

“We Thank God for You”

Colossians 1:3-8

By The Reverend Mr. Nathan D. Shurden

*The Lord's Day Evening
February 14, 2010*

If you have your Bibles please turn with me to the book of Colossians — Colossians chapter 1. It is a joy to open up the Word of the Lord with you tonight in the absence of our dear friend Dr. Derek Thomas who is serving the Lord at Grove City College tonight. He took off this afternoon so it's my pleasure to look with you into a very stirring passage of Scripture from the book of Colossians. Now some of you will notice that I'm trying on a new accent tonight and I've been told that I sound worse tonight than I did this morning, so you can pray that we will make it through well tonight. Billy Joseph as well, if you were here this morning, you probably heard that Billy Joseph was not quite up to par. I'm proud to say that I'm wearing his microphone that he used this morning. So immediately following the service if there are any doctors in the house I will need your assistance immediately.

Colossians chapter 1 — Now you'll see in the bulletin that we are to read verses 3 to 14. Well, I am paring that back. I was way too eager and robust earlier in the week thinking that we would be able to do that large section of Scripture, but really verses 3 to 8 is the section I wanted to focus on and have pared down our attention to tonight. So let's look to God's Word together from Colossians chapter 1 beginning in verse 3. But before we read God's Word let's pray and ask for His blessing.

Our Father in heaven it is a joy to gather again on this Your Lord's Day, one day in seven that You have set apart for the worship of You, that You have made the Sabbath for man, that we need this Lord, that we need this day to remember who it is that You are and what it is that You have done for us. Father as we gather in Your sight tonight we know that we need Your help. There is nothing in the preacher and Father there is nothing within us that would make this Word come home to our hearts except that it is Your Word, and that You would grant by Your Spirit that this Word would come powerfully into our hearts, that it would accomplish all that You have destined it to accomplish. May we be changed tonight and behold the glory of Christ. For it's in His name we pray. Amen.

Colossians chapter 1 verse 3:

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.

Amen, and thus far the reading of God's holy Word.

Well I had chosen this text tonight in part because I desired to speak on thanksgiving and thankfulness of heart — a desire that we would have a model of thanksgiving before us, and indeed we do, and in almost the beginning of every one of Paul's epistles. I could have chosen any one of them and you would have noticed that the apostle Paul begins his letter with thanksgiving, save that very sober letter of Galatians. Now this prayer tonight I think models a couple of things for us. It tells us what kind of heart that true thanksgiving comes from and it also challenges us in our expression of thanksgiving. It provides for us an example, a rubric, almost a type of formula, from which we might be able to express our thanksgiving to God. Indeed that was my prayer tonight right before I left the office just a few minutes ago, that the Lord tonight would grant to us hearts full of thanks for who He is and for what He has done and that He would, by these words, give us a model for how we might express our hearts to the Lord. That's what Paul is doing here as he writes this letter to the church at Colossae.

But I'd only chosen this text for that reason in part. I've also chosen this text for very personal reasons. I'm very aware that this is probably the last time I'll get a chance to speak to you, First Presbyterian Church, before we ship off to Nashville for a brand new work and it's impossible to describe how thankful we are for the season that God has given us to minister here, for what an encouragement you have been. It's amazing how a congregation who has been around this long can suffer so well under the inadequacies of men like me. Indeed you have suffered me well. You've taken care of our family and you've expressed tremendous love when we needed it most. It's been almost six years since we stepped foot at First Presbyterian Church and it's been a very fast six years as far as we're concerned. And so I'm thankful tonight and there's no way to say that thanks except through the apostle Paul to God for you and the role that you have played in our lives, for I may have been called a minister here but it's debated as to who really has been ministered to in these six years.

Well, let's turn our attention to this passage because the apostle Paul gives us

great instruction in thanksgiving tonight. I want to ask two questions of this passage. The first is this — From where does a thankful heart come? Now a thankful heart, as you know, you can see it even in the source of this passage, it's a heart that is given by God. It comes from God. It comes in the moment where God, by His Spirit, awakens us to the acknowledgement of His gracious gifts to us — gifts that we do not deserve, blessings that we could not earn, benevolences that we could not receive apart from His hand directly. When that dawns upon us, that all of this has been granted to us directly from God's hand and nothing from our own doing, we begin to feel within our hearts the spirit of thanksgiving.

When Paul considers this church — he's heard the report from Epaphras of what the Lord is doing — he cannot bow his head in prayer without saying thank you Lord for the church in Colossae. Thanksgiving is on the tip of his tongue as he considers this congregation because he sees the Spirit of God at work in them. We see it there in verse 6 of the passage that we read just a minute ago, and fundamentally this is the beginning place of Paul's thanksgiving. He mentions it later, he mentions a few of the characteristics and gifts and qualities and marks and evidences of the Spirit's presence within this church first, but he says that fundamentally they have accepted the grace of God in truth.

This morning we received new members into the midst of this congregation and they made commitments, made vows, before God and before us. It was as if it were a covenant renewal this morning, saying what we believe and what it is that we're committed to. We are trusting in Christ alone in the Gospel for our salvation.

The church at Colossae through the ministry of Epaphras who is probably a convert out of the apostle Paul's own ministry at the church at Ephesus — a native of Colossae, probably went to go visit the apostle Paul in Ephesus, heard this Gospel, was immediately overwhelmed by it, transformed by it, and returns to his hometown. And he does exactly what Christians and disciples are supposed to do — he begins to talk about the Gospel. He gets back home and he tells his friends and his family and his neighbors. And the same transformation that happened for Epaphras began to happen among those in Colossae. New disciples were forged and a church that didn't exist previously was born. And now the apostle Paul is writing to them. And he writes with second hand knowledge. He writes having heard the report of Epaphras of what the Lord has done within their midst. And by the time the apostle Paul has heard this report, it is not just a profession of faith, it's not just "Oh yes, we trust in Christ," but now there has been evidences, there have been marks, there have been gifts of grace that have been bestowed in the midst of that congregation that show the powerful evidence of the wonderworking grace of God.

No wonder the apostle Paul is thankful. This is the very thing which Paul gives his life for. Paul is a missionary. Wherever he goes he is on a mission. He is

praying that unbelieving Gentiles would come to faith in Christ and would know the Gospel of grace and truth just like the church at Colossae. It was his mission. It was his drive. And when he hears the testimony of a transformed life and the evidences of grace within a brand new congregation, this sends shivers up Paul's spine and his tongue is immediately loosened in thanksgiving.

Do you know such testimony of the transformative power of the Gospel should be the first thing that loosens our tongue in thanksgiving? By seeing the apostle Paul and his expression to a congregation that he's never actually met, but a congregation of whom he has heard that the Spirit is at work in, that the Gospel is reigning in, sends him to write this letter, this expression of thanksgiving, for in it is his heartbeat. To be thankful for the gifts which God has given comes first in the recognition of the greatest gift which God gives, which is the salvation which has been granted to us through His beloved Son. With that immense gift, that inestimable gift, dawns upon the consciousness of an unbeliever whose being transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. There is no sweeter moment, and for those of us who know that experience all so well, we immediately rejoice with those who rejoice and we become thankful with those who are thankful. This is the apostle Paul. He models for us the heart of thanksgiving by displaying for us the chief of God's gifts, His beloved Son. Now we are usually most thankful, it's just the way things are, for the things that are most precious to us. If the Gospel is precious, if Christ is precious, if it is as valuable as the Word proclaims it to be, then it is worthy of all of our thanksgiving.

In our house during Thanksgiving, during the season of Thanksgiving, the beginning of November we put a little tree on our wall and we make little leaves to go on these trees. It's an old paper tree, paper leaves, and during our dinners together at night we gather around the table and we ask each other what it is that we are thankful for. And we write on those leaves all of the things that we mentioned throughout the month of November and they go on the tree. And of course at the end of November we go through the tree and we see all of the things that God has given to us. Now what is always in indictment both to my own heart and to us as we gather around the table, that after two weeks of doing this you're trying not to repeat yourself. Of all the things that you could be thankful for, you've gone through the house and the food and the church and everything generally speaking about the way that God has provided for us and we begin to be slower and slower and slower in our responses of the things that we're thankful for. As the apostle Paul begins in this chapter both to express to us the heart of thanksgiving and then to model what a thanksgiving looks like, I want you to see how specific he is and how spiritually oriented his identification of thanksgiving is as he tells this church exactly when he prays how he prays in thanksgiving for them. To be thankful specifically for how the Lord has worked.

You know, I could stand here tonight as many of you could and name specific ways that you have been blessed and how you are thankful for how God has

used His church and you could name names — you could make a list. We could be here all night and give testimony in the assembly of the upright, not of what you have done but what God is doing in and through you. The apostle Paul, as he gives us an example tonight of a model of thanksgiving, that's exactly what he does. He says, "I thank God for you. I thank God for you and I thank Him for you in these ways." Notice the ways that the apostle Paul is thankful for this new church, this church at Colossae, you see clearly in verse 4 — "We have 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." Here the apostle Paul has already testified of his thankfulness for this congregation, he wants them to know "I'm not just thankful generally, I'm thankful specifically about how the Spirit is working in you right now in this way."

And his first of gifts that God has given to them that Paul is thankful for is that they have faith in Jesus Christ and they have love for all the saints — faith in Jesus Christ and they have love for all the saints. These are two of the most precious and necessary markers of one who has come into a saving relationship with Christ. It is by faith and faith alone that we enter into the family of God. It is through faith in Christ alone, He is the object of our faith, there is no other object, and there is no other name in heaven by which men might be saved. This church, these new Christians, have founded themselves upon Christ and they have been granted the gift of faith. And it means that they have said no to every other thing that they could put their faith in. They've said no to houses and lands. They've said no to family relations. They've said no to money. They've said no to power and they have said yes to Christ, that He alone — we are putting all of our eggs in this basket — it is a sure basket and it is Christ. They have faith in Christ.

But secondly he says that they have love for all the saints. They have love for all the saints. I love the fact that the apostle Paul here, as a Pharisee and as a Jew writing to Gentiles, says "I love to hear of your love for all the saints" that they are non-discriminating in their love for the people of God. You know, this is one of the evidences. As we lay hold of Christ, what happens is by faith in the Spirit we receive the love which Christ has loved us. And how has He loved us? He's loved us sacrificially and He's loved us when we were unlovely, in that "while we were yet sinners" Paul tells us "He died for us." While we were wrapped in the mire and the filth of the mud of sin, He came down and He died for us. He is the lover of the unlovely. Those who have embraced such a Christ begin to look out across the family of God and they indiscriminately love the saints. You love Christ, I love you. You are my brother; you are my sister.

And what is fascinating about how the apostle Paul unpacks the specificity of this thanksgiving is that he says this faith in Christ and this love for all the saints is actually rooted in a deep and abiding hope. It's rooted in a deep and abiding hope. Look back at verse 4 — "We heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints" and then notice "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." Now the apostle Paul is telling us here that the first two

evidences, these first two gifts — faith in Christ and love for all the saints — are manifesting themselves in this congregation and Paul is thankful for them because there is a heavenly hope that they are experiencing — a hope that's laid up, a hope that's stored up for them in the heavenly places. He is saying that this hope for heaven is actually the impetus or the basis for which this single minded focused faith in Christ and this indiscriminate agape love for all the saints comes. How could that be true? It would almost seem the other way around, wouldn't it? Surely the apostle Paul means trusting in Christ gets us the hope that we've always wanted or that trusting in Christ and from trusting in Christ will flow the love of all the saints. Paul actually says similar things in other letters, but not here at the church at Colossae. He wants to remind them of the hope, of the particular hope, which is stored up for them.

What is this hope? Well, you can look ahead near the end of chapter 1, look to verse 27 and Paul lets you know what this hope is, this hope that's abiding within the hearts at the church at Colossae. He says, "To them" this is the church "God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." The hope of glory. Here are the believers at Colossae — Gentiles like you, like me, cut off from all the promises of the Old Testament, not a part of the commonwealth of Israel - all of those covenant promises extending to the Jews. Paul is saying that as this church at Colossae received the Gospel through Epaphras, it dawned upon them in the Spirit that the Gospel is breaking the bounds and spreading like wildfire to extend through all of the Gentile nations, that the hope that was not even possible for Gentiles is now a hope that is sure and it is a hope of glory. It is a hope of glory. It's the hope of being able to see Christ Himself face to face.

Now Paul is saying that this single minded hope that is bound up in Christ, that expressed in glory, is what is motivating these new virtues, faith and love, to grow exponentially and to expand broadly. Isn't that the words that he uses? They're bearing fruit. This Gospel is bearing fruit and it's growing. And it's growing because this hope, the end, the aim, the goal for which we live is clearly in view. They've never lost sight of the first things since the moment they've embraced the gospel of grace. Now how does hope do that? How does hope give shape to faith in Christ and extend love to all the saints? Well, think of it — if you know and you're certain that the hope of glory has been given to you in Christ tonight believer and that there is no way that you could be snatched out of your Savior's hand, would you not be free from every anxiety, from every doubt, from every worldly and earthly concern? And would it not give structure and direction to the way that you lived every single moment of your life? If you could behold tonight in the midst of this Word, the face of Christ, which is your only hope believer, then every moment until that moment will have direction and have shaping by that aim and it strengthens your faith in Christ. You're radically removed from all of the worries and the concerns that come with this life. Think of the worries and concerns that you're bearing tonight, the ones that you're going to go into Monday morning with — is it because you've lost your hope? You've

forgotten the glory that awaits you, that's stored up for you right now in heaven?

How does this hope produce love for all the saints? As soon as you become satisfied in the certainty of this hope of glory that lays before you and all of your desires are met in Christ, then you will be able to love in the manner in which Christ loved and from the satisfaction of the way that He has loved you and from the contentment which comes from knowing that you're in the middle of what He has called you to be and to do as one of His children, you can go to that saint and you can love them in exactly that manner. Paul is telling us tonight that when we have the end in view we have the way that we should walk to the end in view. When we have the aim, when we have the objective set before us, the surety, the certainty, and the satisfaction of the hope of glory, then we know how to wake up tomorrow and the next day and every day after that. We know how to face all of the hard news and then we will begin to find within us something of the desire to spend and be spent for a Savior who would love us like that. Do you hope for such glory?

I've been so encouraged through this shift and transition from this place to the next by realizing that what we have begun together in relationship we will continue for all eternity. That though there will be moments we are missing from one another — we won't be in one another's presence — loved ones who have passed on, people who have moved away — there will be a heavenly reality where all of the short snatches of sweetness and of unity and of peace that we have shared in fellowship with one another in Christ will continue in glory unhindered by sin. What He has begun He will bring to completion in Christ. Glory be to His name.

Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we do bless You and thank You for how You have loved and cared for us in Christ. We are not here tonight for naught. For the Gospel is true. The end is sure and the way is certain. It is in such confidence that we submit our lives unto You. Now come do with us as You may. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand to receive the Lord's blessing.

May the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

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