

Thankfulness for the fruitful Gospel

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[0 : 00] Well, let's open our Bibles together at Paul's letter to the Colossians. I never quite know whether to say Colossians or Colossians. Some people say one, some the other. I think I generally say Colossians.

So if you can cope with a shh in the middle, we'll treat it like that. So I'm going to read from chapter 1, verse 1, down to verse 14. And you'll find this.

Did I give the page number? It's 983. 983. 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 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 the 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, 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 work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

[1 : 59] 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 dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Amen. Now friends, if I were to say to you, raise your hand high in the air if you are one of the world's experts on prayer, I guess not a single hand would go up.

I guess we'd all rather look at the floor with embarrassment, which is another way of saying that we all realize that we're really not very good at praying. I think I've come to realize that all Christians regularly need both encouragement and teaching to keep praying, because we find prayer rather hard.

We often feel a bit like that disciple in Luke's gospel who came to Jesus one day and said to him, Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples. Now we're turning here to Colossians chapter one for this month of November, for our Wednesdays in November, so as to study Paul's prayer, which is recorded for us in chapter one, verses three to 14.

[3 : 24] Now I do know that two of our preachers, Terry and I think it was Rupert, and a couple of months ago worked their way through Colossians, through the whole of this letter. But my purpose for this month is rather different.

I want us to dig down, or you might say drill down, into this one short passage, verses three to 14, for the sole purpose of allowing the Apostle Paul to teach us some good lessons about how Christians pray.

And my plan is to take verses three to eight today, and then to spend the next three weeks on that little passage from verse nine to verse 14. So let me first say something to orient, or perhaps reorient, our thinking to the church and the town of Colossae.

Now Colossae was a town in the Roman Empire, in the Roman province of Asia Minor. And that Roman province of Asia Minor formed what we think of now as the western end of modern Turkey. And it's clear that Paul himself had never actually been to Colossae, which makes this letter rather different. Because when Paul wrote to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philipians, to the

Corinthians, and the Thessalonians, he was writing to churches which had come into being as a result of his own visit and his own preaching of the gospel.

[4 : 43] But the Colossians became Christians not through Paul's work, but through the teaching, the evangelism of Epaphras. You'll see it there in chapter one, verse seven. Just as you learned it, that's the gospel, from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.

And we learn a bit more about Epaphras from the last chapter of the letter. Just turn over to chapter four, if you will, and verses 12 and 13. It's a little cameo sketch.

Chapter four, verse 12. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Now that is a lovely tribute from the Apostle Paul. It's a warm commendation from Paul.

And as you know, there are many moments in Paul's letters when he commends fellow Christians.

And here you'll see he commends Epaphras as a man of prayer, in verse 12, and as a hard worker, a diligent worker, in verse 13.

[5 : 52] Busy not only in Colossae, but also in the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, which were, I think, about as close to Colossae as Motherwell and Greenock are to Glasgow today.

So not far away. And in verse 12 of chapter four, we learn that Epaphras was himself a Colossian, a native of Colossae, because Paul calls him one of you.

So what probably happened was that Epaphras would have heard the gospel from Paul, maybe when Paul was preaching not far away at Derbe and Lystra, and maybe he had become a Christian then, he'd become friends with Paul, and then he'd raced home to Colossae to tell the good news about Christ to his own people.

And thus a church was started in Colossae. We don't know the exact historical details, but we get the impression that there was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, a lot of busy evangelistic travel, whereby eager and gospel-minded Christians went far and wide as they sought to bring the message of Christ to more and more ears.

And it's a rather lovely picture of the gospel network in the middle of the first century AD, this network in which Paul was the central player. He was the leader of the team, you might say.

[7 : 02] You might think of him as the striker or the center forward. But he was anything but a solo operator. He knew that many fellow workers working together were needed if the work was to prosper.

And it's the same with gospel work today. Well, friends, I think that's enough of oiling of the cricket bat. Let's get out onto the pitch and we'll play the game. So let's go back to chapter 1 and verses 3 to 8.

And let's notice first how Paul begins with thankfulness or thanksgiving. So verse 3, we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

And you'll see that this whole section from verse 3 to verse 8 is an expression of Paul's gratitude to God. And in a moment, I want us to notice particularly the things for which he expresses his thankfulness to God because that will help us to know how we too can express our thankfulness to God.

Now, thankfulness, and I'm choosing my words rather carefully here, thankfulness is a truly remarkable feature of Paul's prayer life. Paul is consistently, irrepressibly thankful.

[8 : 15] Even when Paul is having to read the Riot Act, as he has to do with the Corinthians in both his Corinthian letters, even there he is still full of thanks. And he begins one Corinthians by saying, I give thanks to my God always for you.

Now, that's remarkable because he's just about to haul the Corinthians over the coals for a dozen serious misdemeanors. But he begins with thankfulness. It's somehow got deep into his DNA.

Perhaps the reason is that God has had such mercy on Paul, the former persecutor, the former religious terrorist, that Paul's heart and soul are pumped up with a constant sense of thankfulness. No quantity of whippings, beatings, and imprisonments could ever beat the thankfulness out of Paul. And Paul preaches exactly what he practices.

If you just turn over the page to chapter 3 and verse 15, you'll see he teaches the Colossians also to be thankful. So chapter 3, verse 15, at the end of the verse, and be thankful.

[9 : 23] And verse 16, end of the verse, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Verse 17 at the end, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

So he teaches the Corinthians thankfulness because he knows that thankfulness is in the veins of the happy Christian. And I guess he knows that the unhappy Christian is usually a Christian who has got out of the habit of thanking God.

Now my question is, what does Paul thank God for in these verses? And let's notice three things. First, he thanks God for the conversion of the Colossian Christians.

Verse 3, we always thank God when we pray for you since, by which he means ever since, ever 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.

Faith, love, hope. And we've heard Paul putting those three things together before, haven't we? I guess most famously in 1 Corinthians 13. And he places these three things, faith, hope, and love together several times in his letters because, in Paul's thinking, they are the primary evidences of real convertedness.

[10 : 42] They're the hallmarks, if you like, of true Christian life. But when you look carefully at verses 4 and 5, you can see that one of those three is the source of the other two.

It's their hope which is the source or origin of their faith and love. Do you see how he puts it there? We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

So it's the hope that gives rise to the faith and the love. Now you might say, how does this actually work out? Well, the hope laid up for us in heaven is the assurance of eternal life.

It's not some vague hope. It's a sure and certain hope of a sure and certain and wonderful future.

You and I can enjoy that sure and certain hope because of what Jesus has done for us in his dying and his rising.

His dying has dealt with, thoroughly dealt with, the problem of our sins and has brought forgiveness. And his rising has thoroughly dealt with the problem of death.

[11 : 53] The power of our sins to condemn us and the power of death to annihilate us have been utterly broken by Jesus' intervention on our behalf. And our hope, our sure hope of eternal life fills our hearts because of our conviction of the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

He died, he was raised, and therefore, I have, we can have a sure and certain hope. And what Paul is saying in verses 4 and 5 is that this sure and solid hope stimulates and enlarges our faith in Christ.

Once the hope of heaven takes root in our hearts, we trust Christ more deeply. We know what the great future in the world to come holds for us and therefore, we trust Christ in our lives in this world.

It's the hope of heaven that helps us to keep on trusting him now. And in the same way, it's the hope of heaven that deepens our love for other Christians. Let me put it like this.

If there is no eternal future for us to look forward to, that means it's every man for himself. It means that this world is the only world there is, and this life is the only life there is.

[13 : 10] And if that's the case, it's better to eat and drink and be merry because tomorrow I shall be a corpse. But if I'm convinced that this life is merely a brief preliminary to the great and glorious future with the Lord, I'll be much less concerned just to live to please myself, and I'll be much more interested in the welfare of the brothers and sisters with whom I shall be spending eternity.

Those who are Christians are bound together with eternal bonds. So if you're a Christian, in a thousand years from now, in ten thousand years from now, you and I will be together in the land of pure delight where the praise never dies and the singers never tire.

So of course we're going to care for each other in this life and love each other because our shared friendship and our joy is everlasting. Just look at the person sitting next to you for a moment.

Is that a sight of beauty? Is it a thing of beauty and a joy forever? Now if that person is a Christian, you're going to be sharing eternal life with him or her. And that's why we have this great stimulus to love each other.

So Paul thanks God for the conversion of the Colossians. And we too can learn to be deeply thankful every time we hear of a new person or a new group of people coming to Christ.

[14 : 33] It's a miracle of grace and undeserved love when one poor hell-bound sinner is rescued. But let me add a further thought and a rather different thought before we move on.

One of Paul's main reasons for writing this letter was to teach the Colossians not to listen to a group of false teachers who seem to have got their foot in the door at Colossae. And these false teachers seem to have been saying that having Christ was not enough.

You needed more. You needed to obey various religious rules and regulations as well. And the heart of Paul's message in Colossians is to say to the Christians that if you have Christ, brothers and sisters, you have everything.

You don't need more because to have more would be to have less. Christ is sufficient. You can't have more. And presumably, therefore, these false teachers were suggesting to the Colossians that their faith was deficient.

So in chapter 1, verses 3, 4, and 5, Paul is also saying to the Colossians, I'm telling you, brothers and sisters, that your faith is real. It's not deficient. I have heard of your faith in Christ, your love for the saints, and your hope of heaven.

[15:47] Those three qualities are the gold standard of real Christianity. So don't believe these charlatans if they're saying that you aren't quite the real thing. Your faith, your love, and your hope show without a doubt that you are the real thing.

And what's more, I know that you first heard the gospel from Epaphras, and I know that he has a right and true understanding of the gospel. He is, verse 7, our beloved fellow servant and a faithful minister of Christ.

And that's one reason why Paul is commending Epaphras so warmly, both here and in chapter 4. He's reassuring the Colossians that if they have heard the gospel from Epaphras, they've heard the full gospel, the true gospel, and therefore they mustn't be shaken in their faith by these false teachers who have come into their town.

So there's the first thing. Paul thanks God for the conversion of the Colossian Christians. Now secondly, Paul thanks God for the worldwide spread of the gospel.

As he puts it at the end of verse 5, the gospel which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing. Now just think of that statement about the worldwide growth of the gospel in its historical context.

[17:07] Paul wrote this letter somewhere around 50 AD. Give or take a year or two. The gospel had been out of the egg and out of the nest for barely 20 years at that stage.

And yet Paul speaks of it as a phenomenon which has been growing and bearing fruit in the whole world. Now we can see that reality as we look back from 20 centuries' distance.

We know that the Church of Christ is found in every corner of the globe from Alaska to Tasmania. And we know that billions of people today confess their allegiance to Christ. But for Paul to write this only 20 years after the day of Pentecost that is astonishing.

But he writes like this because he has come to know that the gospel is the one and only gospel for the whole world. It never occurred to Paul that perhaps Hinduism might be alright for the Indians and Confucianism might be okay for the Chinese and Druidism might be alright for the British and animism for the Africans.

He knew that the gospel of Christ was the only truth for the whole world. And Paul had not lived a sheltered life. He wasn't naive. He'd mixed with all sorts of people.

[18:21] He was widely traveled. He would have met people of other colors and other races. And he knew something about other religions. But he knew that there was only one gospel, only one true gospel for the whole world.

And he says in verse 6 that this gospel is bearing fruit and growing. And the better we get to know Paul and his letters, the more we see that his vision was for nothing less than the evangelization of the whole world.

Now this comes out particularly in his letter to the Romans. And he tells the Roman Christians towards the end of Romans that he wants to come and visit them and stay with them for a short while so that he can prepare to travel on and move to Spain.

Now we don't know how much of the geography of the world was known in the first century. Certainly Paul would not have known of the existence of America, North or South, or of Australia. His knowledge would have been limited more or less to the Middle East and North Africa and the world of the Mediterranean, Southern Europe and so on. But his vision was for the whole world.

[19:27] And as he saw churches springing up, one after another in the Mediterranean area, he could only see this as a foretaste of a greater and more comprehensive evangelization.

If somebody had been able to give the Apostle Paul a world map as we have it today in the 21st century, can you imagine his delight? He would have taken it home and spread it out.

He would have gathered together a meeting immediately. Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Luke, Epaphras and a few dozen others come together and he would have immediately sent them out. This was Paul. Timothy, go to London.

Titus, get to Paris ASAP. Barnabas, go to Drumna Drocket. Luke, go to Reykjavik. Take plenty of extra clothes, layers of clothing with you when you go.

That was Paul's mentality. If it was there, it needed to be evangelized. And this is the point for us today. He was so thankful to the Lord that the gospel was not only growing, but bearing fruit in the whole world as he heard the news of people in city after city throwing away their idols and their man-made religions and turning to the only Savior, the only one who is able to bring them to God and to eternal life.

[20 : 43] Verse 6 here, it's a joyful verse. And in it, Paul encourages us as well to be Christians with a worldwide view of gospel work because the gospel continues to grow and bear fruit today.

I know that growth is rather slow and difficult in our country because of the forces of secularism and agnosticism, what you might call cloud cuckoo land, New Age spiritualities and so on.

There are all sorts of pressures. But worldwide, there is great fruitfulness in the growth of the gospel. Two of our young associate ministers, Rupert and Paul, at the end of this week are off to North India to help with the work of the Delhi Bible Institute who are planning to plant, I don't know if you know this, but the Delhi Bible Institute are planning and praying and hoping to plant 2,000 new churches across northern India by the year 2025.

I think something like 800 or 900 have been planted already. So they're well on their way to doing that by the grace of God. That's an example of the growth and fruitfulness of the gospel. So Paul is thankful for the conversion of the Colossians for the growth and fruitfulness of the gospel.

And thirdly, he is thankful for the work of his fellow servant, Epaphras. Now we noticed him a few minutes ago, but I'd just like to point out four things briefly about him which Paul mentions in verse 7.

[22 : 09] First, Paul loves him. He is our beloved fellow servant. Paul not only valued his colleagues in the gospel, he loved them.

He cared about them very deeply. Now at one level, we know that Paul was incredibly tough and durable and enduring, but he had a very, very warm heart.

I would have loved to be in a team where Paul was the team leader, wouldn't you? It would have been so encouraging. He would have expected a great deal from his fellow workers, but they would have known just how much he cared about them.

He cared for Epaphras. So there's the first thing. Secondly, Paul values his teamwork. He is our beloved fellow servant. We're fellows in harness together.

That phrase, beloved fellow servant, speaks of the joy of gospel teamwork. Now one of the delights of belonging to a church that means business for the gospel is that we share our labors and our opportunities.

[23 : 10] We share our joys and our sorrows with many other brothers and sisters who all have their own distinctive part to play in the work. Third, Paul values the fact that Epaphras is a servant, our beloved fellow servant.

The word literally means bond servant or bond slave. The gospel Christian is bound to his master, therefore no longer free to please himself. That's the way of the agnostic who considers himself free.

I'm just free to do my own thing and look after myself, follow my own agenda. But the servant of Christ says to his master, every day, I'm yours to command.

I am bought with the price of your blood. I'm a bond slave. And then fourth, Paul values Epaphras' faithfulness. He's a faithful minister of Christ.

Faithfulness is the loyalty of the limpet, sticking to the master and his service throughout the long years of one's life. So let's allow the apostle to remind us that real Christian prayer is full of thankfulness.

[24 : 22] It is steeped in thankfulness. Thankfulness for the conversion of others, thankfulness for the worldwide growth of the gospel, and thankful for beloved fellow servants like Epaphras.

Thankfulness is the great antidote to grumpiness, bitterness, bitterness, and sadness.

Verse three, we always thank God. Let's pray together. Dear God, our Father, we thank you for this irrepressible gratitude that was always rising up in Paul's heart, despite the great sufferings and trials that he went through, the imprisonments and the beatings and whippings.

And our prayer, dear Father, is that you will fill our hearts more and more with thankfulness for the same reasons that you filled Paul's heart with thankfulness. And we pray that thankfulness may prove to be in our lives more and more an antidote to bitterness and sadness.

Help us to be joyful Christians who are able by our lives as well as our words to testify to your grace, your goodness, and your kindness.

[25 : 45] And we ask it all in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.