



“Thank You, God”

[1:1-8]

Chris Bullard

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

“We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit” (1:1-8).

INTRODUCTION

Who is Jesus? That question is of supreme importance. We have put our hope and trust in Him. But who is He really?

The portraits of Jesus that hang in the galleries of this world are many. Each is the artist’s effort to portray whom he believes Jesus to be. But viewing the many portraits, people can see that the result is a bewildering hodgepodge of images. They only confuse those who are seeking the answer to the question, Who is Jesus?

What we believe about Jesus is critical. Human beings are the products of their beliefs. An

impoverished view of Jesus will ultimately lead to an impoverished way of life.

We need to know the real Jesus. A Jesus born of speculation or fashioned out of our convenience will not do. A Jesus of compromise, one watered down, stripped of power, debased of glory, cannot give one hope by which to live or a solid foundation upon which to establish his life.

So I ask: Who is Jesus? Who is this figure who transformed Peter, turned the life of Saul of Tarsus upside down, and revolutionized John’s future? Who is this Jesus who has laid claim to my life and sends me out into the world to represent Him daily?

Men answer that question in countless ways. Some say Jesus was a good teacher who gave men high standards by which to live. Others say He was the supreme example of goodness by which we ought to model our conduct. Some scholars doubt the existence of a historical person named Jesus; they think He was a figment of the imagination of the early church, a legend created to justify the church’s existence in the community. Others see Jesus as a martyr who demonstrated a deep commitment to a political cause.

Such confusion about the identity of Jesus is a sign of great unrest in our culture. It highlights that our society has lost its way and does not know what to believe, and that means a loss of hope in the hearts of men and women.

Tragically, many even in the church live in hopeless despair. Life rings hollow. The evi-

dence of it is all around us: failed marriages, a dependency on drugs, a damaging lifestyle, rebellious children, faltering relationships, shifting values. Hope is gone. The future is dreaded rather than anticipated.

The answer to such hopeless despair is to understand who Jesus really is. One book in the New Testament is devoted to helping us understand Jesus. That book is Colossians.

In this book Paul describes for us the majesty and the glory of Jesus Christ. He gives a portrait of the preeminence of Jesus that inspires hope in our spirits and evokes in our hearts confidence to face the challenges each day brings.

The church at Colossae was one of two New Testament churches to which Paul wrote a letter even though he had never visited the city. The other was the church at Rome. Colossae, an insignificant city, was tucked away in the Phrygian valley in the province of Asia Minor, the area we call Turkey today. It was about one hundred miles south and east of Ephesus. Near Colossae were two cities which were far more important cities in that time, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

The church was probably founded in Colossae during the time Paul lived in Ephesus, for Luke says that the gospel radiated from that city “so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). One of its members was Philemon, to whom Paul wrote a letter, a postcard really. A few years had passed since the founding of the church, and a garbled mixture of religious error, coming out of their pagan and Jewish backgrounds, was threatening to destroy the Colossians’ hope by destroying their view of the Son of God. Paul writes to this young church to renew their vision of Jesus: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father” (1:1, 2).

Shortly after the election of President George Bush, much attention was given to his use of handwritten notes. It seems that throughout his political career, George Bush has taken time to personally write notes of thanks to those who have helped him with the projects on which he was working. Those messages of encouragement motivate his workers to keep on keeping on, especially when their political opposition is strong.

Paul himself was just such an encourager. With the exception of the very passionate letters of Galatians and 2 Corinthians, all of Paul’s letters begin with a personal note of appreciation and thanksgiving for those to whom he is writing. To the Colossians he writes, “We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you” (1:3). Notice that while Paul is thankful *for* the Colossians, he is thankful *to* God. Paul knows where the glory belongs. The Colossian Christians once lived lives that were dead inside, empty, hollow, without hope. Now they were transformed people. That transformation came only because of the miracle of grace that God worked in their hearts.

THANKS TO GOD FOR THE FACT OF SALVATION (1:3-6)

Three things moved Paul to give God thanks when he prayed for this young church. First, Paul thanked God for the fact of their salvation:

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you. . . . (1:3-6a).

Notice the words “faith,” “love,” and “hope” in these verses. These three words are the hallmark of a genuine spirituality, and Paul uses this triad in many of his letters. In 1 Thessalonians he writes about their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.” He writes to the Corinthians saying, “But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Faith

When Paul heard about the folks in Colossae, he gave thanks to God for them because they were bearing these marks of an authentic spirituality. The first thing that moves him to thank God is their *faith in Jesus Christ*.

Their faith was in the person of Jesus. When Paul said that they had faith in Jesus, he meant more than mental assent to certain ideas about Him. Faith always includes the dimension of commitment that leads to devoted service. Faith incorporates a relationship with Jesus as well as knowledge about Him.

Is your faith in *Jesus*? It is easy to put trust in your parents' religion, in tradition, in your baptism, or in your church membership instead of in the person of Jesus. Where is *your* faith? That is a critical question. Where your faith is will influence how you act.

The Colossians had a strong, viable relationship with Jesus, and that truth thrilled Paul's heart.

Love

He also thanked God for their *love of all the brethren*. Love is the way we demonstrate our loyalty to Jesus. Faith in Jesus does not produce a solitary piety; rather, it expresses itself in a loving involvement in the lives of others who also believe in Jesus.

The key word in this phrase is "all." The Colossians loved *all* the brethren, not just a select few.

One characteristic of human nature is that we tend to pick our own kind. We constantly associate with people who have the same educational and socioeconomic conditions we do. We find it difficult to rub elbows with those who are noticeably different from us, much less love them. But that is what Christianity is all about. It takes Oriental and Occidental, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and binds them all together into a unique fellowship where they love and minister to one another. Paul was saying, "It just blesses my heart to hear that you have a love for *all* the saints."

Mark it down, if you only love *some* of the saints, then that is not Christian love. That is doing no more than you could manage without ever entering into a faith relationship with Jesus. If a congregation is simply a loose connection of cliques, that is not the church of Jesus Christ. His church is filled with people who love as Jesus loves. They have a love for all the saints.

Having love for all the saints means we love those whom we would normally not talk to. We love those who are not our social type. We love those we do not know how to relate to because they are so different from us.

Jesus once said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

When Paul heard about the way the Colossians had taken to loving all those who believed in Jesus, regardless of their social level or intellectual capacity, he just praised God and gave

thanks for what Jesus had been able to do in the hearts of these people who had entered into a dynamic relationship with God's Son.

Hope

Why did the Colossians have such faith in Jesus? Why did they love other believers so much? Paul says it was because they had found *renewed hope*: "Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, . . ." (1:5, 6a).

The gospel of Jesus is a gospel of hope, a hope that produces faith, and a faith that in turn produces love. Hope is the root; faith is the plant; love is the fruit. Any gospel preacher or teacher who does not give people renewed hope through the sermons or lessons is not preaching or teaching the word of truth.

Notice that Paul says this hope is stored up, not locked up! It is out of physical view but not out of spiritual reach. It is available now to every aching heart that desperately needs hope to keep on living.

What is this hope? Is it wishful thinking? As the search plane passed over the horizon, the survivors of the airline crash looked at each other with a sense of despondency. The actor who played the lead role in the television drama said to his companions, "All we can do now is hope." But this was not hope. Wishful thinking is not hope, since it is a blind optimism about the future that has no foundation.

In the Bible hope is a certainty, a reality which can be counted on. Specifically, hope is the good news that Jesus has taken care of our futures. We have a destiny of glory secured for us by our Savior and guaranteed by His resurrection. When a person knows that, he is lifted out of the despair that comes from the daily bruises of life. He has courage to go on, to face life, to live above the ordinary. He knows that the best is yet to come.

The Colossians had found renewed hope in the gospel. That hope led them to a faith commitment to Jesus and demonstrated itself through a love of the brethren. All this was evidence of their salvation and a source of great joy to Paul's heart.

THANKS TO GOD FOR THE FURTHERANCE OF THE GOSPEL (1:6)

Paul had cause to rejoice and give God thanks

not only for the fact of their salvation, but also for the furtherance of the gospel: “Which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth” (1:6).

Remember that when Paul wrote this letter only thirty years had passed since Jesus had died. Already in three decades the gospel had spread from Jerusalem to Rome. Already it had gone places Paul had not yet been able to get to. Paul was grateful to God that the Lord Jesus was moving all over the world to change people’s lives.

But it was not just individual lives being transformed that he had in mind. Paul said the gospel had been bearing fruit among them. As a community of Christians, the gospel had been at work to create the corporate life and love that God desires to exist among His people.

What was happening in Colossae was no local phenomenon. Paul wanted them to be assured that what had taken place in their community had happened everywhere the gospel had been proclaimed. It still takes place today where a group of people have a faith commitment to a relationship with Jesus.

Notice that Paul speaks of the gospel as “bearing fruit and increasing.” It is no static truth that we proclaim. The gospel is a living thing. The writer to the Hebrews can say, “The word of God is living and active. . . .” (Hebrews 4:12). When it gets into the heart of a man it bears fruit in his life.

The Good News that we are called to share is not just some system of ethics or code of behavior; it is a transforming power. It produces a harvest within an individual’s heart and then spreads to other lives, producing new converts. In Colossians 1 Paul thanked God for their spiritual growth and for the people who have been added to their spiritual community as they have reached out to others with the gospel message.

THANKS TO GOD FOR THE FELLOW SERVANT (1:7, 8)

Third, Paul was moved to thank God for his fellow servant Epaphras: “Just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit” (1:7, 8).

Epaphras was the one who planted the seed of the gospel in Colossae. We do not know much about him, but he was probably a Colossian himself (4:12). Evidently, on a trip to Ephesus he had heard Paul talk about Jesus and became a Christian.

In Ephesus, the Book of Acts says that Paul rented the lecture hall of Tyrannus. According to some biblical manuscripts, for five hours a day, six days a week, for two years Paul taught the Word of God to anyone who would listen.¹ Many were converted and returned to their homes in the provinces of Asia Minor to tell others what they had discovered in Jesus.

Among that number was Epaphras. He returned to his hometown of Colossae and started a home Bible study group. Since he had some friends in Laodicea, he started another Bible study group there and another in Hierapolis.

Epaphras simply retold to his friends the truth about Jesus: the meaning of His death, the power of His resurrection, and the glory of His exaltation at the hand of God to direct, correct, and protect His people. That stirred their hearts. Hope was revived, and a community of people was established that attracted yet others who wanted to learn what they had discovered.

This was all because one man was faithful to share with others what he had learned about Jesus. For that Paul gave thanks to God.

As you hear the Word of God taught on Sunday, you may wish you knew the Bible as well as the preacher or as your Sunday school teacher so that you could be of use to God. Do you not see that you are already of use to Jesus? You are out daily influencing others who have no hope, hearing their heartbreaking stories, meeting with them in offices and in cafés over a cup of coffee. You can go to the people you know just as Epaphras went to those he knew. You are the one who can plant the seed of the gospel, the gospel that gives hope to the hopeless.

CONCLUSION

The gospel is the story of Jesus. To speak convincingly to your friends and neighbors, you need to know who Jesus really is.

¹Frederick J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part 1, The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), 239.