

April 30, 2006 by Steve Brandon



Thankful for the Work of God

Colossians 1:3-8

1. Hearing of the Work of God (verses 7-8)

2. Thankful for the Work of God (verses 3-6)

Colossians 1:3-8

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

The governing thought to this entire section of Scripture comes in verse 3. Paul is expressing his thanks to God, in prayer to God, because of what God has done in the life of those in Colossae. Verses 3-4 read, "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints." He had heard of how the Colossians had believed in Jesus Christ. He had heard of how the Colossians had expressed their faith through love. And Paul responded the only way that is natural for a spiritual man to respond: in giving thanks to God for His work among the people in Colossae.

In expounding this text this morning, I believe that the best way to begin is by starting at the end of this passage, where we discover how the Colossians first came to know the gospel, and how Paul heard about their faith and love. It's my first point this morning:

1. Hearing of the Work of God (verses 7-8)

Last week, I mentioned that Paul had probably never met the church in Colossae (2:1). It is possible that he traveled through (or nearby the city) on his third missionary journey, as he passed through the Galatian region and Phrygia on his way to Ephesus (Acts 18:23). As the crow flies from these regions, it takes you right through the Lycus valley, in which the city of Colossae was situated. And yet, the book of Acts records no missionary activity in this town. Nor does Paul make any reference in this epistle of any of his own activity in Colossae. Paul (and his travelling companions) may have simply walked through the town on their way to Ephesus, where he remained for some three years, discipling and training the church (Acts 20:31).

How did the Colossians hear about Jesus Christ?

In Acts 19, we read of how fruitful Paul's ministry was in Ephesus. As was his custom, "he entered the synagogue [in Ephesus] and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). After this time, "some [of his hearers] were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way [of salvation that Paul proclaimed]" (Acts 19:9). And so, going to the Jew first and being rejected, he then turned to the Greek to preach to them (Rom. 1:16), "reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9). For two years, Paul was doing this. His ministry was being known far and wide, "so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

The picture we get is this. Paul was in Ephesus, a cultural center of Asia Minor, preaching with all who were willing to come to the school of Tyrannus and listen to his message. Through his speaking, there were those who were believed in the message he proclaimed. They went out and spread the message to such an extent that he could say that "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). The best we can piece together from the book of Colossians is that a man named Epaphras was one of those who heard Paul speak in Ephesus, who embraced the message of the "grace of God" (1:6), and who went out to spread the message of the gospel in Asia. One of the places Epaphras went was to the city of Colossae. In Colossians 1:6, we read of how Colossians heard the gospel and "understood the grace of God in truth." In Colossians 1:7, we read of how they "learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf."

We don't know much about the city of Colossae at the time of Paul. I would suspect that there was a synagogue in the city (or at least a regular gather of the Jewish people within the city), where Epaphras would have initially come to tell the Jews about Jesus, the Messiah. I would also suspect that some of the Jews embraced Jesus as their Messiah, but others became hostile to the gospel and no longer tolerated the preaching of Epaphras. At this point, he surely would have turned to the Gentiles in the city and preached the good news to them as well. There were those in the city who embraced the truth of the gospel. In verse 6 we read that "the gospel ... has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth." We have no indication of whether this was a large number of people, or whether it was a small number of people. But, we do know that those who received the word were fruitful and increased in the gospel (1:6).

How did Paul find out about the work of God in Colossae?

We know from Colossians 4:18, that Paul was a prisoner at the time that he wrote this epistle to the Colossians. We also know (from Philemon, verse 23), that Epaphras was a fellow prisoner of Paul at this same exact time. Knowing the character of Epaphras, I wouldn't doubt at all, but that he was in prison for the same reason that Paul was: for preaching the gospel of Christ. It's pretty easy to imagine what took place when two evangelists were in prison together. What else would they talk about, but what the Lord had done through their ministry, and how it came about that they ended up in jail.

Perhaps Paul picked up his story from the time in which he spent three years in Ephesus, when he first met Epaphras. He would have told him of the revival that broke out, and how many of the Ephesians turned to the Lord. Paul would have told him of amazing bonfire that took place in the middle of the city, where "many of those who practiced magic brought their books together" to burn "in the sight of everyone" (Acts 19:19). He would have told him of how it caused an uproar in the city (Acts 19:23-41). Paul may have then told him of how he traveled "through Macedonia and Achaia" after which he returned to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost (Acts 19:21; 20:1-16). When he arrived in Jerusalem, he was seized in the temple and falsely accused (Acts 21:27-28). Some of the Jews conspired together and took a "solemn oath to taste nothing until [they] had killed Paul" (Acts 23:12). And so, under governmental orders, Paul was escorted late at night by 200 soldiers to Caesarea, where he would be safe (Acts 23:23). Upon being tried, Paul appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11), and was sent to Rome (Acts 27-28), where he was now imprisoned, and where he was now in his cell, speaking with Epaphras.

No doubt, the story of Epaphras was somewhat similar. In verse 7, Paul called Epaphras a "faithful servant of Christ on our behalf" (Col. 1:7). By these words, Paul was probably speaking about how Epaphras was converted through the ministry of Paul, and became an evangelist. One of the places that he went was to Colossae. Perhaps he went to others. ... We don't know. But, we do know that he went to Colossae, where there was a group of people who receive the message that he preached. And God transformed these people. Paul would later refer to them as "faithful brethren" (in verse 2 of chapter 1). At some point, the boldness of Epaphras got him in trouble. As happened with regular frequency in the early church, he was imprisoned for preaching the gospel, and sent to Rome. It was in a Roman prison cell, where they were able to exchange stories about what the Lord had done in their lives.

As Epaphras related to Paul the things that took place in Colossae, he would have told him of their "faith in Christ Jesus" (verse 4). He would have told him of the "love" that they had for all the saints (verse 4), and the "the hope" they had "in heaven" (verse 5). Furthermore, the fruit that was being produced in their lives and increasing (verse 6) would have been news of particular joy for Epaphras to relate. All of these things thrilled the heart of Paul. They moved Paul to "give thanks to God" (verse 3) for the work that He had done among the Colossian people. Paul was so stirred, that he was "praying always" for them (verse 3). In other words, it was a constant prayer of thanks that ascended to the throne of God from the heart and lips of Paul for what the Lord had done in Colossae.

I'm sure that Paul could relate with the apostle John's thought, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth" (3 John 4). When Paul heard that God was moving among a group of people in a far away city, he was very joyful and expressed his joy in giving thanks to God.

It's at this point in my message that we have a great opportunity for application. When you hear of the work of God in another location, what sort of response do you have? Are you indifferent? Or, does it thrill your soul to hear of what God is doing in other places? When you hear of people saved from their sin, does your heart leap for joy? When you hear of churches planted, are you thankful to God? When you hear of movements among other churches that God is obviously blessing are you rejoicing at what the Lord is doing? Do such things thrill your soul? Are you thankful to God for such things?

In our women's Bible study, an assignment has been given to the ladies to write down 100 things for which you are thankful. As I spoke with my wife about her list and about her interaction with other ladies who were seeking to come up with 100 things for which to be thankful, the testimony often came, "The first 20-30 things were pretty easy to come up with. But after that, it was a bit more difficult." My wife told me that she really had to do some thinking to come up with 70-80 more items." Let me ask you ladies, "How many items on your list were there things in which you were thankful for the work of God in some place other than our own lives?"

Yvonne and I looked at her list together. We discovered only a few items that were related to God's work elsewhere. And yet, think about the number of things that you can be thankful for. You can thank God for the many people who have come to faith in Christ, wherever they may be. You can thank God for other churches, that God has blessed greatly. You can thank God for other ministries, that God has raised up to serve His people or to reach out to those who don't know Christ. You can thank God for specific books or tapes that have been helpful to you that have been produced because of God's working in a far distant land, perhaps even years ago.

Personally, as I thought about this text this week, I was amazed to realize that such things are often way out of my radar screen. And yet, Paul was "always" (1:3) giving thanks to God for these believers in Colossae. I want to give thanks to God.

This past Wednesday through Friday, I went to a conference in Louisville, Kentucky, which was entitled, "Together for the Gospel." There were almost 3,000 men at this conference, many of whom were pastors or church leaders. Some of the reason for the numbers of men was the star-studded lineup of speakers that would be there. Preaching at this conference were John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, Mark Dever, C. J. Mahaney, Al Mohler, and Ligon Duncan. These men are my heroes. I read what these men write. I listen to what these men preach. I am thankful to God for the churches these men pastor and the ministries that these men lead. I went to this conference with several other pastors in our community. It was a great time.

One thing that is has taught me is that I can be thankful to God for many, many things that the Lord has used in the lives of the seven main speakers. I think about **John Piper** and the ways in which God has used [Bethlehem Baptist Church](#) to bless many people. The Lord has used him to lead [Desiring God](#), which is seeking to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. I thank God for the ministry of **R. C. Sproul**. His teaching ministry, called, [Ligonier Ministries](#), has impacted my father and many other men that I know. He is currently the minister of preaching and teaching at [Saint Andrews Chapel](#), in Sanford, Florida. I am thankful to

the Lord for the way in which He has used R. C. Sproul to help edify so many in the church. When I think of **Mark Dever**, who pastors [Capitol Hill Baptist Church](#) in Washington D. C. He has been the catalyst to begin a ministry to churches called [Nine Marks](#) ministries. The Lord has used this ministry in wonderful ways to equip the church throughout our land. I thank the Lord for his ministry.

The Lord has used **C. J. Mahaney** in my life in great ways, especially in keeping the cross central in all that we do as a church. He is the former senior pastor of [Covenant Life Church](#) in Gaithersburg, Maryland. He has recently, stepped away from that role to head up [Sovereign Grace Ministries](#), which is an association of more than 50 churches that have been established through the influence of C. J. Mahaney and Covenant Life Church. He also helps to provide leadership to the Pastor's College, which trains pastors for the ministry. **Albert Mohler** is the president of [Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Louisville, Kentucky. Since becoming president, he has done a wonderful job of returning this seminary to its Biblical roots. He also hosts a nation-wide, daily [radio broadcast](#), which is very good at tackling the latest theological issues of the day. To think of the influence that this man is having on training future leaders of the church as well as equipping men and women daily can only be more reason to give great thanks to God for all that is being done through him.

At this conference, **Ligon Duncan** was introduced as "president over all of evangelicalism." While that is obviously not true, he certainly has been used of the Lord to lead some worthy organizations, all while being pastor of [First Presbyterian Church](#) of Jackson, Mississippi. He the chairman of the board of directors of [The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#), which is doing a great job at helping equip the saints against many of the errors of evangelical feminism. He is the president of the [Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals](#), and has been very active in the leadership of [Presbyterian Church of America](#), even performing the duty of moderator for the 2004 general Assembly. His ministry in each of these areas has profound spiritual impact upon many in our nation. I am thankful for what the Lord has done through him.

Finally, **John MacArthur** was speaking at this conference as well. Not only is he pastor of [Grace Community Church](#), in Sun Valley, California, but he also serves as president of [The Master's Seminary](#) and [The Master's College](#). His books and tapes and daily radio program, [Grace to You](#), have impacted many around the world. Only in eternity will we fully know of the spiritual growth that has taken place through his ministry. As a graduate of the Master's Seminary myself, I am very thankful to God for all that He has chosen to do through this one man's ministry. In fact, I can trace a huge turning point in my ministry to the time in which I heard him preach a message on Matthew 7, entitled, "Who are the Few?". This message really challenged me as to what it means to be a Christian. ^[1]

When you begin thinking about the tremendous spiritual impact that these men have made all across the world, to think of 100 things to be thankful for is not difficult at all. You simply need to think of the ministries that you know of that the Lord has blessed. This is all that Paul was doing in verses 3-8. He heard of all that was going on in Colossae, and expressed his great thankfulness to the Lord for all that He was accomplishing.

Let me bring up a specific test case, as many of you know, I recently returned from a missions trip. Upon coming back, I was able to of some incredible things that took place in a small city in eastern Asia. I told you the story of how the pastor of the church grew up in this town, but moved away for some 30 years. He returned to his home with the vision to plant a church in that small city. When he returned, there was only one Christian in the town. He opened up a tea shop and began to preach the gospel to those who would come into his shop. Over the course of time, several people were converted to Christ.

As you recall, some were converted through some amazing set of circumstances. The first convert, who is now a deacon in the church, had a wife, who would often have unexplained fainting spells. This pastor shared the gospel with this man and prayed for his wife. Soon afterwards, this woman was healed of her fainting spells, and her husband embraced the gospel and "took baptism."

Over the course of time, the number of converts grew, from one ... to a handful ... to a dozen ... to a score ... to fifty ... to a hundred, or so. I don't know exactly how many people are now involved in the church, but it's somewhere in the hundred range. Since many of the people in the church live a 2-4 hour walk away from church, it's very difficult for them to attend church every week. There were a good seventy people at the service we attended when we were there.

As we spoke with the leadership of this church, we found out that the people are doing well. It's very difficult to live in their circumstances. When you embrace Christ and "take baptism," you are often cast out from your family. You are often dis-inherited. You are often shunned by society. But, these people at this church have been faithful to Christ.

Five years ago, there was no church in this town. Now, there is a thriving church there. In fact, it is the only church in this town. If you are living in this town and attend church, you will attend this church. If you are living in this town and are a believer in Christ, it's because you were converted through the ministry of those at this church.

I believe that we, as a church, have a golden opportunity to help these people flourish in their faith. As a church, we have sought to keep these people before you. We have sought to pray for them every Sunday in our prayer meeting. We have sought to pray for them in every Sunday morning worship service that we conduct.

My question to you is this, "Are you thankful to God for the work that He has done in this place?" Since the day that you heard of their "faith in Christ Jesus and the love which [they] have for all the saints" (Col. 1:3), have you "prayed always for them" (Col. 1:3). Perhaps you might be saying in your heart, "But, Steve, I've not been there. I don't even know who these people are. Sure, I have heard a little bit about them. Sure, you have given me some of their names. Sure, you have shown me some pictures. But, it's hard for me to pray for people who I have never met." Do you know what? You are in the exact same situation that the apostle Paul was in. Rather, you are in a better situation than the apostle Paul was in. You have seen pictures of those involved in the church. You have had the opportunity to hear some of the emails that they have sent to us recently. You have seen videos of those in in the church. You have heard the voices of the men praying to God. Paul didn't have any of these things. Paul merely had the testimony of another man in prison with him. And how much have the circumstances from this church come into your mind and given you great reason to rejoice in what the Lord is doing in that far away country? How much have you prayed for them in recent days?

I know that I, myself, have been convicted by this text concerning how thankful to God I ought to be for His work among this church I visited on my recent trip. Paul's example is that he was "praying always" for those in Colossae. I can't make that sort of assertion, of an overflowing heart of giving thanks to God.

So, why aren't we thankful to this extent? Why don't we express our thankfulness to God "praying always" for these sorts of situations? Much of it comes down to how we don't have spiritual eyes to see the wonders of God's working. Do you remember the story when Elisha and his attendant had gone out of the city? They faced an Aramean army with horses and chariots, that surrounded the city, ready to attack. Elisha's attendant was a bit frightened. He said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" (2 Kings 6:15). He was fearful that the city was going to be attacked and destroyed. But, Elisha told him, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). And then Elisha prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see" (2 Kings 6:17). "And the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:17). An entire army of angelic warriors were available to come to the aid of Elisha. And the city was spared.

With respect to this issue here in Colossians of Paul's incredible expression of giving thanks to God for the salvation of others, I believe that it is a similar issue. Paul was a spiritual man, who clearly understood the spiritual battles that are taking place in this world. And when he heard of the genuine conversion of souls, he knew how gracious God had been to these people, to change them so. He knew of the blessings that they would experience, now that they were converted. He knew of the glory that would be rendered to God for the blessings that He has poured out on these people. It was easy for Paul to pray this way, because his mind was in tune with the great realities of life. Much of our lack of zeal to thank the Lord in prayer comes down to how little we realize the glories of the work that God does in the soul of the one who believes.

After (1) Hearing of the Work of God (verses 7-8), Paul was ...
2. Thankful for the Work of God (verses 3-6)

This is where we ought to be. We ought to see the work of God and be constantly thankful in our hearts, expressing ourselves in prayer to God. Paul identified four characteristics among the Colossians that gave him reason to express his thanks to God. Paul heard of their ...

1. Faith

Look at verse 3, "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus."

Paul heard that these Colossians had faith in Christ Jesus. Paul knew what this meant for them. It meant that these Colossian believers had transferred kingdoms (1:13). It meant that they received forgiveness of sins (1:14). It meant that they were now reconciled to God (1:22). It meant that they would be presented before God, holy and blameless (1:22) and perfect (1:28). It meant that they were made alive (2:13). It meant that they would never again face the punishment that their sin deserved (2:14). It meant that they would be revealed someday with Jesus Christ in glory (3:4).

In order to tease this out a little bit, look over at verses 13 and 14. In verse 13, we read, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Paul knew that these Colossian believers were no longer controlled by the "domain of darkness." Rather, they had been transferred into the kingdom of Christ. And to live in the kingdom of Christ is so much better.

Yesterday, there was an article and a picture on the front page of the Rockford Register Star. This article explained how 233 people in the Rock River area had recently took the oath of citizenship to become citizens of the United States of America. In this article, Amy Massoth, a job developer for Rock Valley College said, "We try to persuade [our immigrants] when they're eligible [to become citizens] to get it done because the benefits are so great. ... Most don't need a lot of persuasion." The country in which we live is a great country. There is a huge difference in the living conditions in America as opposed to some foreign countries from which these immigrants have come. And they know it. And they want to enjoy the blessings of America.

The comparison of the blessings of living in America as opposed to living in another country pales in insignificance, when comparing the blessings of being in the kingdom of Christ, as opposed to living in the "domain of darkness" Paul had the spiritual eyes to discern this. That's why Paul was thankful. He knew of the blessings that would come upon those in Colossae as a result of their faith.

Look over at verse 14, "In Christ we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Paul clearly understood what it meant to be forgiven. His own testimony is that he considered himself to be the "chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). Before coming to faith, He persecuted the church, with violence, approving of the execution of its outspoken members (Acts 8:1). He was a blasphemer against God (1 Tim. 1:13). And yet, through faith in Christ Jesus, Paul was "shown mercy" (1 Tim. 1:13). He knew what it was to have the weight of sin rise from his shoulders, so that it never burdened him again.

That's what forgiveness means. It means that the sin that at one time would accuse you, no longer does, because it has been removed. It has been forgiven. As Psalm 103 says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). According to the promise of the gospel, Paul knew of how free they were, when they expressed their faith in Christ. It caused Him to give thanks to God, because he knew of the blessings that had come upon the Colossian believers because of their faith in Christ. Giving thanks to God was easy for Paul, because he understood the great realities of life.

Not only did Paul hear of their faith, but, he also heard of their ...

2. Love

Verse 4, "Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints." Since Paul had never met these people, the only way that he knew of their love was by what Epaphras must have told him. Epaphras must have told Paul about specific examples of the way in which the believers in Colossae loved each other.

Oh, to hear the stories of how the Colossians expressed their love for each other. Perhaps there was a need, in which some believers in Colossae had experienced, (financial need, ... medical need, ... travel need, ...). And Epaphras told Paul of how the believers in Colossae sacrificed of themselves to meet the need. Perhaps Epaphras told of how the believers simply loved to be with one another, because of their great love for one another. "Paul, you simply wouldn't believe how these people can think of nothing more delightful than to be with each other. Paul, you would be so encouraged, by their genuine interest in one another. When they gather together, they aren't interested in their own interests. They are interested in the well-being of each other."

Perhaps Epaphras told Paul of how **compassionate** they were toward one another (Col. 3:12). When one hurts, they all hurt. Perhaps Epaphras told Paul of how **kind** they were toward one another (Col. 3:12). They expressed their kindness in their words, and in the way that they greeted each other, in the way that they prayed for one another. Perhaps Epaphras told Paul of how humble they acted toward one another. They regarded others as more important than themselves (Phil. 2:3). Perhaps Epaphras told Paul of how **gentle** and **patient** they were with one another (Col. 3:12). Certainly, they weren't perfect people. Certainly, they sinned toward one another. But, when they did, they confessed their sins toward one another. And relationships which had been damaged were completely restored. Perhaps Epaphras told Paul of how **unified** those in the church were (Col. 3:12). But, it comes through love, which is called, "The perfect bond of unity" (Col. 3:14).

As Paul would have heard these stories from the mouth of Epaphras, he would have been encouraged, as such demonstrations of love are the fruit of faith. As they loved one another, they demonstrated their faith to be genuine. I love what Paul told the Galatians. He said, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). In other words, it isn't so much the keeping of the external commandments that is important. What is important is "faith working through love."

Love is the demonstration of faith. As Paul heard of their love, he knew that it was an affirmation of their faith. And with their faith came great blessings upon them. Paul was thankful to God for the blessings that they would experience in their life.

But, it wasn't only their love toward one another that captured the attention of Epaphras. Paul also heard of "your love in the Spirit." This may mean that they had a "spiritual" love. However, I think that it is better to take this as a love that the Colossians had for God, especially as this love is marked as somewhat different than the love in verse 4. It simply means that they had a love for God, Himself!

Not only did Paul hear of their faith and their love, but, he also heard of their ...

3. Hope

This comes in verse 5, "Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel." In this verse, Paul is speaking about their anticipation of experiencing the joys of heaven. The gospel message is a message about a life to come. Oh, to be sure, there are blessings today that we receive in the gospel. There are benefits in our lives that we experience when we believe in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead: marital happiness, peace in the family, happy children, joy in life, ... These things are all there. However, the good news is a message about eternity!

A good place to see this comes in verses 21-23, "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach. -- if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard."

At one time, all of us were "alienated" from God. We were "hostile" in our minds toward God. We exhibited our rebellion in "evil deeds." And yet, through the death of Jesus Christ, we can escape the punishment that our hostility toward God and our "evil deeds" deserve. The good news is that though we are dirty, Jesus will clean us up. He will pull out the only solvent that can purify from sins, .. His blood. He will take out His rag, and dip it in His blood, and start rubbing it upon the stain of our souls. Miraculously, our sins will be wiped away, so that we will be "holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (1:22) in the day that we stand before God. Our sins will no longer be present to condemn us, because the blood of Jesus has wiped them away.

The only way that you can apply the blood of Jesus to your soul is through faith. It is by believing in Christ as your all-sufficient Savior. This is the point of verse 23. You will experience cleansing and forgiveness, "if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard." In other words, saving faith isn't merely a one-time profession. It is a life-time possession. It is those who continue in the faith and in the hope that they will fully cleansed of their sin, who are truly saved from their sin. Should you not continue in the faith and hope of the gospel, you may well be lost in your sins. The consequences are terrible.

This past week, I had an opportunity to listen to John Piper preach. He preached with an earnestness that I have never seen in him before. I think it's because he has brushed with death in recent days. This past January, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. In February, he had surgery, and I believe, his prognosis is good. But, it has caused him to think about the brevity of life and the seriousness of where we go when we die.

He put it crystal clear. He said that everyone will either "bow the knee to Jesus" or "burn for their sins." In his message, he spoke a bit about the current wave of the day is calling for pastors to "lighten up," ... "tell jokes," ... "make church to be an attractive place, where people are amused" Is this what Jesus said? "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). "None of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33). In light of these calls of Jesus, Piper said that "any counsel that tells us (as pastors) to lighten up is insane!"

Paul knew of these eternal stakes. I believe that this is why Paul was so thrilled with the news that Epaphras told him of the Colossian believers. They bent the knee to Jesus, which meant that they wouldn't burn for their sins. Such news thrilled his soul. Paul knew of the hope that these Colossians had. He knew that they would experience complete cleansing of their sin someday, not because of works of righteousness (Titus 3:5), but only because of His mercy in Christ Jesus to them, because they believed in Jesus Christ and "understood the grace of God" that was upon them (verse 6).

Paul gave thanks to God because the famous Christian triad was experienced in them: faith, love, and hope. But, there was one more reason why Paul gave great thanks to God for the Colossian believers. They had ...

4. Fruit

Look at verse 6. Paul says that "the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth."

In other words, this message of God's grace to unworthy sinners who entrust their lives to Jesus Christ, has been evident in the lives of these believers in Colossae. The gospel has been "bearing fruit and increasing ... in [the Colossians]." It's been transforming their lives. They are living differently than they had lived before. Whereas once they walked in "immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed" (Col. 3:5). They have "put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col. 3:12). Whereas they were once living in "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech" (Col. 3:8). They have been "bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, ... just as the Lord forgave [them], so also [are they so doing]" (Col. 3:13).

It's been spreading to others. They have been opening their mouths and speaking the gospel to others. Others have come to embrace it. Where there used to be only a handful of believers in Colossae, it grew to be a dozen ... and then a score ... and then more and more. Those who have received the gospel are being transformed as well. The gospel has been "bearing fruit and increasing" in Colossae.

Again, for Paul, this is a visible manifestation that the faith of the people was genuine. Because, the good news that we believe is organic. It isn't only something that we believe in our head. It also affects our hearts and our lives. It changes us to the core. That is what it had done to the Colossians. That is why Paul was giving great thanks to God for them.

And so, I ask you, "Will you have spiritual eyes to see and discern the work of God, even in other places, among other believers whom you have never met?" Paul is here in Rome, perhaps on his way to death. He may never meet these people in Colossae and yet, he was constantly thanking God for their work there. Is that your heart and your perspective?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 30, 2006 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] As an anecdote, while at the conference, I had an opportunity to run into John MacArthur. After one of the sessions, I was heading back to my room, which was on the sixth floor. Due to the number of men waiting for the elevator, I decided to make a run up the stairs. When I came out of the stairwell, I saw John MacArthur awaiting to go down the elevators. He was standing next to an old roommate of mine in Seminary, who was travelling with him. I had the opportunity to meet with him for a little bit, as he was waiting for one of the crowded elevators. However, due to being winded from climbing the stairs, I was unable to speak with him, when he asked me a question. Afterwards, the encounter was quite humorous.