

## A Fruitful Message and a Faithful Messenger

Colossians 1:1-8

By Billy Dempsey

I don't know to what I owe the privilege of preaching two Wednesday nights in a row. There's either a short list or a short memory somewhere, but that's alright! I'm glad to get to preach tonight. I'm always glad to open God's Word for you fine folks. Let me ask you to turn to chapter 1 of Colossians. I'm supposed to preach verses 1 through 8; I hope we get that far. I've really got some overview material for us that will help us, I think, through the whole study, so we'll just see what we do. But let me read for us verses 1 through 8.

This is God's Word:

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. 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.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, this is Your Word; it's not man's word. And it's not our right or privilege to manhandle it. Speak to us from Your Word and help me as the preacher to handle Your Word carefully. Holy Spirit, apply Your Word to our hearts and help us, even in this moment, to clear our hearts away of the debris of the week and the day so that we can be nourished, fed, challenged by Your Word and we might see Christ. Hear us. It is in His name that we make our prayer. Amen.*

## **Overview and Introduction to the Epistle to the Colossians**

Well let's talk for a few minutes in terms of overview since we'll be spending the fall with this book. Let's think of overview - what do we need to know about this letter to the church at Colossae before we dive in and start studying. Well, some timeframe might be helpful to us. Paul, by his own admission, never visited the church at Colossae. This was not a church that he planted. It was planted out of that amazingly fruitful Ephesian ministry that Paul exercised during the third missionary journey. You find that in Acts chapter 19 and Paul is reasoning in the synagogue for about three months. He found them recalcitrant and hardened in their unbelief and so he left the synagogue and went next door to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. And in the siesta hour of the day, the day when everything was closed down and nobody was working and nobody was moving around because it was so hot, here was Paul, shut up in the hot lecture hall of Tyrannus with a room full of people every day for two years, preaching and teaching and reasoning about the Gospel. Verse 10 of Acts chapter 19 says this. "This continued," this business that I just described, "for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

And what Luke is telling us there is that there was a tremendous flow of information from the lecture hall of Tyrannus throughout Asia Minor. As far as we know, as well as can be determined by some of the archeology, the lecture hall of Tyrannus was probably located on the street that led from the harbor over here to the agora and the forum and the marketplaces over here. And so there was a steady traffic. There were people who came to Ephesus from all over what is now Turkey to do business and to have goods, to buy and sell goods, to trade, to communicate with other parts of that part of the Roman Empire. Ephesus was the cultural center; Ephesus was New York City in Asia in what we now understand to be Turkey. And so it was a tremendously important city, a tremendously busy city in terms of commerce, in terms of official business, in terms of arts, in terms of finance. It was New York City for that part of the world. And so for the lecture hall of Tyrannus and Paul's use of it to be right there in the middle of the main thoroughfare from the harbor to the agora or the marketplace and the stadium was amazing and there was tremendous traffic through there. That's why Luke can say all of Asia, Jews and Greeks, heard the Word because of Paul's ministry there; because there was so much traffic back and forth to other parts of Asia.

## **Epaphras**

And from that we find a man who Paul identifies here at Epaphras. Epaphras doesn't show up in Acts. We don't meet Epaphras until we get to this letter; who is apparently, because of the way Paul refers to him in this letter and talks about him in this letter and knows him and gives evidence of knowing him in this letter,

Epaphras wasn't just a one-time hearer of the good news, trusted Christ and went back home to tell people about it; Epaphras was a disciple. And Paul poured time and energy and effort into him and taught him and trained him and was confident as he left in, not only the message that Epaphras had committed to his own heart and memory because it was giving life to him, but the messenger himself. And so Epaphras, planted by what Paul says here later in this letter to the Colossians, this church at Colossae, he also planted, as Paul refers to here, the church at Laodicea and the church at Hierapolis. So Epaphras is a busy missionary among its own busy. He's a busy missionary right there in the Lycos Valley which is in south-central or maybe if I get my map coordinates wrong, maybe it's in south-western Turkey. And so that's a little bit about how we begin.

### **Trouble in Colossae: A List of False Teachings**

Let's talk a little bit about the Colossian heresy because it's the Colossian heresy that brings Paul to writing this letter to the church there. There's been a lot of commentator ink. I'm not going to go through all of that. You can chase down some good commentators. I will tell you who I depended on for this study and I think he gave me very good advice and that is a man by the name of R.C. Lucas. He writes in *The Bible Speaks Today* commentary, the New Testament commentary series. And what he says is that he believes that from the evidence within the letter to the Colossians that it's not a heresy that threatens to take the church back to paganism or take the church back to some form of Jewish traditionalism. He makes this comment. "The danger for the enthusiastic young convert comes from error not outside the church but error within the church - teaching that is largely, maybe even emphatically Christian but that has been influenced more than it knows by the Spirit of the age." Boy, I think that really strikes to the heart of what may be happening at Colossae. If it's not happening at Colossae it's afflicted the church everywhere in every age in every location. Haven't we always been, to one degree or another, confused about the line between Christianity and culture? What do we do here that's from the Bible? What do we do here that's limited by our culture and defined by our culture? Some of that is morally neutral; some of it's not. And Paul is deeply aware of that and is recognizing, according to what Epaphras says, that Colossae is experiencing a time when leaders have begun to arise from within the congregation itself who teach with zeal and true effectiveness a spirituality that comes more from the culture and less from Christ.

### **New "Spiritual Fullness"**

Let me talk about some things - let's read between the outlines or the lines of Paul's letter a little bit and talk about emphases that he seems to be making that seem to be speaking to that Colossian heresy. One is that these new teachers, wherever they were coming from - rising from the congregation, coming from

outside the congregation - they seem to be emphasizing a new spiritual fullness. "Listen to what we're teaching and we'll introduce to you a new spiritual fullness that you don't have now. It's not evident here in the life of the church. You've not experienced this before." If you start looking for that throughout this letter you're going to see that in every chapter Paul is making a reference to the fullness that is ours in Christ, that we don't need more of anything but Christ. There's not more information; there's not something we're lacking. What we're lacking is we need to know Jesus better. He's given us fullness in Himself.

### **New "Spiritual Freedom"**

There's another - and I'm running through these quickly. If you call the church office tomorrow I'll email these to you so you can have them to look at. They're promising a new spiritual freedom and they're promising it to everybody who follows their teaching. Again, Paul repeatedly reminds folks in this letter that the deliverance that Christ has won is ours completely. He actually accuses these preachers of liberty of trying to capture their hearers into a new kind of slavery but he insists on and emphasizes the freedom that is ours in Christ. Think about that great verse in chapter 2 where he talks about Jesus making a triumph over all of His enemies and ours at the cross holding them in open scorn.

### **False Promise of Protection**

There's another thing the false teachers are claiming. They seem to claim a particular insight into the powers of evil and the evil one and to be able to deliver and guarantee deliverance and protection, not deliverance but protection for their followers. Again, Paul speaks directly about the role of Christ vanquishing His enemies and ours definitively and finally at the cross. And so you pick up that emphasis from Paul that we don't need any more insight other than what the Bible has already told us about the powers of the evil one. And they're defeated at the cross.

### **Aestheticism**

One of the things the false teachers were noted for was the claim to spirituality that rises from an impressive aestheticism. Chief hallmark would be fasting. There was a great deal of emphasis, apparently, in their teaching on fasting. Maybe fasting was even commanded in the church at Colossae. But if you look at what Paul says in chapter 2, especially around verses 18 and 23, he indicates that the more they fast apparently the more self-indulgent they become and the more arrogant and engaged in what I will call religious vanity they become. Look for that emphasis; especially in chapter 2.

### **Deeper "Knowledge" and Divisiveness**

They offered a further initiation into the deep knowledge of God and a greater

experience of His power. Track that emphasis or track Paul's response to that in chapter 2 verses 8 through 15, where he talks about what is already ours in Christ; chapter 1 verses 9 through 14 where he talks about what is still ours to seek. It's an interesting dialogue he seems to have with the information supplied by Epaphras related to the false teachers. There's a sense of superiority apparently that they seem to have or hold themselves higher than ordinary believers. Paul speaks to that also in chapter 2. There's a divisiveness in their influence. The folks who seem to follow the false teachers seem to have trouble getting along with everybody else. And in fact, a big chunk, if you start reading Colossians and looking for it, a big chunk of this letter is an appeal to unity.

Well look, those are some quick oversight kind of issues. Seriously, don't tell me tonight because I won't remember, but if you would not mind calling or emailing the church office tomorrow I'll make sure that we email you a copy of that - just kind of a quick summary of what some of the false teaching appears to be as Paul is answering it in the letter to Colossae.

### **Paul's Purpose in Writing: Assurance for the Colossians**

Well let's talk about why he's writing. And this gets me to the verses that I'm supposed to deal with tonight. Well obviously he's writing to refute these errors but he begins by doing two things. And we read these two things in the verses that I read just a few minutes ago. He begins that process by reassuring the Colossians as to their standing in Christ and by confirming the accuracy of the message that Epaphras has brought to them. Let's spend a few minutes taking those two ideas and locating them in the eight verses that we read tonight.

### **The Colossians Standing in Christ**

He begins to do so right here in the very beginning from the salutation. "Paul, an apostle" - again, this is usual language for us but let's pay close attention to it in light of what I was just pointing out - "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." What he's telling them is that he's an apostle; an apostle is one who's sent, one who's sent on a mission. The apostle doesn't rise to apostleship on his own; the apostle doesn't have the idea to be an apostle on his own. He's sent, he's pulled out, and he's separated and he's given a mission. Paul is saying, "This was God's idea. My relationship to Him and my ministry in His kingdom was His idea. My relationship to you through Epaphras is His idea. I'm an apostle by the will of God, at His initiative." That's what Paul has in view right here and that's what he's trying, even from the outset, to establish. "Look, I have opinions here that need to be listened to because of who I am, by the will of God; what my calling is, what my task is, by the will of God."

And he writes to "the saints and the faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae." What's their Gospel hope? Their Gospel hope is that they are in Christ. Their

Gospel hope is that they are in Christ and everything they hear from a teacher professing to promote the kingdom of God has got to solidify them in Christ; if not it's going to undermine their standing in Christ. That's why he's pointing that out right here, that they are in Christ, and that is their Gospel hope and no other. Christ and their confidence in Him is their hope of grace and is their peace from God and is their adoption. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father." All of that is what he's telling them right here at the very beginning of this letter.

### **Paul's Desire to Pray for the Colossians**

And then he begins to reassure them really specifically about their standing in Christ. Notice what he says first of all. I can't pass over this without noting it here. Verse 3, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you." Wow. Paul, with all that he has to contend with, of course he's in prison when he's writing this, I can understand him praying for Ephesus because he planted that church, I can understand him praying for Corinth because he planted that church, I can understand him praying for the church in Thessalonica, the church in Berea - he was there, he was with those people; he bled with those people. He'd never been to Colossae and yet he charts praying for them. I don't know about you; I know about me that I want to be like that, I want to do that, I want to be one who's praying for churches I haven't been to or haven't seen, praying for the saints. I want to encourage you to be that way. We can't pray for every church all over the world but we can pray for people, we can pray for places, we can pray for churches that we know about. We can certainly pray for believers right now suffering to horribly in the Middle East, but maybe you need a reminder. Maybe you need to put something around, maybe you need to put a post-it note somewhere, maybe you need to put some kind of little do-dad somewhere. Debbie has a do-dad that she received from a little old lady in Odessa when we were over there and she's got that displayed somewhere. And when I see it, it reminds me I need to pray for that lady. We need to remember; we need to remind ourselves. If we're going to be prayerful about the church, let's deal with our limitations, let's put do-dads, reminders, prayer cards, post-it notes, whatever it takes in our way so that we pray for churches. I'm not sure; maybe Paul had do-dads that he posted around. Paul was a man just like us. We need to remind ourselves to pray for the church of Christ around the world, the church of Christ right here in Jackson, for this church as well.

### **The Colossians' Love for the Saints**

Look what he says. He says to them, "Your faith in Christ Jesus and your love that you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." He's thanking God for those things. And you see what he's doing right there. There's that Gospel triad - faith, hope, and love. He's saying, "I recognize from the testimony of Epaphras that God is at work among you because he tells me about your faith in Christ Jesus, the love you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." Paul is saying, "God is at work among you

and here's the evidence. These are not things that you produce; these are not things that are yours because you are nice people. These are not things that happen just naturally. They happen because the Gospel is at work in you." And we could go through lots of places - think about Ephesians chapter 2 verses 8 and 9 where Paul says faith in Christ is a gift. It's the gift of God not the work of man. Think about love for all the saints. You get over to chapter 3 verse 11 and Paul is going to describe who all those saints are. Here he says in verse 10 to "put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator. Here there is not Greek or Jew or circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

Paul is saying, "That's the love you have for the saints. Your love for the saints is bounding across racial boundaries, it's bounding across social and economic barriers. Your love for the saints is bounding across gender barriers. You're loving the people of God because the same Spirit is at work in them as is at work in you." That's an evidence of Gospel realities. Why? He says "because of the hope that's laid up for you in heaven." Evidence of Gospel realities at work in the lives of the Colossians, at work in our lives right here. It's that our hope is not in this world. The Gospel raises our eyes beyond this world to the world to come and we begin, because of the work of Christ, to long for a life where Christ is. For as he says at the beginning of chapter 3, "For since you've been raised with Christ seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." That becomes our hope. That becomes our reason for being - not only to love God here but to anticipate loving God there; not only serving God here but to anticipate and long for and hunger for the day when we serve God there. A hope laid up for us in heaven. That's the work of God because by nature we are people motivated by what we see. And we don't see heaven. By nature, we are people who are motivated by what we can have. And we can't have heaven yet. And the fact that we are motivated by heaven and have a hope there and are energized by that, Paul's saying, "That's the work of the Gospel among you. That's beyond your ability. That's beyond your character. That's beyond who you are as a broken, fallen person in a broken, fallen world. That's the Gospel. If you think those thoughts and hunger that way then that's the Gospel at work in you - changing life, changing orientation, changing priority." You see, Paul is facing them and us with the reassurance that the Gospel we've responded to is the real thing because it's made a dent and it's made a change. It's begun to reorient who we are and why we do things.

### **The Accuracy of Epaphras' Message**

Well, let me pass on quickly and just say something here about what he says related to the accuracy of the message of Epaphras. It seems likely that the false teachers - it may have been fairly easy for them to cast doubts on the completeness of the message that Epaphras brought back to the Colossians because they never heard Paul and they never saw Paul; they never heard Paul preach. They're relying on Epaphras, which seemed to be good enough until,

perhaps, somebody showed up saying, “Do you think Epaphras got everything that Paul was teaching? Do you think he got it right? Is there maybe something he forgot? We know Epaphras. Paul is this super-intellect and is it possible that the Epaphras that we know maybe got all of that right from Paul?” Look what Paul says. He says of this - this is the latter part of verse 5, and this would be hope, the hope we’ve just been talking about - “of this you’ve heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you” - that’s Epaphras preaching - “the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you as indeed in the whole world is bearing fruit and growing.”

### **God’s Gospel at Work throughout the World**

Let me just hit a couple of things here. In the whole world - do you know what Paul’s saying? He’s saying across the Roman world people are hearing the same thing you heard. Across the Roman world people are living by the same truth that you are now living by. And not only are you hearing it but look what he says. “It’s bearing fruit and growing.” Paul is saying that the true Gospel has at all times been known by the fact that it’s living and it’s constantly bearing fruit and growing. It’s serving as God’s means. As he says right here - verse 13 of chapter 1 - God’s means to deliver us from the domain of darkness and transfer us to the kingdom of the Son he loves in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.” The Gospel is doing that. And Paul is saying that it’s doing that among you. Did you catch that right there around verse 6? He says, “Which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world, bearing fruit and growing as it does also among you.” Paul seems to be saying, “Colossians look around and see what the Gospel, the true Gospel that’s been preached all over the world, all over the known world is doing right here among you. As people hear it they respond in repentance and faith and look what happens to them. They get transferred in the domain of darkness and you see it in the way they live; you see it in what their priorities are. You see it in the healing of their relationships and in the deliverance from bondage. You see it in a life that was broken begins to be a life that is whole again. You see it. You see the Gospel doing great work.

### **A Firm Grasp of the Faith: Centered in Christ**

He also says, “since the day you heard it and understood.” Not only did you hear it but you understood the grace of God in truth. The word, “understood,” is a strong one and it implies that their grasp of the truth brought by Epaphras has been a firm grasp. It’s not a superficial or ordinary understanding; Paul is saying, “Don’t let anyone cause you to second guess that now.” If that’s the case, that their understanding is not a superficial one, that their understanding is not a fly by night one, if their understanding really was a firm one and their grasp on the Gospel was a firm one, what does that say to you and me? What does that say to you and me? If these people, taught by an able teacher, an able preacher, one who Paul calls later “a fellow servant, a faithful minister of Christ,” one who was



at his right hand and serving with him and trained by him, if these people who came to faith under that man's ministry can be wobbled, can you be wobbled? Can I be wobbled? Yes, we can. Paul says in Galatians, "Take heed if you think you stand lest you fall." He's talking about sin there but he's talking also about the reality. Let's be careful. Hebrews chapter 2 says that it's possible for us to drift. Take care lest you drift. Let's be careful that faith that we hold also is faith that holds us. Let's not just assume. Let's not just assume that we can be okay. Let's assume that if these people can wobble with a firm grasp of the Gospel we can wobble too. If these people can be deceived with a firm grasp of the Gospel we can be deceived too. If the writer of Hebrews is telling people, "You can drift, be careful," then let's understand we can drift and we need to be careful.

Paul is centering their attention where ours needs to be centered - on the grace of God in the Gospel; the Gospel that's planted us in Christ, the Gospel that is ours and has united us to Christ. He's re-centering their attention. They've taken their eye off the ball. They're following some crazy ideas out there and he's saying, "Don't lose, don't let go of what Epaphras gave you. It's the real thing. It produces fruit. It grows constantly. It makes people new. Don't lose it. Don't lose sight of it."

### **A Challenge: Give Evidence of God's Work among you**

Well I need to wrap up. There's so much more here and I would encourage you to find a copy of R.C. Lucas' book and read it because it reads way better than I preach it. And then finally, Paul, as he wraps up here, he is saying right here at the end describing Epaphras as "our faithful fellow servant, a faithful minister of Christ" - Paul is placing his stamp of approval on Epaphras and on the Gospel he's preached. One thing he notes at the very end of verse 8, "and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit." You know what Epaphras has done? Epaphras has bragged on the work of God among His people to Paul. Epaphras has bragged on the great work of God among His people and he's telling Paul, "Let me tell you what God is doing. Let me tell you the evidence of what I see. Let me tell you how these people are loving all the saints by the power of God's Spirit at work in them." What an amazing stamp. Would Epaphras come here and say that about us? Would Epaphras come here and say that about us? Would he tell other folks, "Let me tell you about those folks at First Pres. They love one another by the power of the Spirit. They love all the saints by the power of the Spirit." There's a mark of God's work among us. Let's pray.

*Father, thank You for these few minutes. We ask for Your blessing as we turn our attention to pray. Let Your Word shape our thinking and our praying. Let Your Word shape our approach to You. Let Your Word shape our faith and give substance to our faith. Let Your Word shape our hearts. Thank You, our Father. In Jesus' name, amen.*

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