

Sermon Series: *The Book of Colossians*



Giving Thanks to the Father

Colossians 1:1-14 (ESV)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as

to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Why Preach Through Colossians

Today we begin a sermon series on Paul's letter to the Colossians, which will take us through the end of the summer. The plan is to finish the letter on September 7, that's roughly two and a half weeks per chapter. There are several reasons why I believe it is right for us to spend the summer in this letter.

1. **It is good to preach through whole books of the Bible.** We desire to preach the whole counsel of God, meaning we intend for you to be exposed to the entirety of letters as they were intended to be read. Most of the New Testament (NT) books are simply letters that were intended to be read to the entire gathered church (1 Tim 4:13).
2. **It's part of a balanced biblical diet.** We want to spend time in both the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament. So for the summer we'll be in the NT and in the fall we have plans to return to a book in the OT.
3. **It's a letter that I've never preached through** since coming to Hope. It's a letter that we have not previously studied together before.
4. **It's short enough to allow us to complete it over the summer.** It nicely fits into the timeframe that we have for the summer. We'll spend now through September 7 in this letter.
5. **It is intensely focused on the person of Jesus.** Paul zeros in on who Jesus is and it will be good for us to do the same, especially given our culture's tendency to focus on everything except Jesus. The ESV Study Bible says this letter is "one of the most thoroughly Christ-centered books in the Bible" (p. 2291).
6. **It contains warnings against embracing false teaching.** This is a reality of the world that never diminishes—there are always false doctrines and twisted teachings wafting through our days and we need to be firmly grounded in the truth so that we will not be swayed in the presence of half-truths.
7. **We elders prayed about this and we were all agreed it would be good for us.** We sought the opinion of the Lord and we were all agreed that this letter would be good for us during these days.

These are the reasons why we will spend time in Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Introduction (1:1-2)

Colossians 1:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Author

The opening words of this letter immediately clarifies a couple of questions. First, we are told who the author is and who the intended audience is. In characteristic fashion, Paul immediately identifies himself as the author. Unlike the way we write, in typical style of the day, Paul opens the letter by stating who he is, rather than waiting until the end as is the case with letters written today. Paul also points out that **Timothy our brother**, is with him. Perhaps they discussed what to write or perhaps Timothy served as an amanuensis (i.e. secretary) by helping to write the letter. Regardless, Timothy is with Paul in the writing of this letter.

Date

In the letter Paul explains that he is writing during a time of personal suffering and imprisonment. In chapter 4 he mentions that he is in prison (4:3), he names Aristarchus as his “fellow prisoner” (4:10), and in his final request for prayer he says, “Remember my chains” (4:18). This is most likely his Roman imprisonment and thus helps us date the letter to around A.D. 62, being written from Rome.

Audience

Paul is writing to the **faithful brothers at Colossae**. Paul is writing to the followers of Jesus who lived in the city of Colossae. The term ‘brothers’ (*adelphos*) refers to all siblings within a family and so includes both men and women.

Colossae: The City

Colossae was a small city located on the Lycus river in the Roman province of Asia Minor, in what is today central Turkey. The nearest neighboring cities were Laodicea (about 10 miles away) and Heirapolis (about 13 miles away).¹ The region’s lush valleys and fertile plains provided ample space for herding sheep and growing figs and olives.

Because of the abundance of sheep, the city became well known for its production of a dark red wool which it made from a dye that came from the cyclamen flower.



¹ Curtis Vaughan, “Colossians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 163.

The city suffered under two earthquakes, the first in A.D. 17 and the second in A.D. 60. Rebuilding took place after both, but it appears that the second earthquake marked the beginning of a gradual decline from which the city never fully recovered its former prominence. It appears that by about A.D. 400 the city was abandoned and its ruins lay untouched to this very day. The site of the city was discovered in 1835.²

The Church

We know from several hints in the letter and particularly in 2:1 that Paul himself did not personally establish the church in Colossae and that he himself had never personally visited them. Paul tells us in 1:7 that a man named **Epaphras** was the person who first preached the gospel to the Colossians and evidently it was through the work of God in his life and ministry that new church was founded (1:4, 7-9).

Evidently Epaphras heard the gospel and believed during Paul's three year ministry in Ephesus (A.D. 52-55), which was about 100 miles away, and then returned to his hometown of Colossae (4:12) and shared the good news of the gospel. Many of his fellow citizens believed and received Christ.³

Paul, An Apostle

Since Paul did not establish this church and had never visited them, in the letter he described himself as "**an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.**" When we first meet people we often use terms which help people understand who we are and what we do. These believers did not personally know Paul. No doubt Epaphras had told them about Paul, but nevertheless Paul needed to explain to them who he was and what he has been called by God to do.

Paul calls himself an 'apostle.' The word (ἀπόστολος) means "one who is sent," or "a special messenger."⁴ Paul makes it clear that he had been sent **by the will of God.** In the NT the term 'apostle' is "generally restricted to the immediate followers of Jesus Christ, but is also extended, as in the case of Paul, to other early Christians active in proclaiming the message of the gospel."⁵ In this sense, there are no longer any apostles alive today.

Being an apostle in the NT meant that you had been sent out by Jesus to proclaim the good news of the gospel. What was special about Paul's calling was that Jesus personally and particularly sent him as a *messenger to the Gentiles.* Paul was an apostle—a special

² Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), xxvi.

³ *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), Introduction to Colossians, p.2289.

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 541.

⁵ *Ibid.*

messenger—to the Gentiles **by the will of God** and not by his own choosing. Paul’s mission and ministry had been instituted by God’s will and not merely by Paul’s own decision.

Titles Can Be Helpful or Destructive

Titles can be helpful or destructive. They can be destructive when they become a means of swelling our pride or causing us to trust in our own self-sufficiency, or when we use them as an excuse for us not to obediently do what God himself has commanded us to do. However, they can be helpful when they describe what ones does.

Jesus warned against the use of titles. Jesus offered some incredibly pointed words to the scribes and Pharisees on this topic. He noted how they loved to be highly esteemed in the eyes of people and the use of titles was one of the means by which this improper honor was expressed. The Pharisees loved...

Matthew 23:7-12 (ESV)

⁷ greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Last Sunday I shared with you a report from our recent elders’ retreat and I mentioned several changes that we hope to implement over the next ministry year. I promised to explain some of these in more detail over the coming weeks. On Friday I posted a list of those items on The City. If you are not on The City and you think of Hope as your home church, then you should sign up through The City tab on the website. One change I mentioned was that Iain and I would begin using the title ‘pastor.’ This deserves a bit more explanation. This is a change that all of us as elders agreed to.

The primary motivation behind this change is to more easily explain what Iain and I do to those *outside* the church. It was not primarily for you who are *inside* the church. The reality is that when I describe myself as ‘Teaching Elder’ almost no one understands what that means? We live in a post-Christian era and, according to research from Gallop, New England is the “least churching region of the U.S.”⁶

People have no idea what an elder is or does, but it does seem that many people do have an idea of what a pastor is and does. Pastor is a term which is widely used throughout this country to refer to those who are employed full-time by a church. In many people’s minds, the term ‘elder’ either means someone who is really old or, ironically, it refers to young men dressed in

⁶ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153479/Mississippi-Religious-State.aspx?version=print>.

white shirts and black ties who travel together in pairs moving door to door throughout the neighborhood.

We have not chosen to do this as a means of some kind of special honoring of me and Iain. Neither of us want you start calling us “pastor Todd” or “pastor Iain.” Jesus is clear. *“Call no one Father or Teacher.”* Jesus is clearly saying avoid titles. The term ‘pastor’ (ποιμήν *poimēn*) simply means ‘shepherd’—one who is responsible for the care and guidance of a Christian congregation.⁷ Nothing about our organizational structure has changed because we are now using the term ‘pastor.’ ‘Pastor’ simply provides a cultural description of our role. You need not call me pastor Todd any more than you need call Dave Chamberlain “Lawyer Dave,” or Michael Bradford “Engineer Michael.”

You should think of the term as synonymous with elder, or better yet, minister. The only difference is that the term ‘pastor,’ in our culture today, more easily communicates that Iain and I earn our living by being employed by the church. David and Michael do not. This church is an elder-led church. It always has been and it always will be. The term ‘elder’ means overseer and there are a group of four men who oversee and lead this church. We are not a congregational church. We are an elder-led church.

We are currently four elders, two of whom are employed full-time by the church and two of whom are not. Those employed by the church do not possess any greater authority because they are employed by the church and those who are not employed do not possess any lesser authority because they are not. All elders of this church carry equally the responsibility of oversight and leadership, while that oversight and leadership may be expressed in very different roles—me in preaching and teaching, Iain in community life, and Dave in operations and Michael in hospitality.

So use the term pastor when communicating the role of those of us who are employed by the church, but don’t use the term improperly as though some elders are more important than others, because we’re not. You should think of the four of us as four brothers whom the Lord has invited and you, the members, have affirmed, to oversee the ministry and direction of this body of believers. The use of the term ‘pastor’ is simply a cultural accommodation that hopefully will make it simpler for those outside the church to understand that, even though we are an elder-led church (which will probably require explanation), there are some of us elders who are employed by the church and some who are not. That’s all we mean by that title.

Prayers of Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

After explaining who he is and stating to whom he is writing, Paul then moves on to letting these believers know that he is thankful for them and that he has been praying for them and that he continues to pray for them.

⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 541.

Colossians 1:3-8 (ESV)

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Notice that Paul says “we.” By the “we” Paul at least means himself, Timothy, Epaphras, Tychicus, Onesimus, and Aristarchus (cf. 4:7 ff.) Even though Paul and Aristarchus are imprisoned, he is still allowed visitors and when they are all together, they pray together. And when they pray, they prayed for the believers at Colossae. Furthermore, Paul explains that every time they pray for them, they **thank God** for them. They thank God for their **faith in Christ** and for their **love of the saints**. Paul was blessed by all that he heard about the conduct of the Colossian believers. Paul could know that their faith was real because of their loving actions for all the saints.

Optional: Moment of Application

I wonder. If the person who led you to faith in Jesus, were to receive a report on your faith and your conduct towards other believers—your own brothers and sisters in the Lord—would he or she have cause of thanksgiving and rejoicing? Would he or she be happy with what they heard? Or would they be saddened?

The Life-Changing Power of the Gospel (1:5)

Paul notes that it is the power of the gospel that has made the difference in the lives of these believers. The gospel is not merely some admirable system of morality or some new code of conduct. The gospel is the powerful working of God that genuinely transforms lives. Paul says **this gospel is the word of truth** (1:5). This gospel is not mere story or myth. It is the truth, the gospel truth, the very truth of God!

The gospel is so powerful that wherever it goes in the world, **it is bearing fruit and growing** (1:6), **just like it was doing among them**. The gospel of Jesus makes a visible difference in peoples’ lives wherever it is received and embraced. Whatever culture, whether Jew or Greek, the gospel makes a difference. It bears fruit and grows.

Hope (1:5) & Grace (1:6)

The gospel has brought them hope which they did not have before. The hope is that God is a God of grace. This is grace displayed in the life of Jesus is what distinguished the God of Israel from all other gods, indeed from all other religions. Almost all religions require man to make

his way to God, while God through Jesus has made his way to man. The life and resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that God first offers grace to man before man can offer anything to God. The amazing grace of God in Christ is what all believers need to understand in order to have a firm faith in God. This is what Epaphras had made known to them (1:7).

Love & the Holy Spirit (1:8)

Epaphras had also communicated to Paul the Colossians' love for him. Evidently the Colossians had expressed their love for Paul, probably for his efforts in preaching the gospel which had then, through Epaphras (1:7) come to them and blessed and changed their lives. They loved him for being such a willing messenger of such good news. This love they had for him was brought about because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Prayers of Growth (1:9-14)

Paul then, once again, returns to the notion of prayer for the Colossians. But this time he moves on to different prayers.

Colossians 1:9-14 (ESV)

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He prays that God would **fill them the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding** (v.9). God does not want his children confused about what his will for them is. And so what follows, in the chapters to come, will be Paul explaining and answering this very question how does God expect his children to live in this world. If you want to know God's will for your life, then read the remaining chapters and you will learn many clear, specific instructions on exactly what God's will is for how you are to live your life.

Why is knowing God's will for your life needed? Paul answers this in verse 10.

Colossians 1:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Knowing God's will for your life allows you to live your life in such a way that is **fully pleasing** to him, which means that your life is **consistently fruitful** in **every good work**. Does this describe your life? Fully pleasing to God and consistently fruitful? How many of us truly yearn to live a life that is fully pleasing to God and consistently fruitful in every good work? This kind of living is possible. This is exactly that for which Paul is praying.

One of the ways this happens is by **increasing in the knowledge of God**. In other words, the more you know about God and how he operates in the lives of his people, the more easily it is to live a life that is pleasing to him and that is fruitful. Paul then lists six things you should know about God, which are also six reasons to praise him by giving him thanks.

Six Things to Know About God & Six Reasons to Praise Him by Giving Thanks

1. **God has the power to strengthen you** (1:11). You need to know that when you are out of strength, that God is able to supply you with strength that is beyond your ability to supply for yourself. Don't wait until you're at the end of your strength, start now to cultivate a daily habit of depending upon the strength of the Lord. Start your day with a prayer for him to give you strength to make it through each day according to his strength so that you will live in a way that is fully pleasing to him and consistently fruitful in every good work you do while at work.
2. **God has the power to give you endurance** (1:11). The ability to continue believing, to endure in faith, comes from God, not white-knuckled will-power. Spiritual endurance comes from God not your own determination. If your faith is weak, then ask him to cause you to continue to keep believing. Don't rely on yourself. Rely on him to give you endurance.
3. **God has the power to cause you to be patient with joy** (1:11). Patience is probably something that for many of us is in short supply. People get on your nerves. And yet God is able to cause you, not only to be patient, but to *be patient with joy!* Do you know what the definition of patient is? It is "to be able to accept or tolerate, delays, problems, or suffering without become anxious or annoyed." And Paul says God can make you patient, not merely without being anxious or annoyed, but with **joy!** This is amazing.
4. **God himself is the one who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints** (1:12). No one is worthy of all of the heavenly riches in himself or herself. God himself has made us worthy to receive them. We did not qualify ourselves to receive his blessings, he qualified us! He is the one who has qualified us to receive the inheritance of the saints. This is the activity of God in our salvation, not our own activity.
5. **God has delivered you from the domain of darkness and transferred you into the kingdom of his beloved Son** (1:13). God has done something objective outside ourselves when he worked our salvation. Salvation is much more than merely a personal decision. It involves a personal decision, but it is so much more than merely a

personal decision. When a person puts his or her faith in Jesus and God gives that person his own Holy Spirit, he then transfers that person from one spiritual location to another. He moves that person out of the *domain of darkness* and *transfers that person into the kingdom of his Son*. This is an object fact regarding your salvation. The citizenship of God's children is no longer the dominion of darkness. The citizenship of the child of God is now in the kingdom of light. This is an objective truth that no feeling would communicate conclusively to us. Paul reveals this to us so that we might know what the truth is about the reality of the residence of the believer.

6. **In Jesus, the Son, we have redemption, which is the forgiveness of sins** (1:14). Finally, Paul wants the Colossians to remember that they have been redeemed, which means all their sins have been forgiven. May this truth never grow old to us. May we never cease to be amazed that God would be so good to us as to redeem us by forgiving us of all our sins.

Conclusion

As Paul begins his letter to the Colossians, he simply has so much to be thankful for. He is thankful for new believers in Colossae. He thanks God the Father for their faith, their love for one another and for him, for their fruitfulness and their hope; for Epaphras and his ministry in taking the gospel to them in the first place; for the life-changing power of the gospel of grace, and for the objective work of God in effecting their salvation.

These first 14 verses are essentially one long prayer of thanksgiving. What do you have to be thankful to God for this morning? For what can you praise him?

Has the gospel changed your life? Does it continue to grow and bear fruit? Is your life fully pleasing to God? Are you consistently bearing fruit in every good work?

Are you depending upon him for your strength?

Are you growing in him and increasing in spiritual wisdom and insight?

Are you walking in a manner worthy of the Lord?

Are you patient with joy?

Are you giving him thanks for qualifying you to share in the inheritance of the saints?

Are you giving him thanks for transferring you out of the domain of darkness and into the kingdom of his beloved Son?

Are you thankful to him for redeeming you and forgiving you of all your sins? If not, then thank him right now. Praise him right now.

If you have not yet been transferred in to his kingdom, then ask him to do that right now.

If you have not yet been redeemed and had your sins forgiven, then ask him to do those things right now.

If you would like someone to pray with you, then come and members of the prayer team will pray with you.