



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Reasons to Give Thanks

Colossians 1.3-8

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Introduction

In several of Paul's letters, his prayer wish/statement of thanksgiving, typically a component of ancient letters,¹ sets the stage for the entire epistle. If you identify the big ideas in that statement, you will have identified the big ideas in the letter as a whole.²

Colossians 1.3-8 illustrate as Paul lays the foundation to respond to the challenges facing the disciples in Colossae.

The Big Picture

Colossians is devoted to emphasizing the preeminence of Jesus as the Lord and the Christ. Paul stresses the following big ideas.

- As the image of the invisible God (1.15; 3.10) and creator (1.16; 3.10), Christ is the object of the believer's faith (1.4; 2.5).
- As the firstborn from the dead (1.18), he is head of the church (1.18; 2.10, 19) and the one who reconciles all things (1.20, 22) by his cross (1.20; 2.14).
- He possesses the treasures of wisdom (2.3), being superior to others who claim to have and declare wisdom. He is also the model for any who seek it (1.9, 28; 2.23; 3.16; 4.5).

¹ Since Adolf Deissmann's (1865-1937) study of the ancient papyri, it has been understood that the New Testament letters were written employed the style commonly used in letters in the first-century Greco-Roman world, although not all components are found in every NT letter. The typical parts were (1) the name of the writer[s]; (2) the name of the recipient[s]; (3) greeting; (4) A prayer wish or statement of thanksgiving; (5) the letter body; and (6) a final greeting and farewell.

Exceptions include Galatians, 1 Timothy, and Titus, which omit the prayer wish/thanksgiving statement; James and 2 Peter, which omit the final greeting and farewell; and 1 John which has none of the formal letter elements and reads more like a tract, though it is obviously intended for a particular group of people. Hebrews omits parts 1-4 but includes 6.

The above is taken from the discussion of "The Nature of the Epistles" in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 56-59.

² Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon have more elaborate expressions of thanks. 1-2 Thessalonians and 2 Timothy have shorter thanksgiving statements. 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Timothy, and Titus do not have a prayer wish/thanksgiving statement.

In emphasizing these themes, Paul's aim was twofold.

- To counter and show the failings of the inferior things some had embraced (see 2.6-23; notice especially the word "therefore" in 2.6, 16, and the emphasis on Christ in vv. 6, 8, 17, 20).
- To encourage the Colossians to press on in following Christ, learning how to live as he had lived (see 2.6-7; note the word "therefore" in 3.1, 5, 12).

The letter's first main section, from 1.3 – 2.5, is an extended introduction that prepares the readers for the heart of the letter in 2.6 – 4.6.³

- In 1.3-8, he tells them he is praying for them and gives reasons for his petitions.
- In 1.9-23, he explains how and why he was praying for them: they were recipients of deliverance, according to God's plan (vv. 9-20); and they needed to appreciate their place in that plan (vv. 21-23).
- In 1.24 – 2.5, he explains the reason for his concern, based on what he had done for them as a minister committed to making known the word of God (1.23, 25).

Analyzing Paul's Prayer

Verse 3 reveals Paul's habit when he prayed: a regular expression of thanksgiving for them. Translations that place the word "always" closer to "prayer" than to "give thanks" better show Paul's thought (KJV, ASV, NKJV, NASB; see Wright, 50). As he prayed regularly, he included gratitude for the Colossians.

In verses 4-5, he specifies the reasons he was thankful for them, beginning with his customary threefold reference to faith, hope, and love (see Rom 5.1-5; 1 Cor 13.13; Gal 5.5-6; Eph 4.2-5; 1 Thess 1.3; 5.8).

Of interest is that in Colossians, the order is "faith-love-hope." The faith was "in Christ Jesus" (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, *en Christō Iēsou*) "the sphere in which faith operates rather than, as an English reader tends to assume, the object of faith" (Wright, 51). As we would expect, "love" translates ἀγάπη (*agapē*) and refers to the seeking of what was best "for all the saints," regardless of whether there was any natural affinity, kindly emotions, and so on.

The word "hope" (ἐλπίς; *elpis*) is the key to understanding the references to both faith and love. The faith was not just a commitment to something, and was certainly not blind trust, but was a commitment based on something that had really happened. The love was not a sentimental "getting along," but was likewise grounded in reality, the appropriate response to what had occurred. What Paul is saying is that believers are characterized by faith and love "that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven" (v. 5 NIV).

Verses 5b-6 explain the basis for their confidence. They could have hope because they had previously heard (προακούω; *proakouō*) about it "in the message of the truth, the gospel" (v 5 NET). In other words, the hope they had was derived from a message that had substantive content and evidence of productivity—it was "bearing fruit and increasing" (v. 6). It was based

³ See N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 48-49.

in something they could hear, understand, and learn—just as they had done. Paul’s goal was that they would continue basing their lives on that hope (see 2.6-7).

Thankful for a Reason

Paul’s emphasis on a hope based in real events would have been “quite new, and very attractive, for a pagan of the first century” (Wright, 52). That’s no less true now. Our world offers a pluralistic cafeteria of religious experiences urging acceptance based more on feelings, pragmatism, and how nice it makes people than on whether it is true. That can make more troubling the uncertainty behind the question a college-aged girl once asked in a church Bible class I was teaching. “When I pray, she said, “I wonder if anyone is really up there.”

One must wonder whether, in many churches today, questions like hers will be answered in such a way as to bring about assurance. When the reason given for faith is nothing more than “he lives within my heart” or something similar, our appeal is no different from other offerings in culture’s pluralistic cafeteria.

Paul was not opposed to good feelings, the workability of the faith, or its effect on manners and morals. But for him, these were *results* of accepting the truth, not the *basis* for believing it. So, we are not surprised to find that, as he often did (cf. Rom 1.1-7; 1 Cor 15.1-19), he reminded the Colossians that they had responded to a proclamation of real good news. As Wright comments,

Paul describes the effect of Epaphras’ preaching in Colosse in terms not of an emotional reaction, nor even of people ‘accepting Jesus into their hearts’, but of hearing truth and understanding it. The task of the apostolic herald is to announce truth: the word here translated ‘understood’ [ἐπέγνωτε, *epegnōte*, v. 6]⁴ indicates that the response sought is an intelligent thinking through and recognition of that truth. Paul was in no doubt about the Colossians’ state of heart, but he knew that Christian emotion must be undergirded with a clear-headed grasp of truth” (Wright, 54).

Conclusion

We must grasp this teaching at the experiential level. Otherwise, we will be heard to offer just one choice among many and will have little defense against charges that we are merely engaged in wishful thinking.

The truth is that we derive the power we need to resist the world’s adverse influences, make sense out of life’s travails, live like Christ, and thrill in worship and the faith generally when we are assured that *what* we believe is true, not because we have “something better felt than told.”

Therefore, let us be thankful for our faith, and our love for all the saints; but be thankful for a *reason*, “because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col. 1:5).

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⁴ From ἐπιγινώσκω; *epiginōskō*, “to acquire information, probably in a somewhat more exact or detailed form and perhaps with focus upon what is learned—‘to learn about, to find out about.’” (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2d, Accordance electronic ed., version 4.4. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.)