

Colossians 1.3-8, What Have People Heard About Us?

Background:

- Paul is writing from in prison, most likely in Rome.
- He sends the letter with Tychicus (4.7), who also has letter to the Ephesian church.
- Paul has never met the Colossian church. Someone else, possibly Epaphras, heard the gospel from Paul somewhere else and brought it to them.
- Philemon was the host home for the Colossian church.
- Paul is writing to address the issue of Gnosticism, which means knowledge (or secret knowledge).
 - They believed that the spiritual was good and the physical was bad. So some argued that we should avoid all pleasures—whether good or bad. Others believed that, since the spiritual is all that mattered in the end, live it up now because it won't be here later.
 - Through this letter, Paul addresses the physical and spiritual realities of Jesus, his life and resurrection, our salvation, and our daily living.

Verse 3, Paul opens up saying that he thanks God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First, Paul is specifying which God he is thanking. Not just any god. Not all of the gods. But one specific God. The one who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (we will look at what this means in coming weeks). In a pagan world, Paul must specify. In our own biblically illiterate world, we too must specify. Do not assume people know what you mean when you talk about God, Jesus, sin, salvation.

Second, Paul is in prison. Yet Paul celebrates new and growing believers. Do you get excited when you meet someone for the first time and you find out they are a believer?

I met a guy in our neighborhood this past week...

Have you found time this past week to thank God? Maybe for your health. Maybe for food—or toilet paper! (Project Lucas, Kenya). Maybe for the fact that churches, like ours, all around the world are presenting the gospel in a way that people all around the world have a chance to hear. And some are hearing and believing in Jesus, from online services and drive-in churches. Or have you thanked God for the simple fact that God loves you and Jesus died for you?

Paul is thankful for them and he prays for them. Even from prison he celebrates and he prays. We will get to the prayer part next week, but I want us to look at three things Paul is thankful for.

1. Paul is thankful for their Faith, Love, and Hope

These three qualities make up Paul's commonly used triad of Christian character. These are sort of a shorthand to summarize Christian living.

a. He speaks first of their Faith in Christ Jesus.

George Michael said you gotta have faith. Journey admonished to don't stop believing. But have faith in what? Believe in what?

- In a better tomorrow? What if it doesn't come? Or what if it does? Do I every day have to believe in a better tomorrow? Because that will get tiring really quickly.
- Some people say to just believe in anything. Believe in believing. Have faith in faith. They see it more like a good luck charm or the power of positive thinking.

But Paul speaks of their faith in Jesus. Faith in a person who actually did and can do something. Who achieved salvation for us by dying on a cross for our sins. Paul tells the Corinthian church that "he became sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." I don't know anybody who can do that!

Throughout the letter to the Colossians, Paul speaks of three different things we receive from Jesus:

1. He Redeemed us—he delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into his kingdom, bringing us forgiveness for our sins by removing the weight of guilt and punishment that stood over us.
2. He Reconciled us—bringing us peace with God against whom we were rebellious and alienated.
3. He Raised us—through faith in him we die to our former ways of living and receive new life.

I can't do those things. You can't do those things. But Jesus can.

b. Paul is also thankful for their Love for all believers.

Jesus says that the world will know us by the love we have for one another.

John says in 1 John 2.10-11, *“Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”*

This is made possible because of our faith in Jesus. Because he loves you and he loves me, and he loves everyone else who calls on his name equally. None of us deserve it. We are all guilty and hopeless in our sins. Yet, while we were all equally sinners—condemned enemies of God—Christ died for us, the righteous for the unrighteous.

This is why Paul, later on in chapter 3, will say, *“There is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”*

None of us has a greater advantage, or holds greater favor with God.

Yet I get on social media and see Christians blasting other Christians as well as the world.

Why do we shoot our own wounded? Or why do we get angry when a fellow believer disagrees with us on any point? We live in a world of outrage. Let us be the love of Christ in an unloving world.

And why do we look at this lost and dying world and scream at them calling them idiots? We should be broken and we should mourn that people are going to hell. People are dying of this virus apart from Jesus. I don't want to get it—or any other disease—and die. But wouldn't it be better for me or you to die and go to heaven than for a lost person to die and go to hell?

This is why early Christians used to sell themselves into slavery, trading places with unbelievers. So that they could see the love of Christ in action and have the chance to hear about it.

People are going to accuse us and attack and mock us anyway. Let's not give them reasons to do it.

Third, Paul is thankful for their Hope laid up in heaven.

Do you know why they have such love for one another? Yes, because of their shared faith in Jesus. But Paul says it ultimately comes from their hope in heaven. This is a perspective shift. Instead of looking down or around at all the problems and issues and annoyances from those around you, look up to the heavens. Maybe not literally. Maybe rather set your heart on what is to come.

“These light and momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison [but we must] look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

2. Paul is thankful for the spreading of the Gospel—to the Colossians and beyond.

I thought about putting this one first, because the gospel message is what aroused their faith, love, and hope. But I decided to just keep it the way Paul wrote it.

Of their faith, love, and hope, Paul says you have these because you heard of them in the word of the truth—the gospel.

Paul uses this word, ***“truth,”*** here and in verse 6. It speaks of what is true, what is really real. You might be thinking, “I know what truth means.” But we live in a world of false gospels. False messages of faith, hope, and love:

We put our faith in sports teams that, whether they win or lose, can do nothing for us other than entertain us—and sometimes break our hearts. My favorite college football team are the national champions University of Central Florida. But nobody on that team knows that I even exist. They don’t know I am cheering them on when I watch them on tv. If I go to a game, they don’t know if I stand and shout or sit in silence. I like watching college football. But why would I let their wins and losses dictate my life week to week?

We love all sorts of things. I love steak. I love a good cup of coffee—black, no cream or sugar. Because I like coffee, not cream and sugar. I also love my kids and my wife. Two of those things I love a lot more than the others.

Even the love of my family is nothing when compared to the love of Jesus. My identity is not found in my children. Parents, you will have to let them go one day. Are you preparing them to leave the nest? My identity is not in Gentry. I had Jesus before I had my family.

There are many false gospels surrounding hope. Many false preachers and prophets looking to sell you—literally—end times prep kits. Don't buy them. Your hope is not in this world. It is in heaven. And to live is Christ and to die is gain. There are others who want to sell you false hope that if you have enough faith Jesus will heal you or pay your bills. We saw, time again in the gospel of Mark, that it wasn't the *amount* of faith that healed people; it was the simple *presence* of faith.

These people want you to put your hope in yourself or in this world. But the Colossians' hope was in heaven! The truth is that your life is temporary. Unless Jesus comes back soon, you will one day die. The question is, where will you be after that final breath? There is eternal life found by placing your faith in Jesus, and there is eternal destruction by rejecting Jesus.

And it might seem like the world is doing more rejecting than believing. But Paul says that the gospel has gone out into the whole world, and it is *bearing fruit* and *increasing*. We are in the middle of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Let us be in prayer for the gospel to go out into the Muslim world to bear fruit and to increase. As, like Paul says at the end of verse 6, that they "*hear and understand the grace of God in truth.*"

3. Paul is thankful for their continued Learning

He has twice spoken of them *hearing* the gospel message, which led to their faith. Now he speaks of their *learning*, primary at the hands of Epaphras. Paul gives Epaphras his stamp of approval, calling him a *beloved fellow servant*, a *faithful minister of Christ*, and one who has given a good report of "*your love in the Spirit.*"

There are two arms to any healthy church or missions movement. Evangelism and Discipleship.

You can preach the gospel on a street corner all day, where people hear and believe. But without any plan for continued growth—or what Paul calls "being rooted and built up"—you have a shallow faith that will not stand the tests of time.

You can also have world class Sunday School, training union, men's and women's ministries. But if you are not sharing the gospel so that people can hear and believe, the church will eventually close its doors because eventually we will all die or move away and there will be no one coming behind us.

Paul says you have heard and you are learning. This is what we call *sanctification*—growing in holiness. We will see next week in Paul's prayer that he prays for increased knowledge, increased strength, and increased thankfulness. In chapter three he tells us to put off the deeds of the self, of the flesh, of our sinful nature, and to put on deeds of love, and of heaven, and of holiness.

In 2 Peter 1, Peter gives a list of qualities to add to our faith. And then he says in verse 8,

“For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul ends by mentioning their “love in the Spirit.”

Love is the first item in the list of the Fruit of the Spirit. Apparently the love of the Colossians was exceptional in the early church, because Paul has mentioned it twice here in these opening lines.

Because of their faith in Jesus, and just like all believers, they are filled with the Holy Spirit—to give them wisdom and strength, and to remind them of the hope they have in heaven. And also to stir up their affections for one and all.

And, by the way, if we connect this back to my earlier comments about Gnosticism, their spiritual reality has impacted how they live in the physical world.

Paul has heard of their faith. He has most definitely heard about their love. And the hope that they have in heaven. And he is thankful for it. Even when we disagree, do we rejoice in the salvation of another? Even if we don't know them, do we get excited when people in other parts of the world hear the gospel and the church flourishes? Do we pray about these things often?

Does it excite us when we see people growing in their faith? Do we seek to grow in our own faith?

Which brings the question back around: What have people heard about us?

Our goal should not be to impress other people.

- Our goal should be to grow in our faith and share it with others.
- To love others with the same love that God in Christ has shown us.
- And to live in the midst of all circumstances with the hope of heaven.

Have you placed your faith in Jesus?

The great missionary, John Paton, when translating the Bible for the people in the Outer Hebrides, was searching for a way to translate the word “believe.” He finally found the right word, which meant “lean your whole weight upon.”

What do you lean your whole weight upon? If it’s not Jesus, it won’t save you.