

COLOSSIANS

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Colossians 1:1–8

1:1–2 *¹From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and from our brother Timothy. ²To God's holy and faithful people, our brothers and sisters who are united with Christ in the city of Colossae. Good will and peace from God our Father are yours!*

Paul opens his letter to the Colossian church in the same way that other writers of his time did. He provides the sender's name, the recipient's name, and a greeting. However, his greeting is distinctly Christian in character.

Paul identified himself in his usual manner as an apostle of Jesus Christ, God's appointed messenger. When Paul says that this happened as a result of God's will, it is clear that Paul did not seek this appointment. However, Christ intervened in his life and gave him a specific task to complete. Paul also identified Timothy, not necessarily as coauthor of this letter, but as a partner in ministry (*1 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1*). He had accompanied Paul during much of his time in Ephesus and was with Paul now as he wrote this letter.

Paul wrote to the faithful people in Colossae, those people who belonged to the community of the Christian faith. They were holy and faithful because they were united to Christ, both individually and corporately. As each one was saved by the work of the Holy Spirit, they joined others who had likewise been redeemed.

In his greeting, Paul expressed his confidence in God the Father Who had already saved them. As a part of that salvation, God had established a relationship with His holy and faithful people, giving them His grace and peace.

1:3 *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our prayers for you.*

When Paul wrote about the prayers offered on behalf of the church in Colossae, he emphasized the thankfulness that permeated those prayers. The testimony of this church gave Paul every reason to be thankful. The thanksgiving was directed toward God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is important to understand that the reason for the faithfulness of God's people was that God through the Holy Spirit had brought them to this stage of maturity in the faith. They did not do this because of their personal efforts, but because God had orchestrated this transformation in their lives.

Paul used the plural pronoun *we*, showing that he was not alone in his prison, but that others shared his prayers for this church. During this first imprisonment in Rome, Paul was under house arrest, guarded by a Roman soldier. Nevertheless, he was able to speak freely, entertain guests, and share time with other believers. We know from his salutation that Timothy was with him.

1:4 *We thank God because we have heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God's people.*

When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Galatia, he immediately scolded them for their failure to keep Christ at the center of their faith. The church in Colossae was dramatically different. Their faith

remained focused on Jesus Christ, what He had done for them at the Cross and what He was doing in them. For Paul, Christ Himself was the very essence of the gospel message. Without Christ there was no salvation; there was no transformation; there was no eternal life. Without Christ, religion was useless (*1 Corinthians 15:14*). Paul was grateful that the Christians in Colossae remained faithful to their calling in Jesus Christ, and kept Him the centerpiece of their faith.

When believers experience the forgiveness of their sin and restoration to fellowship with their Creator and Redeemer, they join with others whom Christ has redeemed. This was the experience of the Colossian church. They rejoiced in their salvation and shared that spirit of thanksgiving with others who had been saved. God's people in Colossae lived together in the bond of Christ's love and forgiveness.

1:5 You have these because of the hope which is kept safe for you in heaven. Some time ago you heard about this hope in the Good News which is the message of truth.

This hope is fully secure, not because Christians hold on to it with all their strength, but because Christ Himself keeps it for them "in heaven" where no power, human or otherwise, can touch it. Both *faith* and *love* are based on *hope* (*Romans 5:1-5*; *1 Corinthians 13:13*; *Galatians 5:5-6*; *1 Thessalonians 1:3*; *5:8*) which here means "the content of hope," "the thing one hopes for."¹ Though hidden from their view, this *hope* is centered in Christ (*1:27*) and will be revealed when He returns (*3:4*). That is why Christians are to direct their minds toward heaven and to let their thoughts about Christ rule their lives (*3:1-4*). Paul was telling the Colossians nothing new. It was the Gospel that had been already delivered to them when he was in Ephesus. They had already heard about this hope in the Gospel when they were converted. As the Word of Truth, the Gospel is completely reliable. It is God's Word and reflects His character.

1:6 This Good News is present with you now. It is producing results and spreading all over the world as it did among you

from the first day you heard it. At that time you came to know what God's kindness truly means.

It seems that Paul describes the *Good News* as a power separate from the One Who is the Good News. It is not the written Word of God. It is not simply a message. Rather, it is the living, moving power of God making its way into the lives of the believers in Colossae and then throughout the world. In this case “*all over the world*” does not mean to each and every individual in the world, but in all those population centers throughout the Roman Empire in which the Gospel was preached. The evidence of the power of the Gospel has been displayed in the lives of countless people whose hearts have been changed. The Colossian Christians were only one example of what God was doing throughout the world.

That grace continued in their hearts at that very moment. It continued to grow in their hearts and minds from the time they were first converted. The reality of God's presence in their lives could not be disputed. It could be seen in the way that they grew in faith, and in the love with which they treated each other.

1:7–8 *You learned about this Good News from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant. He is taking your place here as a trustworthy deacon for Christ ⁸and has told us about the love that the Spirit has given you.*

Epaphras was the evangelist who took the Good News to Colossae, his native city. He also evangelized the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul's high regard for Epaphras was evidenced by his use of such terms as “beloved fellow servant,” “faithful minister of Christ” (*Colossians 1:7*), and “servant of Christ” (*Colossians 4:12*), a title of esteem Paul bestowed only on one other person, Timothy (*Philippians 1:1*).²

Epaphras was imprisoned with Paul when he wrote the letter to Philemon, asking him to receive his slave, Onesimus, as a brother in Christ (*Philemon 23*). It appears Epaphras was still in Rome, although it is not clear if he was still in prison. In Paul's prison, Epaphras told

Paul everything that the Lord had done in Colossae, emphasizing the love that was evident in the lives of the Christians. The Holy Spirit instilled this love in the believers. It was not like the normal regard that people have for one another as friends. It was a love that flowed from hearts filled with the love of Christ that had redeemed these people.

Notes/Applications

No church is perfect! As Paul continues his letter to the Christians in Colossae, this will become evident. But how many churches would love to hear the words that began Paul's letter, identifying them as God's holy and faithful people, united in Christ. These words would lift the spirits of Christians in many churches throughout the land. If Paul wrote to your church, would he say these same things?

The characteristics of a strong, believing fellowship are hallmarks of what it means to be Christ's disciple as individuals and partners in fellowship with other believers.

- Faith in Christ Jesus
- Love for all the saints
- Trust in the hope secured for the saints by Jesus Christ
- Living in the Word of Truth, the Gospel
- Bearing fruit in an unbelieving world
- Understanding the grace of God in truth
- Love in the Spirit
- Shepherded by a faithful minister of Christ

Everyone knows that no church is perfect. But that is really a mis-directed observation. The criteria by which we evaluate the effectiveness of our churches are found in these characteristics Paul has spoken of in this introduction. These should be the thrust, the theme, and

the centerpiece of every body of believers that calls itself "Christian." Any deviation from these Spirit-filled distinctives fails to fulfill God's purpose for His Church, which He has identified as His Body.

The practical trilogy of faith, hope, and love is common in Paul's letters. They are the distinctive characteristics by which God's people are identified, showing to everyone that they do not behave like the rest of people in the world. By this conduct, they show that they have been redeemed, that they belong to God, that they have experienced the forgiveness of their sin by Christ's sacrifice.

Perhaps the best-known expression of this kind of conduct is found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. "*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13, ESV). While these distinctives are not perfectly applied within any believing community, they are perfectly reflected in Jesus Christ, Who is the Head of His Church. He is the One Who has saved, is saving, and will save His redeemed people. He is the only truly reliable hope on Whom the faith of the saints securely rests. Then, the Holy Spirit instills these characteristics in the lives of God's redeemed people, setting them apart from the world and, at the same time, showing the world what it means to be a part of God's family.

Surely no church is perfect. Nevertheless, Christ's Church exhibits the transformation that takes place when God saves people from the tyranny of their sin. Then, like the Colossians, we are happy to hear Paul's words spoken to our churches, commending us for our faith in Jesus Christ, our love for all the saints, and our hope in the inheritance that is secured for us in heaven.