

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians
(2) Paul's Thanksgiving Prayer (Col. 1:3-8)

Let us read Colossians 1:3 through 8 as it is translated for us in the English Standard Version (ESV).

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

Introduction:

Paul wrote this letter from his prison cell in Rome, some time between AD 60 and 62 after He had arrived in Rome after a long Mediterranean voyage under guard (see Acts 27 & 28). Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and held in jail for two years in Caesarea, the coastal town of Palestine. But he used his right of appeal as a free Roman citizen to be tried by Caesar in Rome. It was probably from “in his own hired house” (cf. Acts 28:30), that he wrote this epistle, or perhaps it was while held in a cell in the Mamertine Prison¹, in the heart of the city of Rome. Paul wrote several of his “prison” letters that are contained in the New Testament. This epistle to the church at Colossians was one of them. Paul had never visited this church at Colossae, although he had known of it through its founder, Epaphras, whom Paul knew and trusted as a faithful minister of Jesus Christ.

Paul originally wrote his letters in Greek, the most commonly used written language of the Roman world of the first century. Paul had a style of writing in which he would form long sentences which contained many subordinate clauses and phrases. The passage before us is one of those long sentences. All of Colossians 1:3 through 8 is one sentence in the Greek text of this epistle. But if you examine these verses in the English Standard Version (ESV) that we read, you will discern three sentences.² The New International Version (NIV) also set forth these verses in three sentences, but its sentences are divided differently from those of the ESV.³ Dividing up the one long sentence into three smaller sentences makes these verses easier to comprehend by most English readers. But in making it easier to understand, these translations do sacrifice some of the literal rendering of the original Greek text. Actually the King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) both retain the one sentence structure of the original Greek letter of Paul. In our study of Colossians we will use the ESV text, but my comments may tend to reflect the grammar and syntax of the Greek text.

This paragraph of verses 3 through 8 contains the theme of the thanksgiving prayer of the Apostle Paul. The first words of Paul to this church, after his initial greeting, were his declaration that He was always offering thanksgiving to God for having brought them salvation. Paul wrote,

¹ Paul probably was incarcerated on two occasions in Rome. It is thought that he was released from prison after the two years described in Acts 28, in which he dwelled under “house arrest” in “his own rented house” (Acts 28:30). But then he was arrested several years later and is believed to have been in the Mamertine prison in Rome until he was executed. See a representation of the domed-ceiling cell that exists in ancient Rome today, believed by tradition to be the cell in which Paul was imprisoned.

² The ESV translation of Col. 1:3-8 includes 3 sentences divided in this way: (1) vs. 3-5a, (2) vs. 5b-7a, and (3) vs. 7b-8.

³ The NIV translation of Col. 1:3-8 includes 3 sentences, but divided in this way: (1) vs. 3-6a, (2) v. 6b, (3) vs. 7-8.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven (vs. 3-5).

First we read that Paul was always thanking God. But Paul becomes specific in saying that his prayer was directed to God the Father. Paul wrote, “***We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...***” When we pray, we generally direct our pray to God the Father. However, it is biblical, or lawful, that we address any one of the three persons in prayer. When we pray, we pray to our One God, who is the Triune God.

We read sometimes in the Scriptures that ***the Lord Jesus is addressed directly in prayer***. This was the common practice of Christians. We see this, for example, when we read in Acts 9 of the Lord Jesus appearing to Ananias in order to send him to restore sight to the newly converted Paul. We read beginning in Acts 9:10ff this account:

¹⁰Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.”

And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”

¹¹So the Lord said to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. ¹²And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”

¹³Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who ***call on Your name***.” (Acts 9:10-14)

Here, to “call on Your name” means that they pray to the Lord Jesus. The Christians were known as ones who pray unto the Lord Jesus.

We read of specific instances in which Christians prayed to the Lord Jesus. When Stephen was being stoned, just before he died he prayed to Christ Jesus.

⁵⁹And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, “***Lord Jesus, receive my spirit***.” ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “***Lord, do not charge them with this sin***.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59f)

Stephen was praying to God, even the Lord Jesus Christ.

John the apostle prayed to the Lord Jesus in his last words of the Revelation, even the last words of the Holy Bible. John wrote,

¹⁸For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; ¹⁹and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

²⁰He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.”

Amen. ***Even so, come, Lord Jesus!***

²¹The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen. (Rev. 22:18-21)

John prayed to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But Christians also pray to the Holy Spirit. They pray for the grace that is bestowed by or through the Holy Spirit. It is proper to pray for His power, for wisdom, for peace, for any and all gifts of grace that the Holy Spirit imparts and manifests to the people of God. But most often, Christians address their prayer to

God the Father, as Paul said that he did here in Colossians 1:3, “*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...*”⁴

The Father is commonly prayed to singly and directly. Peter wrote, “*And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear*” (1 Pet. 1:17). In Ephesians 1 we read Paul’s words,

¹⁵Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: ¹⁷that *the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory*, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him,

And so, we most commonly pray by addressing primarily God the Father. And our Lord Jesus specifically directed us to pray in this way. He said, “In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name” (Matt. 6:9).

Now we read that Paul thanked God for the salvation of these ones in the church at Colossae, because Paul understood that His sovereign God had bestowed His saving grace upon the people of this church. They were Christians, but they were only Christians because God had purposed to be merciful and gracious to them. God had manifested His sovereign, saving grace upon them. And so, Paul thanked God for having done so. We could even say that Paul was “Calvinistic” or “reformed” in his understanding of the sovereign grace of God that brings salvation to sinners. “Salvation is of the Lord” (cf. Jonah 2:9), so Paul thanked the Lord for their salvation. If Paul believed and taught as do Arminians, that salvation is the cooperative effort of both God and man, then Paul would not only be thanking God for their salvation, but he would be congratulating them for their part, their contribution to the matter. If the Arminian gospel were true, you could not give sole glory to God for the salvation of sinners. You would take some of His glory and confer it upon sinful man.

“Congratulations for your wise and sensible decision to be saved, for although God offered salvation to all, you were wise enough and good enough to choose Him of your own free will, whereas all others were not. They did not rise to your level of righteous and wise deliberation. You are to be commended, regarded highly for having brought yourself to salvation.”

One should be able to see immediately the terrible error and egregious affront to the glory of God by believing such a way of salvation. Paul thanked God alone for their salvation for God alone was responsible for imparting to them their salvation.

Notice that this expression of thanksgiving to God was not a one-time act of Paul on their behalf. Paul wrote that he was “always thanking God” for Him having purposed and acted to save them from their sins. Paul was always thanking God in this way. He wrote something similar to the Christians in the church at Philippi. In **Philippians 1:3-7** we read these words:

³*I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,* ⁴*always in every prayer of mine* making request for you all with joy, ⁵for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of

⁴ There are several textual variants of verse 3 among the older Greek manuscripts that are available to us. Some read, “God, Father of our Lord Jesus.” Others read, God *the* Father of our Lord Jesus.” Others read, “God *and* Father of our Lord Jesus.” The editors of the Greek New Testament prefer the first reading, but do so with some doubt, rating their preference as “D”, [Aland, Kurt, et. al., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (United Bible Studies, 1966, 1968, 1975), p. 692]. One can see why a scribe at some time in the past, thinking that he was preserving the deity of the Lord Jesus, would intentionally remove the conjunction, “and”, in the one reading, because he did not think it right to set forth God the Father as “the God of the Lord Jesus.” But this idea is used elsewhere by Paul and should not be regarded as diminishing or denying the deity of Jesus Christ (cf. Eph. 1:17).

Jesus Christ; ⁷just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace.

Paul was always thanking God whenever he thought of the Christians he knew. This should be a practice that every Christian should incorporate in his thinking and express in his praying. When we hear or think of a Christian or church containing Christians, we should offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for having brought them to know Him through faith in Jesus Christ. And it would most certainly be a good practice on the part of each of us who know the Lord, when someone inquires of us about our faith, that we express our thanksgiving before God for having saved us. If someone asks if you are a Christian, do not respond by saying something like, “Yes, I came to faith in Jesus Christ when I heard the gospel.” Rather, respond with something like Paul would have done: “Yes, and I thank God for His mercy and kindness that He bestowed upon me when He called me unto Jesus Christ by His grace.” Let us thank God and give God the glory whenever the opportunity presents itself to us.

But actually when Paul prayed for these Christians, his thanksgiving was only one aspect of his prayer for them. Paul wrote, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *when we pray for you.*” Later in chapter one, actually beginning with verse 9, Paul declared that the content of his prayer for them. He prayed that their love would increase. But here he wanted to express to them that He thanked God for them, no doubt suggesting to them that they, too, should give thanks to God for having brought them salvation through Jesus Christ.

Paul then declared how long he had been praying for these Christians. He wrote that he had done so, “*since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.*” In other words, when Paul had learned that they had become Christians, he had begun to pray for them and had continued to pray for them.

Take note of this: Christians need to have prayer offered to God the Father on their behalf. We do not always follow his example. Often times we pray most for those who are not Christians, praying that God would bring them salvation. This is good that we do so. But all too often, upon people becoming Christians, the prayer on their behalf is not offered as fervently or frequently. Paul declared that it was when he had learned that they were Christians that He began to pray and had continued to pray on their behalf.

Paul identified two evidences that had convinced him that these people had truly been converted to Jesus Christ. Again, Paul wrote to them that he had prayed for them since he had heard (1) “*of your faith in Christ Jesus*”, and (2) “*of the love that you have for all the saints.*” Both are essential evidences of the true grace of God that has brought salvation to His people.

First, and most certainly, salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. We must trust Him, He who alone could do for us that we could not do for ourselves. He was born without the guilt of Adam’s original sin, and he lived a life that God demands of each of us, even a life of obedience to all of God’s laws. And then He died on behalf of His people, dying in their place, as a substitute for them, thereby paying the penalty they owed to God’s justice. True saving faith involves an abandoning of confidence in oneself and embracing wholly, trusting fully in Jesus Christ alone as Lord and Savior.

But true faith is not always present when someone claims to have faith in Jesus Christ. ***For secondly, salvation is evident when there exists true love for other Christians because they are Christians.*** The one who truly believes in Jesus Christ will also have this second evidence of conversion manifest in his life. Every true Christian possesses love “for all the saints”; that is, when he meets or hears of another Christian, his/her heart resonates with that Christian. They share a common understanding of truth. They both have interests and desires that are the same. They both love the Lord Jesus and have full confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They both see one another as brethren in the Lord. They are of the same spiritual family and they have the same basis of fellowship one with another. They both desire that Jesus Christ be exalted and served with all their heart and strength.

This love for the saints, that is, love for true Christians, is a love that God creates and imparts to every true child of God. Paul had declared to the church at Thessalonica: “But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, *for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another*” (1 Thess. 4:9).

And some decades after Paul wrote these words, the apostle John declared that loving other Christians is one of the distinguishing marks of being a true Christian. We read these verses:

1 John 3:10. “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.”

1 John 3:14. “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.”

1 John 4:7. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

1 John 4:12. “No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.”

1 John 4:20. “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”

1 John 4:21. “And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.”

The apostle declared in **verse 5** the basis or main reason of his prayer for them.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since 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.***

Here we see Paul describing their salvation that was to be received in the future, even when they depart from this world to be with Jesus Christ. Their salvation was secure for them in heaven. It was an object of their **hope**. They were recipients of God’s promise that He would save them from their sin both when they were raised from the dead and when they stood before Jesus Christ on the Day of Judgment. Their full salvation was yet future to their experience, but it was certain. Therefore, they possessed a hope that could not be shaken.

By definition, hope must be based on something not yet realized. Paul described the nature of hope in **Romans 8:24f**,

²⁴For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

Now we have pointed out in the past that this is an important matter and a somewhat neglected matter among present day evangelicals. In these days salvation is presented almost exclusively as something that is a **present possession**. We are almost always told or it is almost always assumed that salvation was received in **full** when we first believed. Now, it is true that we came into **certain possession** of salvation when we first believed. And it is certainly true that we were **fully justified** before God--placed into a right standing before God due to our forgiveness of sins and due to the righteousness of Christ being credited to us. But it does not do justice to the whole of Scripture to say that we received salvation **in full**. Coming to faith sets us on a course on which we journey to receive what has been promised. **John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress** illustrates this way of salvation quite clearly. The certainty of all of God’s children arriving at their destination is not in question. God will keep them by His power through faith. Their entrance and share in the glory of Christ is certain; this is why we can have hope.

The Apostle Peter wrote of our salvation being an inheritance reserved in heaven for us. We read this recently, but here it is again. In 1 Peter 1 we read these words:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again *to a living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, *to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you*,⁵ who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet. 1:3-5)

If we only speak in terms of salvation as a present possession, there will be no need perceived for running the race, enduring through trials, persevering in faith unto the end. Take away the future aspect of salvation from a Christian's thinking and you take away *a prime motive* for holy living and you deny him *the source of strength* he/she needs to endure trials. He is left without desire to strive to be holy before the Lord. How is this? If believers see that they have salvation in its completeness now, they remove any place or role of *hope*. The grace of hope is critical for Christians if they are to endure through difficult trials between the time they first believe and the time when they experience their full salvation at the end of their pilgrimage of faith unto their heavenly home of Zion.

Two apostles made this point for us—both **Paul** and **John**. First, let us consider Paul's more full depiction of the nature and role of hope in **Romans 8:18-25**.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; ²¹because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. ²³Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. ²⁴*For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?* ²⁵*But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.*

Here Paul first personifies the creation itself as having suffered the ill effects of mankind's fall into sin. The creation is waiting the day when it will be delivered from its corruption. This expectation of the creation is what Paul describes as *the creation's hope* in verse 20. Similarly, we too, wait the day when we will experience life in its fullness, which will come to us at the resurrection of our bodies (v. 23). Just as God placed the creation in this hope of its deliverance, so God has saved us into this same condition; *Christians, too, have a certain hope* (v.24). We do not presently have what has been promised to us. If we currently possessed all that salvation is, if we have already realized ("seen") all that we will ever receive, then where is the place for hope? But on the other hand, if we have not received all that God has promised, but have only some of what God has promised ("the first-fruits of the Spirit") then we live in such a manner as to long for expect it, work toward its realization (a work of faith), and endure hardship until the promises are fully realized. We will have a motivation to persevere. *"We eagerly wait for it (our salvation) with perseverance."*

Now, whereas Paul wrote of the *motivating* power of hope in the above passage, **John** wrote of the *purifying* power of hope in **1 John 3:1-3**:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. ²Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. ³And *everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself*, just as He is pure.

John first exclaims with wonder and joy that believers should possess knowing that God has destined to call us His sons (v. 1). This means that we will be like Him in holiness, living before Him in love and devotion and obedience. Because we are destined to be so associated with our Father, the world will not

receive us (v. 2). The fallen world does not understand or love the Father. The fallen world will not understand or love the Father's children. But we have not yet fully realized our sonship. Oh yes, we have in a sense already been adopted, we were when we believed on Jesus. We are already called His children. But in another sense we have not entered into our full entitlement as sons, ones who have come to age and are ready to enjoy the full privileges and benefits of being His children (v. 3). This is the ground of our hope. Then John declares that *everyone who has this hope, purifies himself* as His Father is pure.

We see, therefore, that hope not only provides power to endure, it provides motivation to become pure. One of the problems that living in a secure, comfortable society brings to the believer is the tendency to be quite content with life as we currently have it. Because we suffer little, we do not long for the day that our suffering will come to an end. This is one reason that God has called us to suffer trials, but we have spoken of this at other times. Moreover, but because we do not fix our hope principally on what God has promised us at the resurrection, we lack motivation to purify ourselves. Parents, why is it that your children lack motivation to live godly? Why is it that so many professing believers seem to care little for holiness? One reason might be that they have little concern for eternity. They think little of the coming of Christ, His judgment, and the glories that He will bestow upon those who live for Him. They do not desire pre-eminently the things of Christ, but rather the things the world allures them. They want those things. They live in hope of the glory of the world—fun, fame, and fortune. They want the pleasure and the popularity that this world offers. They do not long to be clothed in holiness and to win approval of Christ. They would sooner clothe themselves in whatever will gain the approval of their friends. They do not live for the world to come, but they long for and live for all the things this present fallen and condemned world offers them. And the devil will be ever ready to give it to them if they will simply bow down and serve him (cf. Luke 4:5-7).

Let us return to our text of Colossians 1. Again, we read verses 3 through 5:

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of the *love* that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the *hope* laid up for you in heaven.

Now Paul elsewhere had written of the principle graces that God gives His people. He declared in 1 Corinthians 13:13, "And now abide *faith, hope, love*, these three; but the greatest of these is love." And here in Colossians 1:3 through 5 we have these three gifts of grace listed, but in different order: first faith, then love, and then hope. Here are the comments of **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) on these verses:

Faith, hope, and love, are the three principal graces in the Christian life, and proper matter of our prayer and thanksgiving. (1) He gives thanks for their faith in Christ Jesus, that they were brought to believe in him, and take upon them the profession of his religion, and venture their souls upon his undertaking. (2) For their love. Besides the general love which is due to all men, there is a particular love owing to the saints, or those who are of the Christian *brotherhood* (1 Pet. 2:7). We must love all the saints, bear an extensive kindness and good-will to good men, notwithstanding smaller points of difference, and many real weaknesses. Some understand it of their charity to the saints in necessity, which is one branch and evidence of Christian love. (3) For their hope: *The hope which is laid up for you in heaven* (v. 5). The happiness of heaven is called their hope, because it is the *thing hoped for, looking for the blessed hope* (Titus 2:13). What is laid out upon believers in this world is much; but what is laid up for them in heaven is much more. And we have reason to give thanks to God for the hope of heaven which good Christians have, or their well-grounded expectation of the future glory. Their faith in Christ, and love to the saints, had an eye to the *hope laid up for them in heaven*. The more we fix our hopes on the recompense of reward in the other world, the more free and liberal shall we be of our earthly treasure upon all occasions of doing good.⁵

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vo. 6 (Fleming H. Revell). p. 749.

We next read **verses 5b** through **7**:

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which 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, ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.

The message of our salvation is in the gospel, which is here described as “the word of truth.” The gospel is truth from God of who He is, of what He has done in history, and of what He intends to do in the future. It sets forth the Lord Jesus Christ as the basis of the believer’s salvation. It declares that faith must be placed in Him, even as we turn from sin so as to live for Him as He directs us through this most Holy Word that He has given us. This gospel had come to them at Colossae and it was through this gospel that they were brought to hear, believe, and commit themselves to live for Jesus Christ.

Now take note of the extent to which the gospel had gone. Again, **verse 6** reads, “*Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world.*”

Our Lord Jesus told His disciples in His Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24; Luke 21; Mark 13) that the fall of Jerusalem, which took place in AD 70, would take place when this event occurred:

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matt. 24:14)

Many argue on the basis of this verse that before the Lord’s second coming the gospel will be preached to all people groups. Some advocate that we should be concerned about missions and support them so as to bring about the second coming of Christ. They say that there are currently 6,000 distinct people groups with distinct languages who are scattered throughout the world. 6,000 of those people groups have not yet had the gospel proclaimed to them. It is argued that we Christians need to reach these 3,000 unreached peoples in order that the Lord may return, “After all, did not our Lord say, ‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come’?” But what our Lord was speaking about was not that every people group in every part of the world would need to hear the gospel before the end of the world would occur, but rather He was announcing that the gospel would spread widely into the Gentile world before the Jewish temple and the Jewish system would be effectively destroyed. And as far as Paul was concerned, this had taken place. The gospel had gone into all the world. In Colossians 1:6 he declared that the gospel, even “the word of the truth of the gospel” had gone out into “all the world, and is bringing forth fruit.” He declared this in AD 60-62 when he wrote this epistle. It was within 8 to 10 years after Paul had written this letter that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans.

Paul declared that the gospel was “*bearing fruit and increasing*” (1:6). This was a realization of what our Lord Jesus taught His disciples. He had spoken to them about “mysteries” of the kingdom of God, truths about the nature and course of the advancement of the kingdom in the world. In **Matthew 13: 31** and **32** He said to His disciples,

³¹Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, ³²which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

Here our Lord described the growth of the kingdom in the world.

He also gave this parable in **Matthew 13:33**: “Another parable He spoke to them: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.’ Here it speaks of the permeating nature of the kingdom as it goes into the world.

Again, Paul wrote that the gospel was “bearing fruit and increasing.” It is expressed in the passive voice. What Paul was implying was that God was causing the gospel to bear fruit and increase. Is there a

difference in the ideas of “bearing fruit” and “increasing”? If there is a difference, perhaps “bearing fruit” speaks of the effect of the gospel working within the lives of his people. The Gospel is bearing fruit. But the idea of the gospel “increasing” may be speaking of the outward expansion of the gospel geographically. It was going out into the entire world.

Let us next look at **Colossians 1:6b** through **7a**, which reads: ***“as it (the gospel) 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.”*** The gospel was not only bearing fruit and increasing in the world, it was doing so among the disciples in the church at Colossae. What was it that brought the blessing of the gospel to them? They first “heard” it, and then they “understood the grace of God in truth.” One must hear and understand the truth of the gospel in order for it to bear fruit and increase in the life of a church.

First, the gospel must be taught clearly so that people “hear” it. I frankly do not witness this taking place on a large scale. Even on Christian radio, and especially on Christian television, little of the actual gospel is being proclaimed. Other matters seem to take precedence in much of religious programming.

But not only must the gospel be heard, but the gospel of the grace of God in truth must be “understood.” When we first began our study, we spoke about the heresy that plagued the churches in this region of Asia Minor. The heresy had certain aspects that would be seen quite evidently in the Gnostic heresy of the second century. One of the principle teachings of the Gnostics is that if you acquired knowledge of the god that they advocated, you could thereby come into a relationship with that god and be blessed by him. The very word, gnostic, is the transliteration of the Greek word for “knowledge”—*gnosis*. The word that Paul used here in verse 6b, which is translated as “understand”, is a form of the Greek word, *ἐπιγνώσει*. It is a heightened form of the word, *γνώσεως*. Where the Gnostics offered and promised “knowledge” of their god, Paul described Christians as having “*full* knowledge” of the true grace of God through the gospel.

And then in verse 7 Paul mentions by name the one who had brought the gospel of the grace of God to these people. Paul wrote, ***“just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.”*** Paul associates Epaphras with himself as a “beloved fellow servant.”

Paul concluded this first paragraph by describing Epaphras in **verse 8**: ***“He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.”*** It is likely that this man had been converted to Christ through the gospel proclaimed to him by Paul. Paul had lived in Ephesus, 100 miles to the west of Colossae, for a period of two years. Epaphras was probably converted there and then returned to his home of Colossae. It was through his witness that the gospel had been bearing fruit and increasing” in this region, resulting in this local church of Jesus Christ.

May our Lord help us as a church to be a collective faithful “minister” of the gospel, as we attempt to use every means and opportunity before us to make this word of truth known. And let us pray to our God, who alone can cause it to bear fruit and increase wherever it is proclaimed.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given *us* everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work. (2 Thess. 2:16f)



The cell is underground, with the hole in the ceiling at ground level, which allowed entrance of air and light. This still exists in the heart of Rome (I had the privilege of standing in this cell on a trip to Rome, when we were living in Germany.)