

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

The Kind of Church Paul Thanks God For

Colossians 1:3–8

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to the book of Colossians. Colossians 1:3–8 is our passage for today.

And let me start by saying this. This is a very positive section of Scripture. This is a tough book. Paul's writing to a church that has issues. But Paul starts positively.

It's easy to be negative and pessimistic in our modern-day world. I increasingly have my "get of my lawn" moments as a middle-aged man. Just opening up the newsfeed on my phone makes me cranky. The world seems to be exploding with violent conflicts everywhere. Politics in America is depressing. The church in America is not as healthy as I'd like her to be. I'm not as physically healthy as I'd like to be. At least the Spurs are good again. That's a bright spot.

And it's easy to be negative and downcast. And it's not always our first instinct to thank God. In other words, gratitude is back-burner. Petition and lament are front-burner. And that can make us mooney, despondent, ungrateful Christians.

But Paul says, in another place of Scripture, "Do not be anxious for anything, but in everything, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil 4:6–7). Paul says in another place of Scripture, "Be always thankful" or "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18).

I think it's instructive for us that the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be your Name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done." That comes before there is any petition mentioned in that prayer (see Matt 6:9–10). In other words, Jesus wants us to get our prayers *vertical* before we ever go *horizontal* with our material needs, concerns, issues.

Now, let's talk Colossians. This is a church that is not in great shape. *They got problems.*¹ They've allowed false teachers to influence and maybe even infiltrate the church. They are drifting from the sufficiency of Christ and the supremacy of Christ. That's bad!

It was so bad, that one of their parishioners, Epaphras, has run off to Paul, hundreds of miles away, in prison in Rome to get help. Paul could start this book by dropping the hammer on this church.

But Paul does something curious. He does something that I think we should emulate. He thanks God for some good things happening in the church *first*.² He's going to drop the hammer on them. He will! Just you wait! But that's not how he starts this letter. He starts by being thankful.³ And he starts with prayer.

¹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 15: "The Colossians are not like those who distort the gospel (Gal. 1:7), or do not obey it (1 Pet. 4:17). Such people will face the terrifying experience of seeing 'the Lord Jesus ... revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power' (2 Thess. 1:7–9). The Colossians are holy brothers in Christ, who have put faith in the Lord of the gospel."

² Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 15: "As we take up Paul's letter, we immediately see that the apostle did not directly attack the Colossian problem, but rather began with an exuberant introduction which celebrated the Colossian church. This was typical of Paul, who characteristically praised the churches before dealing with them pastorally. Paul's heartfelt commendation rose from the miracle which had taken place in Colosse: a poor, pagan people without God and without hope in this world had found Christ. Their lives had been changed, and some remarkable things had happened, which Paul will duly note. His celebration was honest and beautiful, and the celebration is ours as well—for we are the Church."

³ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT 60: "Compared to the opening section of Hellenistic papyrus letters, the specific focus on God in Paul's thanksgiving sections becomes all the more striking... the opening health wishes of Hellenistic letters are often

In fact, let me show you the structure of the beginning of this letter, and then we'll get into our passage today, **Colossians 1:3–8**. In **verse 3**, Paul writes,

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

The “we” there is probably a reference to Timothy, Luke, and the others in Rome with Paul. Maybe Epaphras too, who had a hand in planting this church. And they are thankful in prayer for the Colossians. And that thankfulness goes all the way down to **verse 8**. So this whole section is controlled by that first statement in **verse 3** about “always [thanking] God.”

And then, in **verse 9**, Paul switches to prayers of petition.

⁹ *And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you,⁴ asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,*

In **verse 9**, thankfulness gives way to petition. And those petitions go all the way down to **verse 14**. And then in **verse 15** we have the amazing Christ hymn that goes down to **verse 20**, which is absolutely amazing.⁵ We'll get there.

But today, we're going to look at the thanksgiving of **verses 3–8**. Next week, we'll look at the petitions of **verses 9–14**. And then, two weeks from today, we'll get to that Christ hymn.

But today, let's talk thankfulness. Write this down in your notes. Today, I want to give you five things to be thankful for in a local church... assuming that this is part of a local church. Here's the first.

1) Its **embrace** of the gospel (1:3-4a)

A local church's embrace of the gospel. Now you can see this first point implicit already in the introduction. Paul says in **verse 2**,

² *To the saints and faithful brothers⁶ in Christ⁷ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Paul is piling on gospel terms here—“the saints,” the “faithful brothers in Christ,” “grace,” “peace.” None of this language is possible or intelligible without the gospel. In other words, there is no such thing as “saints” without the gospel. There is no such thing as “faithful brothers in Christ” without the gospel. There is no such thing as “grace” without the gospel. There is no such thing as “peace from God” without the gospel.

The part of about grace and peace is typically Pauline. It's a reference to the fact that grace comes from God through Christ, as a result of our faith. We are saved by grace. And that grace leads to peace with God. There's no peace from God without grace. That's typical in a Pauline letter.

In fact, grace and peace are packaged together in every single Pauline letter in the NT (**Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; Phil 3**). And grace is always mentioned first. It's grace and then peace; it's never peace and then grace.⁸

concerned with the physical well-being of the recipients (and the author). In this thanksgiving section, however, Paul is concerned with the relationship between the Colossians and ‘Christ Jesus’ (v. 4).”

⁴ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 56: “Paul could have meant that every time he prayed he remembered his various churches. Perhaps he maintained the Jewish practice of prayer three times a day (cf. Dan. 6:11; Acts 3:1; 10:3; *Didache* 8:3), or perhaps he used the long hours of travel and of work in stitching to hold his churches before God (see also on 1:9 and 4:2). But not too much should be made of the language since it is an epistolary flourish characteristic of the period.”

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 52: “He says, in effect, ‘this is how I am *thanking God* for you’ (1:3–8), ‘this is how I am *praying* for you’ (1:9–23) and ‘this is what I am *doing* for you’ (1:24–2:5).”

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 49: “On the assumption that any departure from customary practice is probably significant, we may deduce here that Paul and Timothy chose to use this uncustomary address to reinforce their primary appeal. They wished to stress that these Christians, unknown to them personally, were nevertheless brothers just as much as Timothy himself was.”

⁷ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 50: “The frequency with which ‘in Christ/him/whom’ appears is a feature of Colossians (1:2, 14, 16, 17, 19, 28; 2:3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15).” Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 16: “The first fourteen verses of Ephesians use ‘in Christ’ or ‘in him’ no less than ten times to describe the profundity of regeneration in Christ.”

⁸ THOMAS CARTWRIGHT: “He sets grace before peace to teach us first to seek for the favor of God and then to look for the fruits of the favor of God. But we usually do clean contrary, for we seek first the fruits of God's grace, for peace, wealth, prosperity, etc., and not care for the grace and love for God.” Quoted in Gregory B. Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, ed. Graham Tomlin et al., vol. XI, RCS (Westmont: IVP Academic, 2013), 131.

Why is grace always mentioned first? Because there is no peace without grace. And there is no grace without the gospel. And the gospel has transformed the lives of these Colossians.

The back-to-back terms, “saints” and “faithful brothers,” reinforce the idea that these people in Colossae are believers.⁹ They’ve been saved. They are faith-filled, faithful brothers in Christ. They are saints who have embraced the gospel.

And speaking of “saints,” look at **verse 3**.

³ *We always thank God, the Father¹⁰ of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray¹¹ for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith¹² in Christ¹³ Jesus¹⁴*

Now let me say three things about Paul here, two things about Christ, and one thing about the Colossians. Let’s start with Paul.

There are three Greek verbs in this section (**1:3–4a**). And the people doing the action in those verbs are Paul and his posse in Rome. They are **(1)** thanking God, **(2)** praying, and also **(3)** hearing about the Colossians.

(1) Paul is thanking God. That’s the controlling verb for this entire passage. Paul is thanking God, thanking God, thanking God.¹⁵ Paul has a thankful heart with the Colossians. And that goes right into his prayer life. **(2)** He’s praying thanks for the Colossians. **(3)** And also he’s hearing. He’s listening to people like Epaphras who come to him and tell him about the churches.

Paul says elsewhere, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (**2 Cor 11:28**). And by the way the “other things” in that Scripture includes beatings and whippings and shipwrecks. Paul puts anxiety in that same category.

Why is Paul anxious about the churches? Because people like Epaphras keep coming to him, even while he’s in prison, telling him about the problems in the church. That’ll give you anxiety! **If Paul would stop listening, then he wouldn’t have anxiety. But that’s not good leadership.** What’s the cure for anxiety according to **Philippians 4**? Prayer with thanksgiving! Paul practices what he preaches. He anxious about the church in Colossae, so he’s praying. Why is he anxious? Because he’s listening.

Notice also two things about Christ in this verse and a half. First of all, notice that Christ is God’s Son. He is the eternal Son, as we’ll find out in a few verses in the Christ hymn. And yet he is also “Lord.” He’s the κύριος in Greek, which was the Greek word that translates “Yahweh” in the LXX translation of the OT.¹⁶

⁹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 14–5; “Saints and faithful brethren are not two distinct groups; the terms are equivalent. And [*kai*] could be translated, ‘even.’ *Hagios*, which translates saints, refers to separation, in this case being separated from sin and set apart to God. Faithful notes the very source of that separation—saving faith. Believing saints are the only true saints.”

¹⁰ JOHN CALVIN: “*To God and Father*. Understand the expression thus: *To God who is the Father of Christ*. For it is not lawful for us to acknowledge any other God than him who has revealed himself to us in his Son. And this is the only key for opening the door to us, if we want to have access to the true God. For on this account, he is also a Father to us because he has embraced us in his only begotten Son, and in him he displays his paternal favor for us to see.” Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 132–3.

¹¹ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT 50: “In Paul, thanksgiving is always directed toward God. In line with the OT heritage, this is an act of praise and confession when the mighty acts of God among his people are remembered (cf. Pss 35:18; 100:4; 109:30). It is proper, therefore, for Paul to offer such thanks to God when he prays for the Colossians.”

¹² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 56: “Paul’s use of ‘faith’ dominates New Testament usage (142 of 243 occurrences).”

¹³ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 15–6: “Biblical faith is not a ‘leap in the dark.’ It is based on fact and grounded in evidence. It is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ Faith gives assurance and certainty about unseen realities.”

¹⁴ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 17: “Salvation does not come by believing in belief, or even in a set of doctrines or a creed. Salvation comes by believing in Christ. When John G. Paton was translating the Bible in the Outer Hebrides, he searched for the exact word to translate *believe*. Finally he found it: the word meant ‘lean your whole weight upon’ [Warren Wiersbe, *Be Complete* (Wheaton: Victor, 1981), 24].”

¹⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 53: “Again in marked contrast to Galatians, where the crisis called for immediate attention, quite disrupting the normal epistolary pleasantries, Paul and Timothy here seem remarkably relaxed and in an expansive mood. However serious the threat posed to the Colossian believers it could be addressed at a more leisurely pace and the response built up to gradually. 1:2–23.”

¹⁶ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 53–454: “The familiar composite title for Jesus (‘our Lord . . . Christ’) is not, then, merely a heaping up of honorific phrases, but a very precise statement of who Jesus is from God’s, and the church’s, point of view.”

Those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God but not God himself will be sorely disappointed in the book of **Colossians**. I'm sorry, you're wrong. How can God the Father *be God*, and God the Son *be God*? How does that come together? How can they both be referred to as the Lord (Yahweh) in the NT. Answer—the Trinity. We clear on that?

Look, if you are confused about Christian theology, Christology, or the Trinity... just stick around. This book is going to solve that for you. And for those of us who have this down already, this book is going to reassure us about these most important doctrinal truths.

And speaking of doctrinal truths, notice the one thing here about the Colossians. They have faith in Christ. Paul's heard about it. He thanks God for it.

And applicationally, church, let me just say we should thank God for this too in this church. Have we embraced the gospel here? Do we believe? Have we been saved?

We've had a few baptisms here lately at Messiah. But not as much as we've had in the past. And not as much as in other places. We've prayed for that. Keep praying for that. But one of the reasons we don't have a lot of baptisms right now is because *most* everyone in our church is saved and baptized already. Praise God for that!

Which means that we need to redouble our efforts in evangelism to get the gospel out to those who need to hear it. But praise God for the saints that are here right now. We've got faith in Christ Jesus here at church! Thank God for that! Paul thanks God for that in Colossae. Let's thank God for that here.

Write this down as a second thing to thank God for in a local church.

2) Its **love** for brothers and sisters (1:4b)

Just to specify, this is a reference *not* to familial siblings, but spiritual siblings. In other words, your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul ends that statement in **verse 4** with an important note.

³ We always¹⁷ thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard¹⁸ of your faith¹⁹ in Christ Jesus and of the love²⁰ that you have²¹ for all the saints,²²

The church in Colossae has love for all the saints.²³ And Paul says, **“Thank God for that!”**

Now here's the question. Is that a reference to the “saints” or the brothers and sisters inside the Colossian church or outside the church? Is that local church love? Or church universal love?

¹⁷ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT 50: ““Always” (πάντοτε) can modify either ‘we ... give thanks’ or ‘when we pray.’ In light of other Pauline introductory thanksgivings (1 Cor 1:4; 1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3; Phlm 4; cf. 2 Thess 2:13), it seems likely that it modifies the former.”

¹⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 90: “The peculiar circumstances of Paul’s letter to the Colossians may better explain this emphasis: writing to Christians he has never visited demands that Paul go out of his way to accredit his representative among them.”

¹⁹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 56: “That this is a matter of report rather than of personal knowledge confirms that Paul did not know the Colossian church personally.”

²⁰ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 19: “True saving faith is more than a conviction of the mind. It transforms the heart to love.”

²¹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 58: “It seems clear from verse 4 and elsewhere that Paul does not merely mean that ‘among them’ there is evidence of individual changed lives; he sees that ‘in them’ as a community the gospel has been at work to create that corporate life and love which is God’s will for his family. In an individualistic age we do well to remind ourselves how often Paul’s ‘you’ is plural—and that not merely referring to a collection of individuals, but indicating a corporate unity, the Body of Christ.”

²² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 56: “To be noted also is the degree to which the vertical (‘faith in Christ’) was integrated with the horizontal (‘love for the saints’). Paul would never have wanted these two to fall apart.”

²³ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 18: “It is a beautiful thing when you see in the Church love for all the saints—not just for some, not just for the lovable, but *all*.”

I think it's both. In other words, the Colossians love each other in the local church. But they also love the saints in their sister churches in Hierapolis and Laodicea and Ephesus.²⁴ They also love Paul and Luke and Timothy, although some of them have never met them. They have love for all the saints.²⁵ **And we should too.**

Now let me argue something here. I think it's both. I've said that now explicitly and publicly. We need to have love for all our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world. But let me *also* say that **your love for the brothers is going to be primarily demonstrated in your local church.**

By the way, Colossae was a small, out of the way, town. There were probably people in that church who never left the city of Colossae and who didn't know any Christians outside of their own church. So the primary way that they demonstrated love for the saints is through their local church. So let me say again that **your love for the brothers is going to be primarily demonstrated in your local church.**

In other words, if you say, **"I love my brothers and sisters in Christ out there. I love 'em all. I just don't love my brothers and sisters in here."** That is a fail! That doesn't work. That's like the spouse who treats other people at work or around town with love and kindness and tenderness. But then he or she totally disregards a spouse at home. They love other people's kids, but they don't really love their own. That's not logical.

I run across these people sometimes who are like, **"I love that church in San Diego. I love that church in Oklahoma City. I love those preachers on the radio. I wish I lived there. I wish I could go there."** What's wrong with the church family that God has given you here? That's like a husband saying, **"I sure love that other guy's wife."** Why do we allow for church envy, where we don't allow for spouse envy?

Listen, bloom where you're planted. Love the people that God has given you in your local church. There's no such thing as a perfect church. Stop looking for a perfect church. And love your brothers and sisters in Christ both inside and outside your local church.²⁶

And I hate to cross-reference here. But this is just too good. **It's as if the Apostle John was reading Paul's mail.** Because John says this, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:19–21).²⁷

Write this down as a third thing to thank God for in a local church.

3) Its **hope** laid up in heaven (1:5a)²⁸

Look at **verse 5**. And notice there's no final punctuation at the end of **verse 4**. Paul is the king of run-on sentences. And this is important, because it's a continuation of the thankfulness and the prayer that we saw in **verse 3**. So Paul is still talking about what he's praying for and what he's thankful for.

Here's another reason why Paul is thanking God in his prayers.

²⁴ WOLFGANG MUSCULUS: "The Christian faith is not able to be true and sincere without love, no less than a fire can be without heat." Quoted in Gregory B. Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, ed. Graham Tomlin et al., vol. XI, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 134.

²⁵ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 18: "Barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Greek, learned and ignorant joined hands and sat down at one table. They knew themselves to be all one in Christ Jesus."

²⁶ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 18: "That does not mean we are to feel the same emotional attachment toward everyone. True biblical love is so much more than an emotion; it is sacrificial service to others because they have need. We show godly love to someone when we sacrifice ourselves to meet that person's needs."

²⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 18: "Genuine faith does not exist in a vacuum but will inevitably result in a changed life. One of the visible and strong fruits of true saving faith is love for fellow believers (cf. John 13:34–35)."

²⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 58: "The formulation here serves to underline the eschatological and forward-looking character of the gospel message that called forth the Colossians' faith and stimulated their love for their fellow saints."

⁵ because of the hope²⁹ laid up for you in heaven.³⁰

It's laid up for you (plural), Colossians.³¹ And there's no doubt about this hope, because biblical hope isn't hope like we understand it in English.³² **It's not like, "Gee, I hope the Spurs win in the NBA playoffs."** No, our hope is secure in the promises of God which are immovable, unshakable, unchangeable, unstoppable. That hope is laid up for you in heaven!

What does it mean to have your hope laid up for you in heaven? It means two things. It means **(1)** Christ is in heaven right now interceding on your behalf. Your hope is *in him*. Your hope is *him*. He is in heaven. Your hope is *laid up* for you in heaven, because Christ is *holed up* in heaven. **When you die, you go straight to him. You fall asleep in Christ Jesus and go right into his presence.**

And there you wait for your resurrection body at Christ's return.³³ Just like those of us who are still alive are waiting to be raptured to receive our resurrection bodies. For more on that, see the "Final Things" series on our website that just finished up last Wednesday night.³⁴

And secondly **(2)**, it means heavenly treasures that are laid up for you in heaven as well. If the Colossians were suffering, or experiencing hardship for their faith in Christ, then they are earning treasures in heaven in light of that. That's highly possible in light of what we saw with Paul in his missionary journeys. Paul suffered everywhere he went. And then he wrote these letters to churches that were suffering.

And if the church in Colossae was suffering, then Paul is assuring them that there's no need to despair about that. Because that suffering is earning treasure in heaven.³⁵ Those are being laid up for you. **And that's true for you right now, Christian. Praise God for that! Thank God for that! Your life will come to an end soon, but you've got nothing to worry about... because heaven awaits.³⁶ Keep laying up treasure in heaven.**

Here's a fourth thing to thank God for in a local church.

4) Its **fruit-bearing** among the saints (1:5b–6)³⁷

²⁹ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 17: "Faith, hope, and love are mentioned numerous times in Scripture as a sort of 'apostolic shorthand' for genuine Christianity. None of these qualities can be manufactured by man; they all come from God." HEINRICH BULLINGER: "Faith, hope and love are the nerves and sinews—they are the principal heads of the Christian religion... Faith stretches toward Christ Jesus and leans on his merits, love busies itself with everything holy and excellent, and hope perseveres on account of the eternal treasure set aside for us in heaven." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 133–4.

³⁰ CHRYSOSTOM: "They should not seek their rest here.... 'Because of the hope,' he says, 'which is laid up.' He shows how secure this hope is." Quoted in Peter Gorday, ed., *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 2.

³¹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 20: "One result of our hope is a willingness to sacrifice the present on the altar of the future... My father warned me repeatedly while I was growing up not to sacrifice the future on the altar of the immediate. The world wants what it wants now."

³² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 58: "'Hope' itself is almost as distinctively a Pauline feature in the New Testament (36 of 53 occurrences). In contrast to the more uncertain, fearful note typical of classical (and modern) usage, the sense here is characteristically Jewish: hope as expectation of good, confidence in God (R. Bultmann, *TDNT* 2.519–23). As such it is closely related to faith, confident trust in God."

³³ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 55: "*Hope* here apparently refers not so much to the state or activity of hoping as to the thing hoped for. It is *the hope that is stored up for you in heaven.*"

³⁴ <https://www.messiahbible.org/final-things-a-comprehensive-study-of-end-times-events>

³⁵ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 20: "In contrast to the 'buy now—pay later' attitude prevalent in the world, the Christian is willing to pay now and receive it later. What makes Christians willing to make such sacrifices? Hope, based on faith that the future holds something far better than the present. Paul writes in Romans 8:18, 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'"

³⁶ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 19: "Peter speaks of 'an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you' (1 Pet. 1:4). The writer of Hebrews speaks of 'laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil' (Heb. 6:18–19)."

³⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 22: "The gospel is not merely a stagnant system of ethics; it is a living, moving, and growing reality. It bears fruit and spreads."

Look at the middle of **verse 5**. Paul finally ends a sentence and begins a new one.³⁸

Of this you have heard

Of this? What's the "this"? Heaven! Heaven is the "this" from the previous statement. Or more precisely, "the hope laid up for you in heaven." The Colossians heard about this. And it's part of the gospel, because let's finish the verse.

Of this you have heard before in the word³⁹ of the truth,⁴⁰ the gospel,⁴¹

Let's just stop here for a moment. Part of the gospel is the hope of heaven. Everyone with me?

When you share Christ with someone, don't forget to talk about heaven. Don't forget to talk about our eternal future. Don't tell people, "If they put their faith in Christ all their wildest dreams will come true in this world." That's not true. That's over-realized eschatology. You don't get heaven now. Heaven is not a place on earth! Our hope, as Christians, is a hope for the future. Christians don't sacrifice the future on the altar of the immediate. We sacrifice the immediate on the altar of the future.

And by the way, that's part of the gospel. **Tell people about heaven. Tell them about new resurrection bides. Tell them about the new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem. Paul links the word of truth, the gospel, to our hope laid up in heaven. So when you share the gospel with people, tell them about heaven.**

Now don't start with heaven. Start with sin. Start with the bad news—we're rebels. And then you can transition to the good news. There's redemption for rebels.⁴²

When I was younger, we used to walk people through "the Romans Road" as part of our evangelism strategy. And it was great. It was useful. And part of it was because it started with the bad news. Romans 3:23, "all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory." And then it went to Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death." That's the right place to start. We're sinners and rebels.

And from there we would move to redemption. Romans 5:8 says, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Yes! There's good news. The bad news makes the good news gooder! And Romans 10:9 says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." It was great! You got 1) Rebels, 2) Redeemer, and 3) Redemption with the Romans Road.

But we didn't have a great go-to verse for heaven. That's important. It's implied in Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." That's good.

But we can be more explicit than that when we share the gospel. God has established an eternity for us free from pain and death and disease and anguish. That is our hope of heaven. That is the "rest" that we anticipate in the presence of Jesus forever.

So when you share the gospel, let me give you four Rs to emphasize: (1) Rebels, (2) Redeemer, (3) Redemption, and (4) Rest.

(1) We are rebels far from God. Our sin has separated us from him. (2) We have a Redeemer, whose name is Jesus. He died on the cross for our sins. (3) And that provides redemption for us. We are redeemed by his blood, and our sins are cleansed. (4) And because of that we have a heavenly rest awaiting us in eternity in the presence of our Redeemer, Christ Jesus. (1) Rebels, (2) Redeemer, (3) Redemption, and (4) Rest. There's the gospel in four words.

³⁸ All punctuation is interpretive in the ESV, as it is in every translation. This is true even the Greek New Testaments that are used today (UBS⁴ and NA²⁷), which include punctuation. The original Greek manuscripts didn't include any punctuation.

³⁹ JOHANNES BUGENHAGEN: "Paul calls the gospel the word of truth, not simply because it contains truth, but much more than that, because it produces truth in the heart itself." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 137.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 58: "Paul describes the effect of Epaphras' preaching in Colosse in terms not of an emotional reaction, nor even of people 'accepting Christ into their hearts', but of hearing truth and understanding it."

⁴¹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 60: "'Gospel' is another word baptized into Christian vocabulary by Paul (60 of the New Testament's 76 occurrences are Pauline). It was known in wider Greek usage, but almost always in the plural, in the sense of 'good tidings' (LSJ s.v. εὐαγγέλιον), and the singular is unknown in biblical Greek outside the New Testament."

⁴² HULDRYCH ZWINGLI: "It is saving for people to know how bad and impure they are so that they might understand how good God is and embrace him." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 137.

Back to the text. Look again at **verse 5**.

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel,⁴³ ⁶ which has come to you,

I don't know who brought it to Colossae. It was probably Epaphras.

⁶ ... as indeed in the whole⁴⁴ world⁴⁵ it is bearing fruit⁴⁶ and increasing⁴⁷—as it also does among you,⁴⁸ since the day you heard it and understood⁴⁹ the grace of God in truth,⁵⁰

What's Paul thanking God for here? He's thanking God for the fruit-bearing of the gospel. The proliferation of the gospel—it's increasing. But the gospel is also taking root in the lives of the Colossian believers and producing real, lasting fruit.

What is the fruit? What is Paul talking about? What does it mean to bear fruit as a Christian? It means you demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control" (**Gal 5:13**). **That's just logical.**

If you've believed the gospel, then you are indwelt with the Spirit. And if you are indwelt with the Spirit, then you're going to produce the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of your flesh. The flesh will decrease. The Spirit will increase. You will put off and put on. That's fruit-bearing.

Also there are the gifts of the Spirit. If you have the Holy Spirit inside of you, then the Holy Spirit wants to use your gifts for the edification of the church. He *has* to be utilized in that way. Otherwise he gets antsy. Otherwise he gets restless inside of you. I feel that! "Use your gift. Use your gift. Use your gift. Use your gift, Tony." I've got to use it.

Also fruit-bearing means works. Martin Luther said once, "Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works."⁵¹ We are not saved by works, but we are saved to do good works!

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (**Matt 5:16**). The Apostle James said that faith without works is dead faith (**Jas 2:17**). Paul said in Ephesians that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (**Eph 2:10**).

⁴³ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 53–4: "The gospel, seen almost as a personified force, is at work in the world through those commissioned to proclaim it; where its truth is recognized and its command obeyed, it bears fruit."

⁴⁴ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 57: "Paul does not, of course, mean that every square mile of the inhabited earth has been evangelized (see below, on 1:23). From his perspective as a converted Pharisee the important point was that the salvation promised in the Old Testament had now been unleashed upon the world irrespective of geographical or racial barriers."

⁴⁵ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 19: "Here Paul engaged in a little justified hyperbole, for though the gospel had not spread 'all over the world,' it was well on its way. What he was celebrating was its dynamic power and its universality."

⁴⁶ JOHN CALVIN: "[The gospel's] truthfulness does not, it is true, depend on its success, as though we should believe it because many believe it. Even if the whole world should pass away, even if heaven itself should be destroyed, the conscience of a pious person must not waver, because God, on whom it is founded, does nevertheless remain true." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 137.

⁴⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 22: "The gospel produces fruit both in the internal transformation of individuals, and also in the external growth of the church. The two concepts are interrelated. The spiritual growth of individuals will lead to new converts being won to Christ."

⁴⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 58: "Epaphras must have spoken very encouragingly of his Christian townsfolk."

⁴⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 58–9: "It should also be said that intellect and emotions, head and heart, are not simply two separate compartments without an adjoining door. Clear recognition and understanding of the genuine Christian gospel—that God loved the world so much that he gave his Son to die for it—is a most powerful stimulus to full-hearted Christian love for God in return. Such an emotional response can in its turn fuel the desire for a deeper intellectual understanding (see 1:9) of God's nature and purposes."

⁵⁰ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 58: "The task of the apostolic herald is to announce truth: the word here translated 'understood' 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."

⁵¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Colossians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 17, who cites Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 362.

Christianity has no place for *works-based* righteousness. But we are all about *grace-based* works of righteousness.⁵² That’s all over the Scriptures. **Grace is the locomotive. And the works are the box cars behind the locomotive. We’ve got lots of cars behind our locomotive. We just don’t mistake the cars for the locomotive.**

And let me say this before we move on to the last point. The church in Colossae has lots of problems. They are not in a healthy place, as we’ll find out soon enough. But they are healthy in this. They are *fruitful*. They are a fruit-bearing church. Paul makes special note of them here.

Look at **verse 6** with me again.

⁶ ... as indeed in the whole world it [**the gospel**] is bearing fruit⁵³ and increasing—as it also does among you,⁵⁴ since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,⁵⁵

When did they hear it? When did they receive the gospel? From whom did they hear it?

Look at **verse 7**.

⁷ just as you learned⁵⁶ it [**the gospel**] from Epaphras⁵⁷ our beloved fellow servant.⁵⁸ He is a faithful minister of Christ⁵⁹ on your⁶⁰ behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love⁶¹ in the Spirit.⁶²

Notice the reference to the Spirit in **verse 8**.⁶³ If you are keeping count, we’ve got the first member of the Trinity in **verse 3**—God the Father. You’ve got the second member of the Trinity in **verses 3, 4, and 7**—

⁵² As I’ve said before, this is empirical righteousness (i.e. right living) that flows from imputed righteousness (i.e., forensic righteousness).

⁵³ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 88: “The language *bearing fruit and growing* is reminiscent of the Genesis creation story, where God commands human beings to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen. 1:28; see also 1:22).”

⁵⁴ THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA: “Not only is the faith known throughout the world, but it grows daily ... and just as it grows daily in extent, it also grows in depth among you.” Gorday, ed., *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 3.

⁵⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 89: “It is worth noting that Paul in this verse seeks to ground the Colossians spiritually by appealing both to the truth of the gospel and to its life-changing power. The gospel is authenticated not by its truth only nor by its power in people’s lives only but by both working in tandem.”

⁵⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 64: “The verb used (‘as you learned’) may imply that Epaphras had seen his task in Colossae not simply as winning them to faith but as instructing them in the traditions and parenesis without which they would have no guidelines in translating their faith into daily living.”

⁵⁷ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT 56: “‘Epaphras’ may be a shortened form of Epaphroditus, which means ‘honored by Aphrodite.’”

⁵⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 64: “‘Fellow slave’ (σύνδουλος) is a term that we might have expected to occur more often in Paul’s letters, since he so delighted in the use of συν-compounds... ‘fellow slave’ occurs only in Colossians (here and 4:7).”

⁵⁹ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT 57: “The genitive ‘of Christ’ (τοῦ Χριστοῦ) can be a possessive genitive (cf. NLT: ‘Christ’s faithful servant’); but it is probably an objective genitive (cf. REB: ‘a trusted worker for Christ’) identifying Christ as the object of Epaphras’s faithful service, especially when the verbal idea behind “servant” is highlighted through the prepositional phrase “on our behalf” (ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν).”

⁶⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 91: “But on whose behalf is Epaphras’s ministry carried out? A textual variant makes the answer to this question difficult, a problem to which recent translations bear witness: TNIV, *on our behalf* (also NIV; RSV; NASB; NET; NJB; REB); ESV, “on your behalf” (also NRSV; NLT; HCSB; NAB). Accepting the latter would mean that Paul is simply highlighting Epaphras’s faithful ministry to the Colossians; accepting the former would suggest that Paul adds the nuance that this ministry (implicitly to the Colossians) is ultimately on Paul’s own behalf. Since Paul is clearly at pains in this context to stress Epaphras’s reliability as a conduit for Paul’s gospel, we think the TNIV rendering is probably slightly preferable.”

⁶¹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 65: “Here, as is appropriate in the letter opening, the note is all of praise, even though it involves repetition of what has already been said well enough in 1:4.”

⁶² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 91–2: “In adding that this love is *in the Spirit*, Paul probably intends to suggest that it is the Holy Spirit who stimulates this love.”

⁶³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 66: “This is the only direct reference to the Spirit in Colossians.”

Christ Jesus, the Son of God. And then you have the third member of the Trinity in **verse 8**—the Spirit.⁶⁴ It's almost as if Paul believed in trinitarianism.⁶⁵

I would actually say that the reference to the Spirit goes all the way back to **verse 6** and all that talk about fruit-bearing. That fruit-bearing took place by the power of the Spirit. And also the love for one another which was mentioned in **verse 4** is a reference to the Spirit as we see in **verse 8**.⁶⁶ This is a "love in the Spirit."
The Holy Spirit has his fingerprints all over this section!⁶⁷

Now Paul is thanking God here for the work of the Spirit. He's thanking God for the faith of the Colossians. But he's also tangentially thanking God for one of the faithful fellow servants of Christ Jesus who has been instrumental to the church in Colossae. And that faithful fellow servant's name is Epaphras.

Write this down as #5 in your notes. Here's a fifth and final thing to thank God for in the local church.

5) Its faithful **leaders** and **servants** (1:7–8)

Now, here's the burning question that we've got to ask about Epaphras. Here's the mystery concerning him. Who is he? Who was he to the church in Colossae? Was he the pastor? Was he an elder? Was he a deacon? Was he just a congregant good at evangelism?

I don't know. And Paul's description of him in **verse 7** doesn't help us answer that question. Because Paul calls him both a servant and a minister? Which is it, Paul?

Now, probably Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae. I argued as much last week. And that's the best way to make sense of **verse 7**, "just as you learned **it** from Epaphras." Learned what? The gospel.

But just because someone brought the gospel to the city, that doesn't make them an elder or the pastor or a leader in the church. Lydia was the great evangelist in Philippi. And they met in her house. But trust me, she wasn't the pastor of that new church. And she was not one of the elders.

Paul use the language "minister" here, which technically in Greek is *διάκονος* (*diakonos*). So perhaps Epaphras was a deacon. But that might be reading too much into this term, because the word *διάκονος* use used for both the office of deacon and also more simply for a servant or minister in the church.⁶⁸ **We are all "deacons" at church. We all serve Christ here at church.**

The bottom line is, I don't know. I don't know if we'll ever know who Epaphras truly was in the church. **Someday in eternity we can ask him.** But we know he was faithful. Paul calls him a "beloved fellow servant" and "a faithful minister." That's high praise from the Apostle Paul. I want that said about me regardless of whatever role I have in the church.

And I would just as soon leave his identity ambiguous for the sake of application in our own church. And let me say this to everyone at Messiah Bible Church. Whether you are an elder, a deacon, a small group leader, or a pastor... whether you serve coffee, teach kids, empty the trash, or pass out

⁶⁴ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT 58: "Paul does not emphasize the work of the Spirit in this letter, probably because Christology, not pneumatology, is at the center of his dispute with the false teachers. A much stronger emphasis on the Holy Spirit in Ephesians (Eph 1:13, 17; 2:18, 22; 3:5, 16; 4:3, 4, 30; 5:18; 6:17, 18), a letter that bears many parallels to Colossians, supports this reading."

⁶⁵ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT 58: "Intentional or not, one finds references to all three persons of the Godhead in this thanksgiving section: 'God, the Father' (v. 3; cf. v. 6), 'our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 3; cf. v. 4, 7), and 'the Spirit' (v. 8). While the relationship between the three is not explicitly noted here, it is passages like these that contribute to the fully developed doctrine of Trinity."

⁶⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 65: "The love that mirrors the love of God in Christ can only be aroused and sustained by the Spirit of God."

⁶⁷ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 59–60: "[The Spirit] here mentioned explicitly for the first time, though the entire paragraph is incomprehensible without him."

⁶⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 65: "'Servant' (*διάκονος*) often retains overtones of its original sense, 'waiter at table' (John 2:5, 9; cf. Mark 1:31; 15:41; Luke 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; Acts 6:2); and thus its range of meaning merges into 'slave' as denoting obligation to offer humble service to a superior (note particularly Mark 9:35; 10:43–45). That the memory of Jesus' actions and teaching influenced Paul's idea and practice of service may be suggested by such passages as Gal. 2:17 and Rom. 15:8."

bulletins... whether you are highly visible at church or you work behind the scenes... whatever the case, you be faithful to the Lord and to the local church where you serve.

Everyone here should be serving faithfully, shouldering kingdom responsibilities in the church. That is what we're called to do. That's what a healthy church does. We don't let 10% of the people do 90% of the work. That math doesn't math. That's not healthy. And that doesn't please God. No, 100% of the people should do 100% of the work. That math is better.

And let me just say, as the pastor of this church, like Paul said 2,000 years ago, "Thank God for this church." I mean that! Thank God for Messiah Bible Church and its faith in Christ. Thank God for its embrace of the gospel. Thank God for our love for brothers and sisters. Thank God for our hope in heaven. Thank God for our fruit-bearing. And thank God for our faithful leaders and servants. Do we have ways to improve at Messiah Bible Church? Yes, we do. I'm not one to rest on laurels. I need to get better as a servant of Christ Jesus here. But praise God for this church. God help us to continue.