

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Faith, Hope and Love Colossians 1:3-8

Intro: Epaphras, a convert of Paul's, who ministers to a body of new believers in his home town of Colosse, has traveled to Rome to seek Paul's assistance in addressing a disturbing doctrine that has begun to appear in the church there. It doesn't seem like this false doctrine was brought in by outside forces looking to take over the church but rather was adopted by prominent members of the church, possibly even teachers, who likely tried to win the people over, not without-right proselytizing, but by presenting an attitude of smug and prideful superiority. We can surmise this because nowhere does Paul address any outside agents like the Judaizers of Galatia and the false teachers in Corinth, Philippi and those addressed in his second letter to Timothy.

Thus, this letter to the Colossians is addressed to all the believers in the church, some of who have been exposed to a heretical form of the gospel and have adopted it wholeheartedly, even advocating it to the rest of the church. Paul recognizes that this "new" doctrine stood in stark contrast to the truthful teaching the Colossians had received from Epaphras and Paul judged it to not only be deficient to the true gospel but ultimately dangerous to one's spiritual health and well-being. The purpose of the letter is to provide the Colossian Christians with the spiritual resources they need to fend off this particular false teaching or any other heresy they might be exposed to later on.

To accomplish this, Paul makes the main theme of his letter the supremacy of Jesus Christ. This isn't the only theme of the letter but all the other themes radiate from this central truth like the spokes of a wagon wheel. Paul goes on to address the supremacy of Christ over the cosmos – His creation. He follows that with a celebration of the supremacy of Christ over the Church – the new creation. He will discuss the finality of God's revelation in Christ, which is the gospel message; and he'll allude to prophetic events that will happen in the future. Basically, Paul will point out those things God has "already" done in Christ and those future promises God has "not yet" fulfilled. But mostly, Paul will take the truth of the supremacy of Christ and apply it directly to the Christian life: how we are to

think, speak and act.

3-8- As usual, Paul starts his letter with a prayer report. Though he had never visited this church, there's no reason to think Paul was simply being polite. It was customary in ancient letter writing to offer a prayer of thanks to the various gods the writer or readers worshiped. Paul adopted the same custom in his own correspondence but he actually transformed and expanded this custom by filling it with Christian meaning. His thanksgiving here is nothing like the typical nod to various deities for any imagined blessings received or misfortunes averted. This prayer was intended to be read aloud in Christian worship services and as such, it becomes a witness of Christian faith as well as a real means of Christian instruction.

Paul never offers up some stock, all-purpose prayer but sensitively structures it to the situation of the church he is addressing. He carefully weaves together the church's progress in the faith, their needs and his hope for them into a beautiful tapestry of praise and thanks to God. Bible students would be remiss to ignore the thanksgiving hymns in Paul's letters as mere fodder for devotional meditation unrelated to the key themes of the book. These passages actually lay the groundwork for what follows, hinting to the main themes and setting the tone of the letter.

Paul gives thanks for several things: 1) the Colossians faithful acceptance of the gospel (**3**); 2) the universal impact of the gospel as it sprouts up everywhere (**6a**); 3) how Epaphras has laid a solid foundation for them in the true gospel (**7-8**). But, before we dig into what Paul was thankful for, let's take a few minutes to look at just Who Paul was thankful to.

3- Paul's prayer here is addressed to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... We have seen this formula in many of Paul's letters. In fact, we have seen it so often that the familiarity of this formula to the modern Christian mind almost robs it of its original meaning. Of course, we know God is the Father of Jesus because the NT affirms this over and over. But in Paul's day, this concept would have been startling to Jews and pagans alike. Yes, God was regularly addressed as Father in Jewish prayers, as were various pagan gods like Zeus and Jupiter. The difference is that for Christians, God's fatherhood wasn't based primarily on His creative acts (**Acts 17:28**) or even on His paternal role in the history of Israel (**Hosea 11:1**). For the Christian, the concept of the fatherhood of God is based

directly on His relationship with Jesus, the Lord of the Church. God is then not only redefined in terms of Jesus, He's exclusively known through Jesus.

The consequences of this view are tremendous. If God is now to be seen in terms of Jesus, then our understanding of Christ becomes the governing criterion for our reading and study of scripture, the primary purpose for living our lives and for understanding the will of God. The Bible is informative but we don't read, study and meditate over it just for informational purposes. The written Word of God reveals the living Word of God (Jesus) Who, by His attributes and characteristics, reveals God the Father to us because Jesus is the very image of the Father. Bible study is meant to be instructive, compelling – even challenging. But most of all, Bible study is meant to be trans-formative in the life of the believer; leading us to greater spiritual growth and maturity.

Now, the fact that Paul is thanking God for the Colossians faith and love implies that he gives God credit for it, not the Colossians. The main draw of the false doctrine being foisted on these believers is that they could achieve a greater knowledge of or fuller experience with God by redoubling their efforts and working to improve themselves. What Paul is doing here, in the most subtle way, is reminding them that what they have now in Christ didn't come by any efforts on their part but by God's grace being poured out upon them and God's Spirit birthing new life within them. True salvation doesn't come by any human effort; it can't. So how could human effort ever improve upon it? It can't!

Too many people go through this life with a faulty concept of what Christianity is. They believe they are Christians because their family claims to be Christians or they went through a ritual as a child or because they belong to a certain church or denomination. Since that is the basis of their faith, they then feel required to perform certain good works or religious ceremonies to maintain their relationship with God or earn God's favor. But true, born-again believers don't go to church to EARN God's favor; they go to church to LEARN about the favor God has already bestowed upon them as His children in Christ. In Christianity, there's nothing to earn but there is plenty to learn and our life's focus should be on discovering what God has done for us and what He desires to do in us and through us.

4-5a- Paul's use of this particular (familiar) formula may also have been

aimed at another facet of the troubling teaching in Colosse. This false teaching seems to have questioned whether faith in Christ is all that is needed to know God; here Paul affirms at the very outset that God is known as the Father of Jesus Christ. This doesn't mean the Colossians were lacking in faith. In fact, the first thing Paul thanks God for was their faith and the genuine love they had for their fellow believers (4). Their genuine faith and Christian love sprang from their hope, which is laid up for them in heaven; that is, the object of their hope, the thing hoped for, is in heaven. This is probably a deliberate point made for the sake of the Colossians, who seem to have had doubts about the certainty of their future salvation. Paul's point is that the great trio of faith, hope and love are rooted in the certainty of a future in the presence of God.

Paul says as much in **I Cor 13:9-13**. In this great chapter of love, Paul tells the Corinthians that the 3 great pursuits of the Christian life are not miracles, powers and gifts; they're faith, hope and love. Though spiritual gifts are precious and are given by the Holy Spirit today, they were never meant to be the focus or goal of our Christian lives. Instead, we are to pursue faith, hope and love. Now, if this is the case, we should expect to see this emphasized throughout the NT, and we do (**I Thess 1:3, 5:8; Gal 5:5-6; I Ptr 1:21-22; II Tim 1:12-13**).

While these 3 are equal in importance to the believer, they're not equal in substance. Paul says the greatest of the 3 is love. Love is the greatest because it will continue, and even grow, in eternity. When we're in heaven, faith and hope will have fulfilled their purpose. We won't need faith any longer when we can see God face to face. We will no longer need to hope in the coming of Jesus once He comes back to settle all accounts. But we will always love the Lord and love each other, and that love will only grow deeper and richer throughout eternity. But the Colossians did not need to wait for eternity; they were experiencing that true, Christian love in their church in that moment in time.

5b-6- By this point, Paul has digressed into a reminder of the Colossians' Christian heritage. They'd heard the gospel and responded to it and that is the source of their hope. They have believed the good news, which is the word of truth. Why, then, should they now start doubting parts of it? They should remember that they are in their present relationship with God simply because of the good news they had received.

It's significant that Paul describes the gospel as that which has come to you. The Colossians had not gone out to seek God (as they now seem to be attempting to do) but have had Him visit them through His word. The gospel, as a received message, embodies the very character of God's grace. It is offered freely, coming unexpectedly with its call to faith, repentance and service. The gospel can be rejected or it can be accepted, but it cannot be changed to suit the wishes or demands of its hearers! Once it's adapted to accommodate the human desire for self-justification, it ceases to be an offer of grace and becomes just one more technique for self-improvement, a feel-good message that no longer challenges the old nature and, above all, is lacking in love.

The gospel has to be a call to faith in Christ and a challenge to accept freely God's loving offer of free salvation. Otherwise, it ceases to be good news and becomes one more burden, one more mountain to climb, instead of the release from burdens that lost human beings most need. It's for this reason that Paul has responded with such depth of care and concern to the news from Colosse. In their pursuit of spiritual experience and perfection, the Colossians are in danger of reducing their faith down to something they attain through their own efforts and techniques, and losing sight of the wonderful, relieving, life-giving grace of God.

Furthermore, as evidence of the effectiveness of the gospel, Paul informs them, and thanks God for the fact that this same gospel has taken root and is bearing spiritual fruit in all parts of the known world. The same gospel they had received is producing harvest after harvest everywhere it goes. It is effectively bringing people to faith in Christ all throughout the Roman Empire, and probably even beyond. The term all the world may seem like an exaggeration to us, but from Paul's perspective, it wasn't a far-fetched concept at all. If the gospel hadn't yet spread as far as it could, it wasn't because Paul and his fellow workers had been dragging their feet!

This, again, was a reminder for the Colossians that the gospel they'd received wasn't unique to them and it certainly wasn't their property. If they are dissatisfied with what they have received, it's not due to any defect on the part of the message because that same message is winning converts far and wide. In fact, the gospel has continued to bear fruit even among the Colossians. There's a subtle change in meaning here. The 1st reference to

bearing fruit refers to bringing new members into the fellowship of Christ. The Colossians are already believers; yet the gospel continues to be a message that challenges converts to explore more fully their new awareness of God and its consequences for their lives.

Even today, there are some ministers that see the entire aim of Christianity as being to bring about conversions. That's not a bad thing as we could do with more evangelism. But, what happens after their conversion? That's not the end of the matter; it's merely the beginning of a journey of faith which will take the rest of their lives to complete. So, Paul reminds them here that the gospel they've received is the catalyst that enables their continued growth. That growth began with their understanding of God's grace. He's not saying that they grasped the sheer magnitude of God's grace or all the implications it has for their lives. No, what they understood, probably all they understood, was that their salvation depended solely on receiving God's grace – an understanding they are in real danger of losing.

7-8- Paul also thanks God for the solid foundation Epaphras has laid for the Colossians in the true gospel. The truth is that the gospel can only bear fruit successfully when people faithfully proclaim it and when others respond with understanding and obedience. A solid understanding and a skilled delivery of the gospel is helpful but not matter how solid your doctrine is or how persuasive your delivery can be, the Holy Spirit must do the real work of regeneration of true conversions will not be made. Sometimes, an emotion delivery will only produce an emotional response – not a heart-felt repentance and acceptance. Only the Holy Spirit can breathe new life into a dead spirit and bring about a real conversion.

That's what Epaphras had brought to the Colossians: the gospel was faithfully and powerfully delivered and the Spirit birthed new life into their hearts. Now Epaphras was with Paul in Rome, asking for help to deal with a problem that was getting out of hand. Paul's description of him as a faithful minister of Christ serves to indicate that Epaphras is to be trusted; the gospel he brought was not his personal invention and Paul also trusts him to give a true account of developments in his Colossian congregation.

Of course, the news that Epaphras brought to Paul was not all bad, by any means. The Colossians still bear a love for Paul (8) which their leader conveyed to him. This tells us that Paul is still held in respect by them so he

can expect them to still be open to his teachings; at least to listen to them and not reject them out of hand. This love is literally described as in the spirit, which could be taken to mean love that is inspired by the Holy Spirit or simply love that is spiritual. In practice, there's very little difference between the 2. Love is the supreme product of the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer, even listed as the first of the fruits of the Spirit in [Gal 5:22](#). To describe this love as being spiritual simply reinforces the point.

So, the Colossians are in danger of taking to heart a teaching that threatens the gospel itself, but they haven't lost their love. As long as that remains, there's hope. One of the hallmarks of love is a willingness to listen to others and to take seriously what they have to say; especially if the one speaking loves the same Lord and has proven their love by a lifetime of submission and obedience to the Lord. It has always amazed me, even, at times, surprised me through the course of my ministry how some people will come and faithfully sit under the teaching of God's Word for years and then one day, when the Word is in conflict with how they want to live their life, they drop serious Bible study like a hot potato and check out completely. If nothing else, it shows that they don't love God's Word as much as they let on in the past.

In the Colossians' case, it's the very love that they have for Paul that makes it likely they they will be willing to pay heed to his message.

Do you possess the blessed hope of being with God in heaven, at a future date? In the NT, hope is not the wistful, blind optimism that constitutes the hope used in our modern vernacular: "I hope the weather improves" or "I hope the Saints make the playoffs." Neither of those comments is based in any foundation of truth. The NT concept of hope is the confident expectation that God will fulfill His promises. According to God's Word, Christians have a lot to expect from God and their hope in God will not be disappointed.

We have a glorious future that has been established, and is currently being accomplished for us by Jesus Christ Himself. In [John 14:2](#) Jesus promises us, I go to prepare a place for you... Then, He continues to say in the next verse, "Look, if I'm going to prepare a place for you then clearly, obviously, I'm also going to come back to get you so I can bring you to the place that I am preparing for you!"

Is Jesus preparing a place for you or is that hope not a reality in your life today? It could be, it should be – it needs to be. 😊