

1. Genuine Christian Growth

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[0 : 00] Our reading today comes from Paul's letter to the Colossians, which you will find in page 983 of the Blue Bible. And we will read the first 14 verses together today of chapter 1.

Over these next seven weeks, we will, God willing, aim to cover the letter to the Colossians. But before you get too depressed, I'm only on for the month of July.

And my colleague Rupert Hunt Taylor will do the four weeks in August, I'm sure, clearing up any mess that I leave. Colossians chapter 1, beginning at verse 1.

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. 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.

[1 : 15] Of this you had heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world 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 and 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 work, 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.

[2 : 34] Amen. And may God add his blessing to this, the reading of his word. False teaching in the church is as old as the church itself.

Most of the letters in the New Testament are written to proclaim and defend the truth of the gospel, and demolish the lies of false teaching. The letter to the Colossians is one such letter.

And you can maybe guess from the series title on the order of service, what the issue was at Colossae, of what was heart of the false teaching that was threatening to infect the church at Colossae.

And the issue was this. There were these false teachers, often called Gnostics. And that word Gnostics means to have knowledge, to be learned.

These Gnostics claimed superior knowledge. They claimed to be in the know, to be part of some spiritually elite group. And they were peddling this new spirituality that was something akin to new age spirituality, that gathered ideas from here, there, and everywhere.

[3 : 51] And they were offering a spiritual fullness that had not been previously enjoyed by the Colossian believers. They were proclaiming that mere Christianity was not enough, that Jesus Christ was somehow insufficient, insufficient on his own to give believers fullness, and that faith in Jesus Christ had to be supplemented.

It needed things added to it for a fuller experience and greater liberation to be enjoyed. I'm sure you can sense some of the uncertainty and the painful questioning this would have brought about in the lives of the new young church at Colossae.

Asking questions. I wonder if I'm really a Christian. Is there something more I need? And sadly, friends, there are groups today within the church of Jesus Christ who cause the same doubt, the same uncertainty in genuine Christian believers by offering new liberty, new power, deliverance and freedom in the Spirit.

And the effect, whether intentional or not, is to cast doubt upon the sufficiency of the work of Jesus Christ and to imply there is something more that is necessary, something more that is needed. Well, the Apostle Paul's answer to teaching of that sort both then and now is the letter to the Colossians. In this letter there, the Apostle Paul heralds the supremacy and the sufficiency of Jesus Christ in order to bring assurance and stability to a church, a church that was under threat have been taken in and led astray by the false teachers.

[6 : 00] In our verses today, Paul writes to assure the church that genuine Christian growth has taken place among them. He writes to endorse that they are genuine believers and that Apaphras who planted the church is a faithful, genuine gospel worker.

He writes also to encourage them to keep going and to keep growing in the gospel. So we have two headings for today.

In verses 1 to 8, Paul gives thanks that they have got going in the gospel. Paul gives thanks that they have got going in the gospel.

In verses 9 to 14, Paul prays that they would keep growing in the gospel. That they would keep growing in the gospel.

Well, firstly, in verses 1 to 8, Paul gives thanks that they have got going in the gospel. A miracle has taken place at Colossae.

[7 : 08] The gospel has produced fruit among them. verse 6. For wherever the gospel is planted, it bears fruit. And Paul's response is, verse 3, to give thanks.

To give thanks to God the Father for the work that he has done in the people of Colossae. But how can Paul be confident that this is genuine gospel growth?

faith? Well, Paul can be confident because genuine gospel fruit has been produced in them. The fruit of faith and love.

The evidence is not that they've been baptized or they've joined the church. No. But that they have the fruit of faith and love. And not just any old faith, but faith in Christ Jesus.

Verse 4. I remember a few years ago I was speaking to a guy and he said, I think I'm a Christian. I don't believe in God. I don't believe Jesus was divine.

[8 : 10] And I don't believe in the resurrection. But I've got faith. Faith in what? I was screaming. It's not having faith that makes you a Christian.

Your faith needs to be in something. We are not saved by faith, but by faith in Christ Jesus. Faith means to trust, to lean on, to put your full weight on.

And the Colossian believers had done this. They had placed all their trust, all their weight on Jesus Christ. But the false teachers hadn't done this.

They hadn't put all their trust in Jesus Christ. They were not relying solely on Jesus Christ. And we can tell this from chapter 2 verse 16 and following. These false teachers were relying on religious rituals, religious practices, spiritual disciplines.

And these false teachers were putting pressure on the Colossians to rely on these other things too. The false teachers were telling them, hey, you've made a good start, but you could do better.

[9 : 23] You have a good foundation, but you need something else. Have you got this? Do you have that? Have you had this experience? Paul was wanting the Colossian believers to be absolutely cast iron sure that if they had faith in Christ Jesus, if they were relying, putting their trust, their full weight in Jesus Christ, then they were genuine Christian believers.

And he wants us to be cast iron sure too, friends. For if we are not, then we will be prone to putting our trust somewhere else. Paul wants them to know that they are real, genuine Christians.

And not just because of their faith in Christ Jesus, but also because of their love for all the saints. saints. And the word saints here just refers to ordinary Christians.

Not to super-duper Christians, but just ordinary Christians. Paul was sure that they were genuine believers because of their love for all the saints.

They had love for all the other Christians. And this is probably in contrast to the false teachers who thought they were among the spiritually elite.

[10 : 41] And this is how it usually goes with the elite. They normally have the first team, the second team, and then the rest of us. But not so among the Colossians. They have love for all the saints.

Genuine gospel work has taken place. And it's taken place in little Colossae. And how has this genuine gospel fruit come about?

Well, it had come about because they had heard the genuine gospel. Verse 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.

Faith and love spring from the hope laid up for you in heaven. Verse 5. Paul majors on the hope of the gospel. As I think maybe the false teachers were underplaying this.

Focusing their teaching on the present, on the here and now. So Paul stresses the hope of the gospel. Paul reminds them that at the heart of the gospel they had heard and believed is a future hope.

[11 : 49] And that's not a hope that's iffy. It's not a wishy-washy, wishful thinking like me hoping that Celtic won the Champions League. No. No.

Hope in the New Testament is a future certainty. The definite expectation of heaven, of God's new creation. It had been this offer that had led them in the first place to lean, to trust in Jesus Christ and had led them to love one another.

The offer, the hope of heaven contained in the gospel. And Paul wants them to know the gospel they have heard is genuine. Verse 5, this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel. Verse 6, it's a message of God's grace, the grace of God in truth. And verse 6, it is the universal, the Catholic gospel that is bearing fruit all over the world.

So they have heard the universal gospel. That is the truth of how God has done everything that is required to save us in Christ. Verse 12, he has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints.

[13 : 03] Verse 13, he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have, verse 14, redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

A genuine gospel work has happened. And it's happened as they have heard and understood the genuine gospel. And the genuine gospel was brought to them by a genuine gospel worker.

Verse 7, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf. And he has made known to us your love in the spirit.

We can see from chapter 4, verse 12, that Epaphras was one of them. He was one of their own townspeople. The scholars believe that Epaphras had come to faith in Christ under the ministry, the preaching ministry of the apostle Paul in Ephesus.

In Acts chapter 19, Luke writes, for two years in Ephesus, the apostle Paul preached the gospel. And during this time, all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

[14 : 18] The scholars believed that it was during this time that Epaphras had come to faith in Jesus Christ. And after he came to faith in Jesus Christ, he came home and he preached the gospel in his own hometown.

And people believed and they planted a church. They had learned the gospel from faithful Epaphras, not the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul had never met them, chapter 2, verse 1.

But just as Paul had wrote to Timothy, what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

This is exactly what has happened here. Epaphras, faithful Epaphras, reliable Epaphras, has got the job done properly. He has passed on the genuine gospel.

I don't know if you're familiar with the TV show, The Apprentice. It's the final tonight and I've watched it for the first time during this series.

[15 : 26] I don't think Epaphras would have got to the final in that cutthroat business environment. His qualities of faithfulness, reliability, being an honest plodder, are not the key qualities required in the cutthroat world of business.

That's maybe the same in the office or the place of work that you're going back to. But in Christian ministry and in Christian living, faithfulness to Christ is the key quality required.

Paul is confident and he wants the Colossians to be confident that Epaphras is a genuine gospel worker. How do we know the gospel had been at work?

Well, there was genuine gospel fruit that had been produced by hearing and understanding the genuine gospel that had been preached by a genuine gospel worker.

And Paul's response to all of this is to give thanks. Paul gives thanks for the start they have made. But he is not content. So in verses 9 to 14, he prays for them.

[16:38] He prays that they would keep growing in the gospel. He gives thanks that they have got going in the gospel. But now in verses 9 to 14, he prays that they would keep growing in the gospel.

And so from the day we heard verse 9, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Paul prays for them. In fact, Paul writes that he hadn't stopped praying for them since he had heard they become Christians. Paul doesn't want them to become saved, satisfied, and stuck.

No, he wants them to keep growing in the gospel. And he prays that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will. Now, the knowledge of God's will is not about trivial things about, you know, where will I work or who will I marry.

No, the apostle Paul has greater things in mind. Paul is thinking about God's plan for the world.

They have received the gospel, so they have already received the knowledge of God's plan.

[17:53] He's not praying that they will have some new message. No, but he's praying that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's plan, that they would be filled with the gospel, that they would be filled with all of God's spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Look to chapter 2, verses 2 and 3. Paul writes here that all the treasure of God's wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ.

So do you see what Paul is praying for them? He wants them to get to know more of God in Christ.

You have him now, but Paul is praying that they will grow to recognize all that they have in Jesus Christ, that they would realize all that is theirs in Jesus Christ.

Paul wants them to be filled, to become mature. Chapter 1, verse 28. But the way to this filling, this maturity, is not by moving on to something else, but by growing in Jesus Christ, by plumbing the depths of Jesus Christ.

They have understood the truth, but Paul doesn't deny there is room for growth, that they must increase. But the growth, the increase is to be found in Jesus Christ.

[19:14] And the purpose of this, well, it's practical. It's not to become puffed up like the false teachers. No, it is practical. Verse 10.

So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

This is for us all. Verse 10 is the demand for all Christians. This is what God desires for us all. We need to be filled with knowledge and understanding in order that we may live in light of God's plan, that we may walk worthy of the Lord in all the areas of our lives so that we would see the world from God's point of view in order that we would know how to please him.

Well, what does this look like? Well, verse 10 and 11, bearing fruit in every good work, verse 10, growing in the knowledge of God as I seek to live it out, verse 10, being strengthened, verse 11, and giving thanks, verse 12.

Not that Paul thinks this is easy, for he prays, verse 11, that they would be strengthened with all power according to God's glorious might. He prays that they would be strengthened with all of God's divine power.

[20:39] Why? And for what reason? For worldwide evangelism? To perform great miracles? But look to verse 11.

For all endurance and patience with joy. Seems like a bit of an anticlimax, doesn't it? All this divine power shows that they would keep going.

Yes. Paul prays verse 11 in order that chapter 1, verse 23 would be their experience. That they would continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.

Remember, they are in Christ, but they're at Colossae, verse 2. And in Colossae, there are those trying to delude them with plausible arguments, chapter 2, verse 4.

Trying to take them captive by philosophy and worldly wisdom, chapter 2, verse 8. Putting pressure on them to add man-made religion to their faith in Jesus Christ.

[21:46] Chapter 2, verse 16 and following. And the antidote to all of this, Paul prays that they would grow in the gospel, that they would grow in Jesus Christ, strengthened by him so that they would endure.

Paul prays that they would stay Christian. He prays it because he knows it will take all of God's power to keep them going, to keep them going through all the trials of life, all the struggles, all the tests of living in a foreign world.

And especially when that fallen world is full of false teachers trying to take you captive. And through all of this, to give thanks to the Father.

Verse 12. They are to develop an attitude of gratitude for what God has already done. Yes, the gospel is the hope laid up for you in heaven, verse 5.

But there are present realities. And we will grow as we continue to give thanks for all that God has already done. Verse 12. He has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

[23 : 01] So don't let man disqualify you or pass judgment on you. Verse 13. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son.

He has rescued you. He has delivered you. Not just pardon, but deliverance. The chains of the old life have gone. We have, verse 14, redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

There is present salvation. No need for anything to be added. Just to be filled with an increasing reality of this. Genuine gospel growth has happened at Colossae.

Paul gives thanks that the gospel has got them going. And Paul prays that they would keep growing in the gospel. And as the Colossians and us gives thanks to the Father, we will have a deeper sense of all that he has done and all that he will do to bring us to glory.

Let us pray. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus, the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

[24 : 36] Our Heavenly Father, we ask that you would grant us grace, your strength and power to do this. In Jesus' name, Amen.