives thanks to God for it. That though he is bound like a prisoner, though he is being persecuted for preaching the gospel, others are continuing to preach that gospel.

And in the whole world, verse 6, it is bearing fruit and growing. Very encouraging, isn't it? When our own circumstances are difficult. I've never been in prison.

I imagine it must be very difficult. But here, Paul looks beyond his own circumstances, and concerns himself, not just with his own interests, but the interests of Christ, and rejoices that the church is growing, and people are coming to new life.

[12 : 54] So it's right, isn't it, to be thankful as Christians. It's right to rejoice when we hear good news. It's right to be encouraged when we receive reports from other lands. It's a difficult time in Western Europe, isn't it?

In terms of the progress of the gospel, the smallness of churches, and so on. But as we learn more and more about what God is doing in other countries, we discover wonderful things happening, wonderful fruit growing.

Somebody, rather flippantly, I think, made a joke that the church is growing so quickly in Latin America that in a hundred years' time there will be more Christians than people. That's a bit of an exaggeration, but in other lands, the gospel is growing.

Parts of Asia, parts of, say, America, parts of Africa. And it is right that in the midst of our own difficulties, we take encouragement from that. That God is at work drawing people to himself, converting them, bringing them to new life in Christ, and bringing forth fruit from their lives.

What Paul heard from Epaphras. The question is, of course, how this happened. How did it happen that this group of pagans in Colossae became believers in the Lord Jesus? And the second heading is really what the Colossians heard from Epaphras.

[14:07] We know what Paul heard from Epaphras. But what did the Colossians hear from Epaphras? Verse 5, Of this, that is the hope, you have heard before in the word of truth the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing.

So Epaphras gave them a message of hope. Secondly, chapter 6b, As it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

He gave them a message of the grace of God. They heard of the hope of the gospel and they heard of the grace of God in truth. Much needed then and much needed now.

He came to them with a message of grace and a message of hope. But what was that message? Well, throughout the letter to the Colossians, Paul alludes to it. He refers back to things they've been taught and emphasizes the heart of the gospel.

And a very lovely summary is found in verse 11 to verse 14. He prays that they may be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy.

[15:17] Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

A friend of mine at university, well he wasn't a very close friend actually, perhaps in hindsight I wish he was, it was the guy across the landing from me. And you never quite know at university who you're actually sharing a landing with.

And this guy was quite pleasant, a very, very tall Englishman. We didn't get on particularly, well we weren't particularly close, but a few weeks ago I had a bit of time to kill so I began to Google the names of everyone in that building just to see what they were up to.

And this guy, it turns out, actually was aristocracy and he'd just inherited an enormous 400-year-old manor house in northern England. And I read that and I thought I wish I'd spend more time with the guy.

But I just never knew. And what he'd done for the first time in the 400 years of that building is he'd opened it to the public. It always used to be a private house. But as the heir, he said, well I don't want to keep this to myself.

[16:32] I want to share this with other people. The villagers and the other people who come, they had no claim on it. They weren't part of the family. They had no right to be there. They had no reason why they should be allowed in.

But because he's a kind chap and perhaps he charges an entrance fee, he decided to share it with other people. And that is the picture in verses 11 to 14. Paul gives thanks to the Father who has qualified the saints in Colossae to share in the inheritance of the saints of light.

He talks of the kingdom of God's beloved Son, verse 13, the glorious eternal kingdom of Christ. And these pagan Colossians, they had no claim on it. They had no share in it.

They were not worthy to inherit it. But God, seeking to give them hope, out of his pure grace, qualifies them to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Not just to visit for an afternoon, not just to come along and take a school trip, but to live there forever, dwelling in the very presence of God who has delivered them from the domain of darkness and transferred them to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

[17:45] He gives them a hope, giving them an inheritance they could not earn. And by his grace, he cleanses them. So Epaphras came with that gospel.

He came to tell them of Christ who was the image of the invisible God who is preeminent over everything. The very one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and yet who was willing to die and to suffer on a cross in order to reconcile people like the Colossians to himself.

And having reconciled them, verse 21, to work in them and to, by the power of his Spirit, to present them holy and blameless and above reproach before them.

To redeem them from their sin, to forgive them and then to make them holy, blameless, perfect before God. Epaphras came with a message of the grace of God, of a Saviour who died for them and who was working in them to renew them and to regenerate them.

And when they heard that, they believed. And what a transformation that was. People who at once were alienated from God were reconciled to him. People who at one point were dead in their sins and their trespasses were made alive with Christ and their lives were hidden with him.

[19 : 04] People who once dwelt in darkness and hopeless despair were transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son and accepted as sons and daughters of God.

Epaphras preached the gospel, a gospel of hope and a gospel of God's grace. Faith comes through hearing and when the Colossians heard, they believed.

But why does Paul mention it there? Well, you see, the problem is in all of these letters, there's always some issue that Paul needs to address. They are occasional letters. And the situation, as we've mentioned here, is that people were trying to lead the believers away from Christ.

So having been given a heavenly inheritance and having set their minds on heavenly things, there were some who were trying to concern them with earthly things. And having been given fullness in Christ, who himself, in whom the fullness of God dwelled, there were some who were trying to take them captive with human tradition, human philosophy.

They had everything in Christ and yet people were trying to draw them earthwards by philosophy and religious practices and their behaviour.

[20 : 22] As we go through the letter, we'll perhaps look at the problems they faced in more detail. But Paul writes to thank God for them, for their love and their hope and their faith, reminding them that this is the foundation of a true Christian life.

And reminding them of the gospel of grace and their hope laid up for them in heaven so that they get their bearings right before he proceeds into the body of the letter. So as we go away today, I pray that we might have grateful hearts.

It's very encouraging on a Wednesday, isn't it, for 200 people to spontaneously gather to read the Bible, to pray to God, to sing his praises. And I pray that we might not take that for granted, that we might thank God for the faith and the hope and the love which we see week by week.

And I pray that we might not be moved from that hope. There are a great many temptations, there are a great many dangers spiritually, not to give up being Christians, but to move away from the hope that is in Christ.

And it's my prayer that like the Colossians, we will be firmly anchored in the hope of the gospel and the grace of God. I read a sermon last week by a man who'd been preaching for 45 years.

[21 : 36] And he began this sermon by saying, I am very pleased to report that in 45 years I have made absolutely no progress theologically. It didn't mean that he hadn't grown as a Christian or matured as a Christian.

What he meant was that he'd never moved away from the simple things of the gospel, the cross of Christ, the grace of God and the hope of glory. So let's be praying for one another that as we go our separate ways we will be firmly rooted in these things, the hope of glory and the grace of God.

Let's pray together. Lord, it fills our hearts with such thanksgiving when we look at each other and know that in this room there are 200 stories of your dealings with people from all different walks of life.

We thank you for your gospel, Lord. We thank you that it tells us of your Son who died to save us, to forgive us, to redeem us and who is by his Spirit at work in us to transform us, to make us holy and blameless and pure.

So Lord, we pray that as we go our separate ways you will help us to meditate upon these things, to fix our hearts and our minds on things that are above and to be conscious of your presence and your power with us in all that we would seek to do.

[22 : 55] We pray for the time now, Lord, of eating and drinking together, that it might be a time of encouragement, of up-building fellowship and a visible demonstration of the love for all the saints.

And so we thank you for this letter and the lessons gleaned from it. In Jesus' name. Amen.