

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians II

Colossians 1:1-8

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians, chapter 1, we will continue the study we began last week. You remember we said as we looked at the first two verses that in this great letter, the Apostle Paul is battling a false teaching. A heresy amongst the church at Colossae. This false teaching does not reject Christ outright, it claims to introduce these Christians to something in addition to what they had heard from Epaphras originally. It claims to introduce these Christians to a deeper knowledge of God, a deeper experience of God, a higher life. It claims to do it in a variety of ways, keeping certain ritual rules, believing certain mystical things. It intends to supplement the teaching which Epaphras had originally brought to the congregation. We said it actually mixed elements of Judaism as well as great paganism and mixed it with the original preaching which the Colossians had heard. It claimed to give them something more, something deeper, something that they had not heard of to supplement their incomplete teaching. It didn't outrightly deny that teaching, it just said you need more. You need Christ plus these things.

Now in response we saw last week that the Apostle Paul had made the antidote to this particular teaching an unfolding of the implications of Christ's preeminence. Paul directs us to the sole sufficiency of Christ in his person and in his saving work. In fact we had said that the message of Colossians is that believers are complete in Christ and that faith in him necessarily rules out their dependence on any resource outside of him. For in him we have our all in all. In that context, we come to verses 3 through 8 which we are going to concentrate on today. But let's read, beginning from verse 1. Hear the word of God.

Colossians 1:1-8

Our Father, this is Your word. It is intended for Your people's edification, for our encouragement, for our instruction, for our correction. Use it this way in us. Cause our hearts to be open to this word. If we come this day distracted or fearful or cold, by Your spirit draw us to Yourself and open us up to hear Your word. Apply that word to us in our own particular situation by Your spirit that we might not only be hearers but also become doers of the word and, we'll give You

all the praise and the glory. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now that we have a little context about this epistle, and let me say as we turn to verses 3 - 8, it is very clear that Paul is trying to do two things in this passage. The first thing he wants to do is reassure these loyal, Christian believers at Colossae that they have in fact heard the gospel. They haven't heard only a part of the gospel for which they need to gain some new and improved gospel, they've heard the whole gospel. And secondly, he wants to confirm the message which Epaphras had brought to him. You remember that we read that Epaphras was a faithful servant, he came to Christ in Paul's Ephesian ministry a hundred miles away. He brought the gospel back to Colossae and now these new teachers, these false teachers, are saying well, what Epaphras is saying is okay, It is just that we have some new teaching that you need to hear to add on to what He is saying. And so Paul wants to make it very clear that he has the highest confidence in the preaching that Epaphras has done to the Colossians. He is saying, "No, my friends, he gave you the whole truckload. He gave you the whole gospel and I want to commend the work that he has done."

Now this passage outlines fairly easily today. In fact, very conveniently it falls in to three parts If you look at verse 3 you will see Paul give a thanksgiving in prayer. That is the first section. If you look at verses 4 and 5 we see the second section. That is Paul's description of the triad of faith, hope and love. The triad of Christian experience. So you have the thanksgiving in verse 3. In verses 5 and 6 you have the triad of faith, hope and love and then in verses 5 through 8, the end of verse 5 through verse 8, we have a testimony from Paul. So here we have a thanksgiving, a triad and a testimony. Let's look at this passage together today.

I. Paul's thanksgiving in prayer.

Notice verse 3. "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you." Paul begins by announcing a prayer of thanksgiving. He thanks God for the Colossians and specifically for what God is doing in the Colossians. And before we go on I simply want to stop and note Paul's generosity. Paul could have come with words of criticism. Why in the world are you Colossians giving in to this false teaching that is in your midst. You're messing it up. He could have legitimately brought and opened with many words of criticism, no doubt. But Paul's first words are words of thanksgiving for what God is doing. I want you to stress that this is sincere thanksgiving. The Apostle Paul is following a convention of his day. When people wrote letters back then after the salutation they usually said something nice about the person that they were writing to. We still do that today. But you know Paul doesn't always open with a word of thanksgiving. If you read his epistle to the Galatians he does not begin with a word of thanksgiving. If you read his epistle to the second Corinthians, he does not begin with a word of thanksgiving. And you know why? Those churches were really, really straying from the truth of Christ and Paul was

not going to give false or flattering compliments.

But look how Paul takes this opportunity to give a word of sincere thanksgiving to the Colossians. I thank God for you and I simply want to stop and say, Is that our attitude? Is that our outlook? Are we always looking to give thanks to God for what He is doing in our midst, in our friends, in our families? Are we looking at the other members of this congregation and the pews on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights or when we see one another in the week and thanking God in our hearts for what he is doing in them? Do we have an outlook of thanksgiving, of generosity? There are always going to be things we can be depressed about. There are always things that discourage us and yet Paul works in a spirit of thanksgiving. You think of this man. If anybody could have been depressive and downcast, It is Paul. The man is in prison. The man's ministries are under attack both from opponents from the Jewish faith and also from other people within the church who hate him and who are opposed to him, some of the churches that he has planted have begun to disintegrate. This man could be depressive and yet he is a man characterized by sincere thanksgiving. You'll find it in all of his letters. It is an amazing thing, my friends, this thanksgiving. Paul thanks God constantly and that thanksgiving becomes a blessing for him. It is an irony, isn't it? When you thank God, the blessing comes back on you.

One of the old Puritans once said the thankful heart has a continual feast. You see Paul could have been a man in the midst of a famine. He knew trouble and yet he looked for things to be thankful for to God.

Is that our attitude? Is that our outlook? Are we looking to our brothers and sisters and lifting up thanksgiving to God for them? Now Paul thanks God very interestingly for the faith of the Colossians. He sees the faith of the Colossian and he says "Oh, Lord, thank you for their faith." Now that may seem strange to us, but it is not strange for Paul. If you read the Apostle Paul, he never, ever once in his writings congratulates his readers for his faith. He always thanks God for it. And that reminds us that faith itself is the gift of God. Faith itself is authored by God. Yes, we believe. Yes, we believe in Christ but it is God who works faith in us. Faith is not something which comes natural, faith is a gift of God. It is wrought in us by the work of the Holy Spirit. And so the Apostle Paul congratulates and thanks God for the faith which he sees in the Colossians.

Now let me say in passing that Paul's thanksgiving also has the effect of undercutting the teaching of the Colossians. You see the false teachers are saying to the Colossians what you have is good, but you need more. You need the secret teaching that we can bring to you which will improve your Christianity. It will give you a deeper experience of God. And here is the Apostle Paul saying to the Colossians, I thank God that you have the real thing. I thank God that you have experienced God in his fullness. I thank God that I see evidences, signs, marks of God at work in you. I thank God that you do not need to be looking for a new and improved teaching because you have got the truth. You see he

undercuts the false teaching by his very thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is a powerful thing my friends. Christians must recognize the importance of thanksgiving. We ourselves must follow in this pattern. Do we imitate his thankful spirit? And let me ask you this. Are we spiritually minded in our thanksgiving? It is very easy in all the blessings which surround us to be thankful for the temporal things that God gives us—relative, wealth and prosperity, clothing, food, friends, families, all manner of blessings and vocation. All of those are temporal blessings. All of those are real blessings. We would be wrong not to be thankful for them but so often we are so caught up in those things that we forget the spiritual blessings that are being heaped on us. Are we thankful like Paul for the spiritual blessings? No doubt Paul's congregation was mixed. There would have been some who would have been well off, some who were not? There would have been some from the higher social classes, some from the lower social classes. Some with certain blessings, others with other blessings. Paul doesn't concentrate on those blessings.

He says, I thank God for the faith and the love and the hope that he has worked in you. Do we look at one another and think that way? Are we thanking God continually and praying for God continually to do works of faith and hope and love in us. Are we spiritually minded in our thanksgiving? Do we realize that faith is the gift of God? Do we realize that when we believe that itself is a sign that God has been at work in us. This is so important my friends because from time to time Christians struggle with assurance and invariably those of us evangelicals in the 20th Century begin to ask questions like this. Was my faith perfectly pure when I first believed in Christ? Was I 100% sincere? Can I be absolutely sure that my faith was enough to gain my justification? Well, we are asking the wrong questions. No, your faith wasn't perfectly pure. No, your heart wasn't undivided. No, your faith wasn't strong enough to save you because your faith can't save you. Christ saves you. Faith is that whereby you lay hold of Christ and the very fact that you had faith at all was an evidence that God was already at work in you. And the Apostle Paul's thanksgiving reminds us that that is something that we need to be thankful for.

All of us are going to undergo, and some of us are perhaps now undergoing, experiences which take us into the valley. In that valley it is very easy to forget all the temporal blessings that God is giving you and it is even easier to forget the spiritual blessings. Even in that valley we must be thankful for what God has been doing to us. And as we walk with him we can always be thankful of the faith that he has implanted within us. We must be encouraged by that. That is a design of God to give us an intimation of his love for us. I love you, Christian. You see that faith in you. That is a gift that I've given you because I love you. You see that hope that is in you? That is not natural, I implanted it in you. That is a gift from me to you. Be encouraged. Walk in faith, go forward because these are testimonies of my love to you. When all the other testimonies because of the difficulty of our circumstances tend to be blotted out, we have to call our hearts

back and we have to say, "Lord, I am going to thank you even though I do not feel like thanking you right now. It is an ironic thing my friends, if we fail to thank God for his blessings we will begin to doubt that God hears our prayers. If we fail to remember that he has blessed us in the past, it will be difficult for us to believe that he will bless us now and in the future. And so thankfulness not only is a responsibility of us because God has done great works for us and we must in hearts of gratitude give to him back the praise and the glory but It is also important for us because as we thank God for what He is done for us we remember in fact all the things he has done for us and that encourages us to go back to him in prayer. And so the Apostle Paul begins with a thanksgiving. And that is the first thing we look at today.

II. Paul's triad - faith, love, hope.

Now let's look at this great triad. Faith, love, hope. This is the order that he gives it in this passage. You know we could turn to other passages, too. Paul speaks of this triad: faith, love and hope elsewhere. First Corinthians 13 is a place where he mentions it. He also mentions it in I Thessalonians 1:3. There are many places in Paul's writings where he points to these three great characteristics.

Before we look at them though, let me quickly say this. Paul, when he says faith, love and hope, is not talking about natural characteristics. He is not talking about things that we have naturally as personality attributes. Paul is talking about qualities which are worked in us by the Holy Spirit. These qualities of faith, and love and hope are hallmarks or evidences of the work of God in the soul of a man or woman. When you see these things in a person, you are seeing evidence of the work of God. These are not things which come naturally. They are not temperamental, they are not personality based.

When we say *faith*, for instance, we are not talking about a person who has a propensity to believe or a credulous person, much less. We are not talking about people who just love to believe. Sometimes we say, 'Oh, that person was just born to believe.' That is not what we are talking about. Faith is something different. When we say *love*, we are not talking about a person who is nice. There are all sorts of people in the world who are nice but who do not love and who do not have this love. When we talk about *hope*, we are not talking about people who are optimistic and who in the face of the greatest disaster can bubble over with enthusiasm. No, we are talking about things that the Holy Spirit works in a person. These things are things that the Spirit works. That having been said let's look at these three great things.

Look with me in verse 4. "We give thanks to God since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus." We heard of your faith in Christ Jesus. Paul, as he speaks of this *faith*, is speaking of that *reliance* on Christ, that *trust* in Christ, that belief in Christ, that *commitment* to Christ which these Colossians have made. And I want

you to note that he stresses the fact that Christ is the object of that faith. In each of these three qualities that he speaks of there is an object. For faith, Christ is the object. For love, the brethren is the object. For hope, heaven or the future glory is the object. In each of these great qualities there is an object and Paul says I thank God when I heard of your belief, your reliance on, your trust on, your relationship with, your commitment to Christ who is the sole sufficient object of saving faith. He thanks God for that.

Then he goes on and he says, and I thank God for your love. Look again at verse 4. The love which you have for all the saints. Again, this is not simply a human affection that is being spoken of here. This is self-denying concern which puts the best interest of others as a priority in our relationships to them. Love says I will look out for the best interest of my friend, of my family, of my neighbor, of whomever I am loving. You are looking out deliberately for the best interest of others when you engage in love. Affections come with it, but we can love even when we do not feel like it. It is possible, however, to have great affection and never actively engage in love though. Because love not only works and feels and thinks, love acts. And so the Apostle Paul thanks God for the love which they have for all the saints. Notice again this is a love of the Christian brotherhood which he is emphasizing here This is not just love to family or love to spouse or love to children. This is a love for the Christian brotherhood and we know that that is a distinctive gift of the spirit. Jesus and John both said it is true; they will know you are Christians by your love for one another. Our Lord said, behold how they love one another. And so this love for the brotherhood is a distinctive gift for the spirit.

Notice as well that it is stressed that all the brothers and sisters are loved. Paul says your love for all the saints. Jeff Wilson has said this. "The remarkable repetition of the word all in this letter is evidently directed against the exclusiveness and caste feeling which is fostered by the false teachers' claim to superior knowledge." You get the idea. This group is out here saying that we have found the real truth and the rest of them haven't quite caught it yet. What does it do? It naturally causes a division which makes one part feel as if it is superior to the other part of the body. And so Paul stresses on, he goes on. This should teach us that there is no room in the church for any intellectual, spiritual or social elite which separates itself from fellow believers whom Christ has accepted. Is your life characterized by a love for all the saints?

Let me say this. We live in a place, a location and a culture where love of family and love of friends is very strong. That is good. That can also be a barrier to our going beyond and loving all the saints because we can be so comfortable in our love for family and for friends that we have grown up with and gone to school with that we forget the saints that are out there, some who are perhaps lonely, some who are perhaps with us this day, who feel outcast, neglected, overlooked.

Oh, my friends, love for the brethren for all the saints is a mark of the work of the

spirit. It goes beyond family love. Jesus says even thieves and robbers and gentiles love their families. They look out for one another. But you are to show your love as coming from a divine origin by loving one another. In other words, you're going to love beyond family boundaries. You're going to love beyond the boundaries of your friends and your social class. You're going to love all the saints. That is the sign of the spirit. My friends that is something that is a prayer of mine for our body. That we would become characterized as a congregation who loves beyond conventional boundary, who love beyond the boundaries of the spheres of life that we normally work in, whether it be our friends that we work with, or our friends in our neighborhood, or our friends at school, or the friends that we grew up with and went to school with or the friends with whom we go to church or our families. If we will love beyond those fears, always looking to show our love to all the saints, we will bear a testimony to the love of Christ in us. Then Paul points to hope.

Notice again, he says because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Note here that Paul says that hope is the cause of faith and love. You might not think it that way. You might think well faith causes hope. But Paul says It is the other way around. The hope in you enables you to believe and to love. Hope is the cause of faith and love. Hope is confident assurance and expectancy of the vaster blessings in store for believers in the world to come. Hope expects what faith believes. Hope expects what faith believes and by expecting it, enables you to believe it, even when you can't see it. You see faith is called on to trust despite the evidence to the contrary, but hope expects the realities that God sets forth. It has been said the future belongs to those who belong to God. That is our hope and as we expect that reality it breeds faith and love. How can you love in an unjust world? How can you love when people have been unloving to you, when there are past tragedies that haunt you, when justice has not been done in your own experience, because God will set it right and you know it. And so you can set aside your need to have justice satisfied and you can love even when you haven't been loved. How can you believe when the world seems to be going crazy, when everything seems turned upside down because you hope a Christian hope. You expect the reality of the promise of God and you know He is coming again and therefore you are able to believe in the midst of a turbulent storm.

Notice again Paul acquires the remedy to the subjective teaching of the false teachers. They say look you people lack an important part of Christian experience and you need to find it in the subjective experiences of mystical union with God that we can foster for you by keeping these rituals or believing these particular occult beliefs. And the Apostle Paul says you want to see the work of God in you? You want to see evidence of the work of God in you? Do not go looking for mystical experiences. Look at Christ, look at the brethren and look at heaven. Believe, love and hope. Belief, hope and love are evidences of the divine work in you. You do not need any more than that. If faith has been worked in you, if hope has been worked in you, if love has been worked in you, then you have the evidence of the finger of God in your soul. Paul says you do not need

these mystical things. You've got the real thing if you have faith, hope and love. You look to Christ and you love the brethren and you hope for glory. That is the sign of the work of God in you.

III. Paul's (fivefold) testimony.

And then finally Paul gives a testimony, verses 5 through 8. He testifies to the truth that these Colossians have already received. He says five things. First of all, he says this. You have heard the word of truth, the gospel. He first comes to the Colossians and he says look, you've already heard the truth. Somebody can't come to you and say okay now we are going to give you the rest of the truth because you've already heard it. Epaphras has already preached it to you. Do not be tricked. You have already heard the word of truth.

Secondly, this word of truth not only came to you (verse 6), it is in all the world. In other words, this is not some secret that only a few people know about. The whole world knows about the word of the gospel. It is being spread everywhere. The Apostle Paul is saying that the gospel is not a secret code for the initiated, it is in all the world.

And Paul gives thanks that the same message of salvation which was preached to the Colossians is being preached all over the world. So somebody can't come to you and say now we have got a secret that nobody else knows about. All the world knows about it. Thirdly, he says this gospel is working. You can imagine the false teachers saying yeah, well what Epaphras is saying is fine but we have got something that will really work. It will just revolutionize your experience with God and the Apostle Paul says it is working.

Look at verse 6. In all the world it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing. Exhibit A, you, faith, love and hope is being rooted in you. You're being built up in this love. You show love for the saints. That love is of the spirit, he says in verse 8. It is working, It is effective.

Then, fourth, he says that Epaphras was faithful in his preaching. Notice what he says. You heard it, you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bondservant, who is a faithful servant of Christ. In other words when these men come and say, 'Oh Epaphras hasn't told you the whole story.' Paul's response is that is wrong. He has told you the whole story. He is a faithful servant and just like he reported to me about the wonderful things that the spirit of God is doing in your midst, he was faithful to report to you the whole of the gospel which I've been preaching. I know that he is given you the whole counsel.

And finally Paul says this. Not only have you heard it, not only is the gospel everywhere, not only is the gospel effective, and not only did Epaphras preach to you the whole of the gospel, he says you understood it. Do not be tricked, do not

be tricked by someone saying that you need a new and improved teaching. You do not because you understood the grace of God when he first taught it to you. And I see the evidences that you understood it because God has worked in you faith and love and hope.

My friends, let me ask you this. Do you believe Paul's testimony? Do you believe that testimony that the gospel that he has given is soul-sufficient, that the Christ which he preaches is the answer to every spiritual question that you have? Do you believe that the Christian life ought to be characterized by faith and love and hope and is, in fact, your Christian life characterized by faith and hope and love? Not optimism, not niceness, but faith and hope and love. Has God worked that in your midst? If you do not see those things there, then I still have the answer. Come to Christ. He will give them to you. You do not see enough of them there and I think we are all there. Ask of him and He will fill you exceeding abundantly with faith and love and hope.

Do you live in a spirit of thanksgiving? Are you a genuinely thankful person, not denying reality around you, not living in a state of psychological denial, but a person who in spite of the difficulties of life can honestly thank God for what he is doing in your midst? If not, maybe you need to do some business with God. Maybe you need to ask him to work in your heart a thankfulness which is befitting the Christian. Oh, may God make these realities for us. May we truly become a people characterized by faith and love and hope. May the Lord bless His word. Let's look to Him.

Our Lord and God, this is Your word. Prosper it in our hearts. For we ask it Jesus name. Amen.

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