

Sunday, May 22, 2022

Colossians 1:1-8 (The Gospel Produces)

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Intro

Colossians is the story of gospel advance, contrary messages, and applying the gospel to daily life. In the church. In the home. In the community.

A simple message delivered by one man radically alters the lives of a group of people and unites them in loving community. They experience newness of life in the Spirit, but contrary voices begin to compete with the one true gospel.

The one who delivered the message needs help. What do I do with these contrary voices? So he takes a trip to visit an imprisoned man who can help. Hearing the situation, the imprisoned man composes a letter and sends it off to guide this local church.

So we have the book of Colossians.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Book Introduction (1:1-2)

Authorship

Paul wrote this letter in the company of Timothy. As apostle, Paul speaks pastoral counsel as Jesus' representative.

Paul is writing this letter while in prison (4:3, 18). Likely in Rome.

Paul didn't found this church because he's never met them (2:1).

Recipients

The church in Colossae. "*saints and faithful brothers in Christ*" = all the Christians who belong to this church. If you're a Christian you're a saint. Saint ≠ an extraordinary group of elite believers. Saints = holy ones.

Not holy because they're the best of the best. Holy because they're **in Christ**. Connection with Jesus makes us holy.

Epaphras started this church (1:7). Paul has heard about them from Epaphras. Epaphras is apparently with Paul as he writes (4:12).

Circumstance

Paul's heard about a false spirituality being spread in Colossae. Related to Jewish law and asceticism (2:8-23).

What is Colossians all about?

Presenting a biblical spirituality rooted in Christ's sufficiency and supremacy.

Body

Passage Focus

Paul's joy over their conversion reveals a number of gospel realities.

Point 1: The gospel produces confident expectation (1:3-5)

Explanation

Paul heard about gospel advance in Colossae which leads him to do two things: thank God for their conversion and pray for them. What do we do when hear reports of people genuinely converted? We thank God. We pray for those people. What do we do when we hear reports of God producing spiritual depth in a local church? We thank God. We pray for those people.

What specifically is it that Paul heard about the Colossians? Two things: "*your faith in Christ Jesus*" and "*the love that you have for all the saints.*"

"your faith in Christ Jesus"

Faith = trust. What are they trusting in? A person. Jesus Christ. Not a mere person. God the Son in human flesh.

They aren't trusting in a past decision. They aren't trusting in themselves. Church attendance, good deeds, etc. They aren't trusting in some generic love of God. They aren't trusting in a different religious figure. They aren't trusting in a set of moral principles.

They're trusting in the person of Jesus. There's something about trusting in Jesus and Jesus alone that has altered their lives. Let me suggest their trust is grounded in **Jesus' death** and **promises** related to Jesus' death.

"the love that you have for all the saints"

Their faith has tangible results. With faith came flourishing, loving relationships. Faith impacted local church community. God saves us to produce flourishing local churches.

What's love? Commitment, devotion (persevering love), affection (feelings involved!), concern that leads to tangible action (denying selfishness for another's good), corresponds to truth. Helping people fight sin is love!

What created this love? Paul speaks of "*your love in the Spirit*" (1:8). So love is a fruit of the indwelling Spirit. Gospel hope involves divine enablement.

"because of the hope laid up for you in heaven"

The beginning of verse five explains the cause of this faith and love: "*because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*" Hope ≠ wishful thinking. I hope it won't rain on Saturday. Hope is confident expectation. Because God said it, it's going to happen. Confidence in God's promises (things to be realized in heaven) drives faith and love in the present. They are trusting Jesus and loving each other because they have confident expectations for the future.

How does this work?

What's laid up for God's people in heaven? The end of death. Glorified bodies. The end of cancer, chronic pain, fatigue. The end of sin. No more being sinned against. No more grief over our own sin. No more fear of terrorists, robbers, etc. God present. Faith becomes sight. Creation restored.

There's something about confident expectation in such things that drives trust and love today. Confidence makes all the difference. The fight for faith is a fight for confidence in God. The more confidence we have in God the more confidence we have in his commands. The more confident we are in God the more we'll love each other.

All God's promises come through Jesus:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. – 2 Corinthians 1:19-20

Every promise that belongs to us comes through Jesus. Every expectation drives us to Jesus. So fill your hearts with God's promises and your faith in Jesus will burn.

When your body is breaking down, confidence in *"the hope laid up for you in heaven"* stirs faith in suffering!

Point 2: The gospel is a true message (1:5)

Explanation

They heard about heavenly expectations *"in the word of the truth, the gospel."* **So the gospel is a message with content.** Gospel means "good news." Good news in the form of a message. Today we see three aspects of that message: *"faith in Christ Jesus"*, *"hope laid up for you in heaven"*, and *"the grace of God."*

We'll get to *"the grace of God"* a little later. I've explained that faith means trust and I've hinted at Jesus' death. Jesus' death is unstated but assumed.

The gospel is message about Jesus' death and resurrection. There's something wrong with our world that Jesus' death remedies. The resurrection validates Jesus' promises. Jesus' death and resurrection calls for a response: faith and repentance.

In brief, our world plunged into ruin through Adam's failure to keep God's command. With Adam's failure came physical death and spiritual death. As a result, we die and rebel against God. The Bible calls this rebellion sin. Sin has consequences because God doesn't tolerate rebellion. Sin calls for punishment, hell. Our broken relationship with God needs to be reconciled.

But God is merciful. He delights in rescuing sinners. So he sent his Son, Jesus, into the world to die in the place of sinners, as a substitute. If we trust in Jesus, Jesus took our punishment on the cross. If we persist in rebellion, we'll suffer the penalty ourselves. In hell. The good news is forgiveness of sin and restored relationship with God is available through Christ alone.

The message calls for a response. Faith and repentance. Turn from rebellion to faith in the person of Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. The gospel is good news because we're broken.

The gospel is a true message. True = an accurate commentary on reality. An accurate assessment of the human condition. The one true God has actually spoken. We can have certainty. God truly commands all men everywhere to repent and believe. God truly pardons even the worst of sinners. God truly changes the hearts of men!

How can we know God's promises in Christ are true?

- 1) God furnished proof of the gospel with the resurrection of Jesus.
- 2) God furnishes proof of the gospel today when he alters lives through the Holy Spirit.

Like when God brings diverse people from diverse backgrounds and unites them together in loving community because of their common allegiance to Jesus. People who would have never associated apart from Jesus.

3) The gospel accurately assesses the human condition.

How is it that men can design space shuttles and electric cars but we can't end divorce or lying or theft or hatred? Man is incredibly gifted, but morally broken. Wouldn't it seem much easier to not lie or not hate than to build a space shuttle? Why can we do one but not the other?

We believe the gospel to be true because the Spirit shined light in our hearts.

Point 3: The gospel bears fruit and increases (1:6)

Explanation

Verse six notes how the gospel "*is bearing fruit and increasing.*" In two locations: "*among you*" and "*in the whole world.*" The gospel made its way to Colossae with great effects. Faith in Jesus and love for each other.

"*in the whole world*" ≠ literal. Not every city in the world. It means something like a very large area or the whole known world. Likely a very large area.

The point is the gospel message was producing remarkable results.

"*bearing fruit*" = having success. Like an apple tree that produces a good crop.

"*increasing*" = growing like a tree starts out small and becomes much larger. Increase in the sense of spreading and covering a larger area.

The gospel message wasn't falling on deaf ears. People were believing. Lives were altered. Gospel communities called local churches were formed.

What produced these results? Gospel proclamation. How should this inform our ministry as a local church? Let me give an illustration from the Reformation.

The Word made central

One of the things recovered in the Reformation (think Luther, Zwingli, Calvin) was the proper place of the Bible. They called it *sola scriptura*. Literally "scripture alone." The Bible alone has authority over our faith and practice. The Bible alone is sufficient to save and transform sinners.

With *sola scriptura* came the elevation of preaching. At the time of the Reformation, the state of preaching in the Roman Catholic Church was dismal. Very few heard their priest preach regularly. The Reformer Hugh Lattimer spoke of "strawberry parsons." The priests came around once a year like strawberries. Preaching that did happen was often in Latin. The people didn't know Latin. And sermons contained obscure theological disputes, stories, speculations, little Bible.

With the Reformation came the recovery of the sermon. Expository preaching. Verse by verse through whole books of the Bible. The physical centrality of the pulpit in the sanctuary. Services centered on the sermon and the Word of God rather than the Eucharist. The biggest revival in church history.

Application

What's my point in sharing this? I think Colossians 1:6 tells us where our confidence should lie. If fruit and increase was produced by the gospel, it's the gospel that we should trust in for our own spiritual growth and outreach.

This doesn't promise that the gospel is always effective. Paul is just noting that the gospel is effective. Do we have not because we speak not "*the word of the truth, the gospel*"? Just another plug for gospel optimism. One of our fights for faith is a fight to trust that the gospel does convert sinners.

Looking back I can see my failure. Apologetics never gospel. Answering objections never gospel. Sharing my story never gospel. Speaking the gospel means sharing the elements of the message and calling for a response.

Conversions and spiritual growth aren't produced charismatic personalities, elaborate youth group games, good lighting, music style (biblically rich lyrics can help!). Conversions and spiritual growth are produced by the gospel.

Where does our confidence lie? Let's place our confidence where it belongs!

Illustration

Placing our confidence in our children's games or our musical skill is like placing confidence in the car's paint job and leather seats instead of the engine, struts, spark plugs, etc. There's nothing inherently wrong in games and musical skill, but these can't be what we place our confidence in.

Point 4: The gospel communicates the grace of God (1:6)

Explanation

The Colossian believers "*understood the grace of God in truth.*" There's something in the gospel message that speaks to God's grace.

God's grace is tough to pin down because it's used in different ways:

- 1) A present state of being (under grace).
- 2) Divine enablement (empowering grace).
- 3) An element of the gospel message (1:6).

What is it in the gospel that speaks to God's grace? God's grace relates to justification. Justification being the event when a sinner is declared righteous and not guilty. When justification occurs, grace occurs.

When they "*understood the grace of God in truth*" they grasped the fact that their sins only merited punishment. There was nothing in them that could merit God's favor. They could only be made right with God through the merits of another. They needed God to deal with them other than they deserved. They found grace in God's free, unmerited gift of justification in Christ.

Application

That's the beauty of being in Christ. We're not treated as we deserve. In other words, God is merciful to sinners. Merciful to sinners who are in Christ. Divine mercy comes through faith and repentance.

Point 5: The gospel must be heard and learned (1:6-8)

Explanation

Here I'm just pointing out something very basic. In order for this gospel message to produce faith in Jesus and love for the saints, a person needs to hear this message and learn this message.

I'm highlighting the fact that someone needed to speak the gospel to them. This was Epaphras. Apart from Epaphras' faithful proclamation they would have remained dead in their sins. In those days the gospel was only heard at corporate gatherings (Scripture read and taught/preached), personal conversations with a believer, or maybe a street preacher.

In our day people can hear through a physical Bible, web pages, online sermons, Christian books, corporate gatherings, private conversations. But research confirms most conversions come through relationships with Christians and encountering sermons in person.

They also needed to learn the gospel. Maybe not heard it and believed it after a three minute conversation. Maybe learned over time through multiple conversations with Epaphras. Time to process the message and ask questions. That's the advantage of the local church and contact with actual people. Opportunity to discuss, converse, and clarify.

But it's the gospel that does the work. Not our eloquence or creativity.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. – Romans 10:17

Conclusion

If we believe this, we'll emphasize the Bible and its central message, the gospel.