

The Marks of a Living Relationship with Christ

The Gospel and its Fruit

Text: Colossians 1:1-8

Greetings

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ

by the will of God,

and Timotheus *our* brother,

To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse:

Grace *be* unto you,

and peace,

from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

praying always for you,

Since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus,

and of the **love** *which ye have* to all the saints,

For the **hope** which is laid up for you in heaven,

whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of **the gospel**;

Which is come unto you, as *it is* in all the world;

and bringeth forth fruit,

as *it doth* also in you, since the day ye heard *of it*,

and knew the grace of God in truth:

The Work of Epaphras

As ye also learned of **Epaphras** our dear fellowservant,

who is for you a faithful minister of Christ;

Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit.

Introduction:

The present text contains the first two parts of a normal pauline letter, the salutations or address, and the opening prayer of thanksgiving for the recipients. Paul's epistles follow normal Greek letter writing protocol. We know this by comparing them with other first century letters that have survived in the Egyptian papyri. The normal pattern of a letter was for the person to first identify himself and then to greet the person or persons to whom he was writing. This would be followed by a prayer to whatever god he prayed to for the well-being of the person to whom he was writing and a prayer of thanks for some recent benefit conferred by the god. This would be followed by the main body of the letter, and finally the letter would be concluded with a final prayer and greetings. The following example of a greeting and prayer of thanksgiving is taken from a 2nd century letter written by a young military recruit to his father:

“Apion to Epimanchus, his father and lord, very many greetings. Before all else I pray for your health and that you may always be well and prosperous, together with my sister and her daughter and my brother. I thank the lord Serapis that when I was in danger at sea he straightway saved me. . .” (Loeb Classical Lib. No. 266, p. 305)

Paul's prayers, we must insist, are not, however, mere formularies placed at the beginning of his letters out of respect to custom, but genuine expressions of gratitude to God for what God is doing in the lives of the believers to whom he is writing, or in the case of II Corinthians, his own life. This being the case, paying attention to what he thanks God for at the beginning of his letters will yield insights into the issues dealt with in the letter.

In the case of the present letter, the first thing to be noticed is that Paul's thanksgiving is not based upon first-hand observation, but upon oral reports he has received from Epaphras. As previously observed in 2:1, Paul had not personally been to Colosse, but was writing to them on the basis of reports received from his colleague, Epaphras, who as a faithful servant of Christ had taught them the truth of the Gospel (1:8; 4:12). To grasp to importance of what we are about to discuss you must imagine the intensity of the Apostle as he listens to Eraphas' report. Knowing his zeal for Christ and his gospel, we can be sure that he was more than curious to know if certain key elements would be present. They were. So Paul could write with joy:

“Every time we pray we are giving thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because we heard about you faith in Christ Jesus, and the love which you have for all the saints. This

arises from your hope which is being safely kept for you in heaven, which you heard about previously when the Word of Truth, the Gospel, was announced to you. This Gospel has now arrived among you, and just as it is increasing and bearing fruit wherever it goes throughout the world, so it has been bearing fruit and increasing among you ever since the day you heard about the grace of God in truth" (1:3-6)" (Author's translation).

What gives rise to Paul's joyous thanksgiving is what motivated his ministry. The Gospel had been announced in its truth and in God's power to the Colossians, they had received it as it had been transmitted to them (2:6), and now it was producing the fruit that it invariably produces, faith, love, and hope. Only the Gospel can do that. Only the Gospel and produce the church, and when the church truly exists it will always be characterized by active faith in Jesus Christ, sacrificial Christ-like love among believers, and unshakable hope in our eternal salvation. It was for this Gospel and its fruits that Paul labored among the Gentiles of the first century, and it is for this Gospel and these fruits that we are called to labor among the nations of our time. To do this we must have a clear understanding both of what the Gospel is and the fruits that it produces.

What is the Gospel?

Given the importance of the gospel, one would think that it would be redundant to define it among Christians. Experience has taught me otherwise. It is not uncommon for Christians, even those who are frequent church-attenders, to be able to define the gospel in only the vaguest of terms. Therefore, we will let Paul define it for us as only he can.

First of all, let it be said that when we hear the word "gospel" we associate it with something religious. This would not have been the case for Paul's first century hearers. They heard "good news", for that is precisely what the word in itself means. The content of that good news had to be explained. We may see how Paul explained it first by looking at a passage where he summarizes the message that he had delivered to the Corinthians, and secondly by looking at some of the other words that Paul commonly associates with the gospel. In I Corinthians 15: 1-8 he writes:

"Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time."

Paul makes it clear that the good news that brings the hope of salvation is the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. It is through his death and resurrection that sin and death have been conquered and that we have the hope of eternal life.

Let us now consider some of the words that Paul commonly associates with the word “gospel”. First he often calls it the gospel of God. A literal translation would be simply “God’s good news”. This is not just any good news. The source of news determines its value. God has good news for us. That good news is that he has not forgotten nor abandoned us, but that he has acted in Jesus Christ to save us. A second name that is often associated with the gospel is “Jesus Christ”. If it is God’s good news, it is his good news about Jesus Christ. God’s good news is that he has sent a savior, his own son, Jesus Christ to be our sin-bearer and redeemer. In Eph 1:13 Paul calls it “the good news of your salvation” because the good news is that the sinner can be saved from eternal condemnation. Therefore, it is the “good news of hope” (Col. 1:23; II Tim. 1:10), and it is from the gospel that our hope derives, but for Paul it is also the “good news of truth”, because it is true. It may seem too good to be true, but millions of believers living and dead bear testimony to its truth by having experienced its transforming power. Furthermore, he refers to it as the “good news of peace” (Rom. 10:15; Eph. 6:15), for it is through the work of Christ that we have been reconciled to God. Paul also, on more than one occasion, says of the Gospel that it is a demonstration of God’s power (I Thess. 1:5; Rom. 1:18). It demonstrates God’s power by transforming the sinner from the inside out making him a new creation in Christ Jesus. Paul also calls it the “good news of grace” (Acts 20:24). It is not good news about what we can do for God, because we can do nothing. It is good news about what God has done for us; “by grace are you saved.” Finally he calls it the “glorious gospel” (I Tim. 1:11). It is glorious because it demonstrates the glory of our great and loving God, who takes us from despair and from the realms of darkness and translates us into the glorious kingdom of his dear Son (Col. 1:13).

So the Apostle gives thanks that the true life-changing good news about Jesus Christ had reached even to the remote Colossians. Activated by God’s own power it had transformed the Colossian believers. Even as he wrote it was progressing and bearing fruit in this Lycus River valley town in the Roman province of Asia. Let us now examine the fruit that it was producing.

What is the Fruit of the Gospel?

We have seen that it is the Gospel that establishes the Church. Where the Gospel is not understood, received, and lived out there is no true church of Jesus Christ. Where it is understood, received, and lived out it produces fruit. Paul outlines that fruit in verses 4 and 5 when he recites in his prayer of thanksgiving the part of Epaphras’ report that had brought joy to his heart. The Colossian Christians possessed: “faith in Christ Jesus”, “love for all the saints”, and “hope” that was “reserved in heaven from them.” Knowing that they possessed these three things, Paul could be assured that the Gospel had done its work; that the labor among them had not been in vain. Likewise, we may know that the work of the Gospel has been effective in us when it has produced these three fruits. Paul himself exhorts us to:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (II Cor. 13:5 RSV)

The frequency of the occurrence of these three graces, not only in Paul, but in the rest of the New Testament and other early Christian literature, demonstrates that they were considered to be undeniable evidences of the grace of God and the power of the Gospel. Whether they are mentioned together as in I Cor. 13:13, I Thessalonians 1:2, I Peter 1: 3-8, and Hebrews 6:10-12, or separately or in pairs, always in the New Testament they are the evidence of genuine spiritual life.

We would do well to ask ourselves the question Paul must have asked of Epaphras when he gave his report on the Colossians: “How about their faith, hope, and love”? To assist us in our self-examination let us make sure that we understand what he means by each.

Let us begin with hope. Even though it is last in order in the text it appears that Paul sees it as the source from which the other two spring. This is the reason we have translated “this (i.e. you faith and love) arises from your hope”. In 1:21-23 Paul writes:

“And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight -- if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.” (NKJV)

In this passage Paul is anticipating what would happen to the believers of Colosse if they were to listen to the false teachers. To abandon the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ is to abandon hope. Hope is the assurance that the gospel brings, the assurance that we have been made right with God through Jesus Christ. It is the hope of eternal life. It is a hope that is presently being kept for us in heaven. Genuine spiritual life begins with that conviction. God is for me who can be against me. God has not forgotten nor abandoned me, but he has provided an eternal hope of salvation by sending his own Son, Jesus Christ to be my savior. Those who have experienced the life-giving, life-transforming power of the Gospel can say with the Apostle: “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (II Tim. 1:12).

From this hope born of hearing and receiving God’s good news of salvation about Jesus Christ springs first faith, then love. Faith is trust. It is the God-given capacity to anchor one’s life completely in the reality of Jesus Christ. It is what Edward Moore expressed in his hymn “The Solid Rock”:

“My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.”

That kind of faith produces willing and loving obedience, and the obedience of faith manifests itself in acts of love as the love of God is given to us by the Holy Spirit. Christians have often defined themselves in negative terms, in terms of what they don’t do, and certainly to belong to Christ is to forsake all that is offensive to Christ, but the test of genuine faith is not about what we don’t do, it is not about what we have forsaken and given up, for it would be possible to do that outside of the power of the Gospel. The

test is about the positive realities of a living hope, an obedient love, and a self-sacrificing love. These are the unfailing evidence of the work of the Gospel, the marks of a living relationship with Christ.