

Lesson 2

Colossians 1.1–8: Thanksgiving

1.1–2: Introduction

Paul’s opening to the Colossian churches is typical of Paul’s letters. After identifying himself personally, he draws attention to his mission and commission. He was an *apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*. These descriptions of himself carry the notion that the things he is writing are authoritative, as an official representative of God himself.

Also, we see Paul’s inclusion of Timothy, who is included in the introductions to 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Timothy served as Paul’s understudy and accompanied him for much of his work across Asia Minor. Paul’s affection for Timothy is made clear in Philippians:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.

—Philippians 2.19–22

After identifying to whom the letter was addressed, *saints and faithful brothers in Christ*¹⁶, Paul extends his greetings to them with his customary trademark: *grace and peace*.¹⁷ “Grace” references God’s love in bringing

16 “In Christ” is one of Paul’s favorite phrases. He uses it 33 times in his letters. The broader term, *in Christ Jesus* is used 48 times. Looking at salvation in geographical terms, *in Christ* is significant in that believers are now located in a new place, i.e., the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. See 1.13. For more, see Moo, *Colossians*, p. 77.

17 See Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; and Philemon 3.

salvation through Christ. “Peace” is the state of our life (*peace with God*, 1.20), and peace with one another (Ephesians 2.14–18).¹⁸

1.3–8: Paul’s Thankful Heart

In the Greco-Roman world of writing it was very common to include a paragraph or sentence of thanksgiving to the gods after the opening salutation.¹⁹ The intent was to begin the letter stressing the positive aspects of the relationship. We certainly see that in the opening section of Colossians. Here of course, Paul adapts this form from the Christian perspective:

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. —Colossians 1.3–4

Verse three is the beginning of one of Paul’s famous long sentences, (1.3–8 and 1.9–11). Both sentences convey warmth, care, and concern for the individual Christians addressed. Even though he did not know them personally, he was deeply concerned about the issues and threats confronting them. What is written here provides a connection to what is coming later in the letter ... faithfulness to the Lord and adherence to the apostle’s doctrine. For example, the purpose of being *filled with knowledge*, 1.9, is so that they *walk in a manner worthy of the Lord*, 1.10.

Verses 3–8 divides nicely into three sections:

1) Praise for the Colossian believers, 1.3–5.

18 Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984.

19 Adolf Deissmann notes a 2nd century papyrus from Antonis Longus to his mother, Nilus: Antonis Longus to Nilus his mother many greetings. And continually do I pray that thou art in health. I make supplication for thee daily to the lord Serapis. This sentence, occurring in innumerable papyrus letters, is the stereotyped form of assurance of mutual intercession. See Deissmann, Adolf, and Lionel Richard Mortimer Strachan. *Light from the Ancient East the New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910.

- 2) The all-encompassing Word of Truth, 1.6, and
- 3) The Colossian reception of that truth, 1.7–8.

1.3–5—Praise for the Colossian believers

When he prayed for the Colossians, Paul always gave thanks to God for their faithfulness, loving spirit, and the hope they possessed.

Faith, love, and hope constitute a *triad of Christian virtues*.

- **Faith:** They were convinced that salvation is found in Jesus and lived their lives accordingly. Here *faith* is used in the sense of having a strong confidence in or reliance upon something. Faith is not just *mental assent*, it implies obedience and compliance, i.e., it is a demonstration of trust. *Obedience is the hallmark of the true believer. When a man obeys God, he gives the only possible evidence that in his heart he believes God.*²⁰ It was Martin Luther who said, “Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works.”²¹
- **Love:** the evidence of faith, see Galatians 5.6. Jesus put it succinctly: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just 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*, John 13.34–35. Consider John’s teaching in 1 John 2.9–11; 3.10; 14–15; and 4.20. This is the type of love that moves, not always out of natural inclination, sacrificially.
- **Hope:** what *faith* and *love* are sustained by. Hope is the *anchor* of the soul, Hebrews 6.18–19. It is a result of our adoption by God, 1 John 3.1–2. Hope is what motivates us to sacrifice the present pleasures of this world for the glory of what is to come. Paul says this hope has been *laid up* or “stored for future use.”

Regarding these, it has been said *faith rests on the past; love works in the present; hope looks to the future.*²² 2nd century writer Polycarp wrote of these things:

²⁰ MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Colossians*, p. 17.

²¹ Dooley, Tim, ed., *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987, p. 362.

²² Lightfoot, St. Paul’s Epistles ..., p. 131.

These things, brethren, I write to you concerning righteousness, not because I take anything upon myself, but because ye have invited me to do so. For neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. He, when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter,²² which, if you carefully study, you will find to be the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you, and which, being followed by hope, and preceded by love towards God, and Christ, and our neighbour, “is the mother of us all.” For if anyone be inwardly possessed of these graces, he hath fulfilled the command of righteousness, since he that hath love is far from all sin.

—Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians²³

All of these things were part of the *word of truth, the gospel*, which they had *previously heard*. This is probably referencing the work of Epaphras, who it is strongly believed planted the churches across the Lycus Valley.

1.6: The All-Encompassing Word of Truth

The *word of the truth, the gospel*, can be described as the “true message,” as opposed to the false messages some were proclaiming in the area.²⁴ “The truth,” and “the gospel,” were used as interchangeable terms, as are “obeying the truth,”²⁵ and “obeying the gospel.”²⁶ Looking more closely, we want to go back to 1.5 and focus on three important words:

- Word: “message.” Typically spoken communication: *that which is spoken, an exposition or account which one gives.*

23 Polycarp of Smyrna. “The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians.” *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Vol. 1. The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

24 In Ephesians 1.13, Paul identifies it as the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

25 Romans 2.8; Galatians 5.7

26 Romans 10.16. See also Galatians 2.5, 14 where Paul uses *the truth of the gospel*.

- Truth: “reliability, authenticity.” Conformity to reality, with the implication of dependability.
- Gospel: “the news of the promise of salvation.”²⁷ “Gospel” in early Christianity was a very specific piece of news: Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, lordship, and imminent return.

When we say *word of truth*, we are speaking of a message that can be relied upon.

Paul says the gospel message was *bearing fruit and increasing ... in the whole world*. The truth encompasses all cultural, racial, political, and geographical boundaries, Revelation 5.9–11; 7.9–10. The presence of the Roman Empire with its economic system, infrastructure, and ease of travel, enabled the gospel to be carried throughout the world. The results of teaching it were easy to see. It resulted not only in inward transformation of those who believed, but also numerical growth of adherents. The result of the true gospel is something that is easily seen and observed.

The heart of the gospel is *grace*. It is the concept of God’s freely giving us forgiveness and life after death, Ephesians 2.8–10. This is unlike every man-made religion, which emphasizes human works as the pathway to gaining acceptance from God. Here, Paul calls it *the grace of God in truth*. It is genuinely true, especially in contrast with any other gospel.

1.7–8: The Colossian Reception of The Truth

What was true globally was also true to the churches in and around Colossae. They were growing inwardly and outwardly. The number of believers was increasing. The message they received had come from Epaphras, who is also mentioned in Colossians 4.12 and Philemon 23. He had been a fellow prisoner of Paul and served as Paul’s helper at Colossae, ministering to them on his behalf. Paul, unable to travel, had personally received a report of the Colossian reception of the gospel and growth by the Spirit.

²⁷ Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon...*, p. 339.

Much of what Epaphras told Paul regarding the work in this area was positive. But there were also other things he must have said that gave occasion for Paul to write this letter addressing serious errors that were creeping in.

1.8 is the only reference to the Spirit in this letter. Their *love in the Spirit* is the love that has been *poured into our hearts by the Spirit*, Romans 5.5. The Spirit was in them and was uniting them with God and one another in a powerful bond. The Spirit, as opposed to the flesh, was the source of true knowledge.²⁸

For Thought and Reflection

1. Why do you think it important that Paul identified himself as an *apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*?
2. How did Paul regard Timothy?
3. For what was Paul thankful? (1.3–4)
4. What is *faith* as used in this reading? *Love*? *Hope*?
5. What is the *word* as used in 1.5?

28 Compare 2.18. See Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians,...* p. 44.

6. What is implied when we use the word *truth*?

7. What is the *gospel*?

8. What is the result of the *word of truth* being spread? (1.6)

9. Who delivered the gospel to the Colossians?

10. How did they receive it?