

When the Gospel Comes to Town

Colossians: Christ Above All

By Dr. D. Ralph Davis

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Colossians 1:1-8
Preached on: Sunday, September 7, 2014

First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpcolumbia

My Scripture this evening comes from Colossians 1:1-8. Colossians 1 and we'll begin reading at verse 1.

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Timothy the brother, To the saints in Colossae, even to the faithful brothers in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we keep on praying 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 put aside for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of truth, the gospel which came to you, even as also in all the world it keeps on producing fruit and growing, so also among you from the day you heard and came to know the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras, our dearly loved fellow slave, who is for us a faithful minister of Christ who also made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Now you're never gonna get one of those brochures in the mail that has a package of certain cruises that you can take, not one that will take you to Colossae. It's 120 miles east of Ephesus. It's far inland in the area of Phrygia, what used to be Phrygia would be in the middle, near the middle of Turkey now. It was too far inland and, in any case, Colossae is overshadowed by its nearby cities of Laodicea and Heropolis. Colossae did produce a certain dye that was used for textiles and it was on the major trade route from the Aegean Sea to Syria and the east, but Colossae has never had more than surface surveys done there. Colossae has never been excavated, so it's no use you going there unless you want to stand at the foot of Mount Cadmus, 8,435 feet, and admire the surroundings. But if you never get to visit there, you may get an idea of the Christians who lived there in Paul's time. You get that in verses 1 and 2, of course. You find that there are people under the authority of Christ, it says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus." An apostle was one who was sent and the idea was that the one who is sent is as the one who sent him. So when Paul speaks or when Paul writes, it's as if the authority of Jesus, of Christ himself, is speaking through him or through what he writes.

There are people under the authority of Christ and they're also a people with a demanding calling. You notice that they're called "saints in Colossae, even faithful brothers in Christ." They're in Christ and They're in Colossae. They have to be faithful as ones united to Christ, in Christ, and yet they must live out that union with Christ in the real circumstances of Colossae. They're in Christ. They're in Colossae. You're in Christ. You're in Columbia. It can be a demanding calling.

But then they're also a people well provided for. Notice he says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father." Now grace is here not what we would call so much saving grace, although grace is always unmerited and so on, but I think here it's more sustaining grace. You remember what Jesus said to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, "My grace is all you need. My power is most fully displayed when My people are weak." You notice how he defines grace in terms of power. "My grace is all you need. My power is most fully displayed." Grace is also Christ's power continually communicated to his people to keep them staying on their feet. "Grace to you."

He continually gives it and then he gives them peace. That's not primarily feelings of peace necessarily. In Colossae there may not be much peace sometimes and so on, or Columbia, but this is peace, primarily peace with God. There's a certain relationship of reconciliation with God himself, that though everything else may be somewhat in a turmoil and a furor, there's a peace at the center of things. You can have grace and you have peace, you're a people well provided for and that's the case with the Colossians.

So those are the people. Now Paul is under house arrest, I think in Rome. We don't need to take 10 minutes to discuss where that was. It was probably in Rome and you get a picture of that in Acts 28, the last chapter of the book of Acts. So Paul's in house arrest in Rome and he's holding a little thanksgiving service here in verses 3 to 8 which is the focus of our concern tonight, and it's as if he's saying, "I'm so thankful to God that the Gospel has come to you in Colossae and for the difference it has made." But Paul's not always thoughtful. He simply takes off into one long sentence in which he tacks on thought after thought and he just goes on and on in verses 3 through 8. I know some of your translations divide it up into maybe three sentences, that's because they think you need help but it's really one long sentence of 102 Greek words and about 129 English words and the ESV lets it all hang out in one, semicolons and commas etc. and it just goes on. Paul's done worse but this challenges you to try to pull it all together and think it through and that's what you have in this thanksgiving. You know what Paul does? It's typical, when he gets excited he just takes off and that's what you have here and we're meant to join in this thanksgiving. He doesn't express his thanksgiving just so we can go, "Uh-huh." No, Scripture is always trying to pull a response out of you. Scripture is always taking you by the lapels, it's always trying to get a reaction from you but if we're gonna know what Paul's thankful for and all of that, we better try to unpack his thanksgiving and understand what it was in particular that he was thankful for so that we can understand how we, ourselves, should be grateful.

In the first place, then, Paul is thankful for the natural combination of the Gospel, verses 3 and 4, especially 4. The natural combination of the Gospel. "We always give thanks to

God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we continually pray for you, having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints." The big word there in verse 4 is "and." We've heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints. The second always follows from the first. If the second does, if there isn't the love for all the saints, then there's something wrong with the faith in Christ Jesus. If the love doesn't follow for the saints then for God's people, then there's something defective with the faith. You see how it goes together: your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints, for God's people. That's the way it is. Faith in Christ, love for Christ's people. One follows the other. They go together.

Some of you may not have heard of Eddie Plank. Eddie Plank was a baseball pitcher about 1901 and played for the Philadelphia Athletics. This won't help some of you either but Eddie Plank was the Warren Spahn before Warren Spahn, if that helps some of you. In any case, he was a little eccentric like some baseball players are and he had a rule, he would not pitch a ballgame unless he had a bowl of tomato soup for lunch, no matter how hot the weather was. Now there you have your principle. If you're gonna pitch, there has to be a bowl of tomato soup for lunch. No tomato soup, no pitch. The two go together. That's what you have here. Faith in Christ Jesus, love for Christ's people. The two always must go together. It's the natural combination of the Gospel.

Now so you come to faith in Jesus, then you care for the people of Jesus. Their cares and their troubles and their tragedies and their joys matter to you and you find that your prayers are littered with intercession for other believers more than for your own needs perhaps. That's the way it works. Now please understand this isn't some rosy colored idealism that a preacher has. Far from it because Christ's people, the people here called saints, all of the saints, they're not necessarily the most lovable, congenial, attractive people at all. Now some of them are, I grant you that, but I have to say that I've had more problems from Christians, more trouble, more aggravation, more frustrations from Christian people than from pagans. It's tough messing around with Christian people. It's not some idealistic thing when Paul says, "faith in Christ Jesus and love for all the saints," but the one must follow the other as uncongenial and difficult as it sometimes may be. That's just the way it is. If you have faith in Jesus, you simply care about the people of Jesus. You can't help yourself. That's the natural combination of the Gospel and Paul's thankful for that. He wants you to be.

Secondly, you find that he's thankful for the powerful incentive of the Gospel. The powerful incentive of the Gospel. Let me try to explain. Here we look especially at verse 5. Okay, so let's go back and pick up verse 4 there where he says, "we've heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints because of the hope put aside for you in heaven of which you heard before in the word of truth, the Gospel." Now what's the connection there? Do you see that first part of verse 5, "because of the hope put aside for you in heaven," but it connects with what goes in verse 4. What is the nature of that connection? Well, it seems that verse 5 is telling us what it is that drives faith and love in verse 4. What is it that makes this faith in verse 4 go on believing, or this love in verse 4 go on loving? You do that because of the hope put aside for you in heaven. That's

what Paul is saying. It's this hope that drives and motivates and stimulates your Christian life.

It may sound a little bit odd but that's what the text is saying. What is this hope, though? Well, in the New Testament hope is not the way we usually think of it. We have when we use hope as a verb, we often use it in the idea of a bare possibility. "Well, I hope so." That's not the way the New Testament uses the idea of hope. In the New Testament hope, it's not merely an optimistic outlook. You know, there are some people who are optimistic just because they don't know any better and that's not what biblical hope is. So it's not just an optimistic feeling or your spirits are up, and hope in the New Testament is not something uncertain. There's no uncertainty about hope itself. It's not whistling in the dark. The thing about hope in the New Testament is it refers to what is certain. It's the time of the hope that's uncertain. We don't know the time of it, that is, that the content of the hope is certain, the arrival of the hope is what we don't know but that's a little different way of looking at hope than we usually have.

So what do we say, can we just do a quick short course in hope in the New Testament? Well, very inadequate but maybe we can try. What is this hope? Well, it's personal. You notice in 1 Timothy 1:1, Paul refers to Christ Jesus, our hope. Christ Jesus himself is our hope. Our hope is personal and then our hope is tied not to feelings, it's tied to an event. You remember Paul says in Titus 2:13 we are ones who are looking or expecting or looking for the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. It's the Second Coming of Jesus. It's an event that is the object of our hope.

You remember, too, that this hope involves the resurrection from the dead, the bodily resurrection. You remember what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:3 where he gets, Peter gets excited, he says, "How blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who in line with His massive mercy has caused us to be born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." And he goes on to spec out what that hope is but there's part of it there. If that's a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, then that hope also involves us as Jesus' people with the resurrection of the body from the dead. That, too, is a part of our hope.

Then, of course, the hope in the New Testament involves ongoing fellowship with Jesus, doesn't it? There was a funeral service for Cathy Joy yesterday. At the very first of the service, Dr. Thomas quoted those words of Jesus from John 14, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with Myself that where I am, there you may be also." That's part of that hope, that ongoing fellowship with Jesus.

So there's something of what the New Testament means by hope in short scope. Now notice here in verse 5, though, it's a secure hope, "because of the hope set aside or put aside for you in heaven." Put aside, laid aside, maybe treasured up, as if it's secure and it is secure. That's what Paul means. It's not something that can be plundered. It's not something that can be wrecked. It's not something that can be ruined or something that

can be kidnapped or something like that. No, it's put aside for you in heaven. It's a secure hope.

Now there's a lot of hope that we can have that isn't very secure. Richard Bues tells of Arthur Peuchen who was a Canadian who one night stepped out of his first class cabin on an ocean liner, he was clutching three oranges. Inside his cabin in a tin box there were \$200,000 of bonds and \$100,000 in preferred stock but when he stepped out of his cabin door, he thought three oranges would be more useful. He was on the Titanic and it was going down and there are some things that just aren't very secure as a hope. But Paul says this is a secure hope. It's put aside. It's put aside in heaven for you. Secure.

So the pattern and the logic of the text here, again if you follow the connection between verse 4 and verse 5 then is just this, that it's the certainty and the security of your hope that sets you free to believe and love. Why do you go on believing in Jesus and go on loving his people? Because of the hope set aside for you in heaven. You might say, "Well, I'm sure I see..." Well, that's the logic whether you can put it all together. It's because your future is nailed down that it sets you free to live now in the way you need to live.

When we were having the Thornwell Lectures here recently this summer, it was one of note, it was one of the two lectures but if I call one name it was probably the other, so it was one of the last two or three lecturers referred to a certain incident as an illustration, and I had read of this a number of years ago as well in Daily Bread devotional booklet. A pastor had apparently used it as an illustration. It was when they were building and so on, constructing I guess the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco a number of years ago, and during the first part of the construction there were no safety devices used and 23 men fell to their deaths. For the last part of the project, there was a large, huge net that was put in place that cost \$100,000. At least 10 men fell into it and were rescued, but what was really interesting was this little side fact that there was 25% more work accomplished when the men were assured of their safety. That's what security does to you, it liberates you.

Now that's what Paul is saying here and what does that mean? Well, it means that being assured of our future sparks effort now. So turn a deaf ear to the yo-yos who tell you that you can be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good, or to those who say that you're so hung up on pie-in-the-sky by and by. It's precisely that pie that makes you care about what's happening in the pit now. That's the powerful incentive of the Gospel. It's because you have a sure hope.

Well, thirdly, Paul is thankful for what we could call the universal vitality of the Gospel. That sounds kind of cumbersome but that's what he seems to be trying to put together what he's saying there in verse 6. You notice he just refers to the word of the truth, word of truth, the Gospel and then he says in verse 6, "which came to you, was present among you even as also in all the world it keeps on bearing fruit and growing, so also among you." The universal vitality of the Gospel. It's as if Paul is saying, "You know, there's a certain flourishing, there's a certain fruitfulness, there's a certain liveliness about the

Gospel and this is the way the Gospel works throughout the world. It's taking place that way, the Gospel is working that way throughout the world and it's working that way among you folks in Colossae as well." It's as if he's saying, "It keeps on bearing fruit and growing." It's as if he says, it's as if there's a hidden power in the Gospel. You know the buzzword everybody uses, dynamic. There's a dynamic in the Gospel. There's that hidden power in the Gospel which implies something else, it implies, can we use the word, the unstoppable of the Gospel and the Colossians are evidence of this. It's operated that way also among them.

Now it's in Rome where Paul's now in prison writing to the Colossians and so on, and Acts makes quite a statement, you know, about Gospel power even in Rome. You remember that sort of overall sketch Luke gives you in Jesus' words in Acts 1:8, "You'll be witnesses to Me both in Jerusalem and to all Judea and Samaria and unto the end of the earth." Then you get to Acts 28, the very end of the book, and the Gospel is at the end of the earth, isn't it, as Luke says in Acts 28 about verse 14, "And so we came to Rome and the brothers there when they heard about us, came to meet us as far as the forum of Appius," and so on. "We came to Rome and there were brothers there. The Gospel had already come there and there was a church there, there were believers there and they met us," and so on. Then you have also in Rome at the very last verse of the book of Acts, that Paul is there under house arrest, probably chained to a Roman soldier, etc., but it says he was proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. In Rome. At the end of the earth. The Gospel kept on bearing fruit and growing.

The universal vitality of the Gospel and there's just something unstoppable about that and this power of the Gospel and this unstoppable of the Gospel seems to lie behind sometimes certain, well, expressions in the New Testament that we may not think too much about. I think it was in a lecture to maybe a few of you were there, I'm not trying to put a guilt trip on you but it was earlier this year, I think, that I tried to underscore what seems to be implied in Philippians 4:22, the page before Colossians 1. There at the end of Philippians, remember Paul said, "All the saints greet you but especially those of Caesar's household." Caesar's household, the saints in Caesar's household. That's interesting, isn't it? That refers to the whole imperial household. It doesn't mean Caesar's immediate family. That is, that the whole imperial household from the lowest slaves to the most powerful courtiers, and in Rome this contingent numbered in the hundreds and perhaps in the thousands. It was the imperial civil service. It was a vast bureaucracy. It included all sorts of people. Quarry superintendents. Bankers. Shoemakers. Dining room attendants. Hairdressers. Midwives. Surgeons. Anointers of perfume and aftershave. Mail carriers. Latrine cleaners. The whole shooting match. They were in the imperial household. Everybody has a government job, you might say, and yet they were believers in Jesus in Caesar's household. That's the implication of that verse. Ah, does Nero have a clue that that's the case? How can you hold the Gospel out? Can you get a Gospel shot like a flu shot? What can you do because it seems that the Gospel oozes and slithers and sneaks its way into the echelons even of government and there's no spray or disinfectant or Lysol that can counteract it.

In other days when the Soviet Union was still intact, probably I don't know maybe in the 1980s, early '80s, I'm not sure but there was a Christian evangelical by the name of Samuel Nestle who was traveling with his wife Lil in the Soviet Union. They were Christians and so on, and they were about ready to come home from their time there and they decided, they looked at their tourist guidebook and they found that there was one place that had a 16th century chapel in this home, and it was on the tour guide stuff and they decided they would have just enough time to take that in before they had to leave. So they went to that. When they did, they found the chapel would have probably seated some several hundred worshipers rather than the dozen or so sightseers that were following the middle-aged guide around that place. But it was interesting, it struck them, this guide seemed to be very knowledgeable of biblical history and she dwelt in considerable detail, for example, that incident portrayed in one of the paintings of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road. Nestle says, "From the warmth and urgency of her tone, she seemed to be engaged in evangelism rather than officially correct, detached explanation." So when the tour was over, the Nestles waited until everyone had left and they went up to her and they thanked her for the personal conviction which seemed to infect her words and then she shook her head negatively when Nestle reached into his pocket, she probably thought he was going to give her a tip and she didn't want a tip, but her face absolutely glowed and she uttered a thankful, "God be with you," when he handed her a tract in the Russian language. Right in the shadow of the Kremlin, the Gospel had, as we sometimes say in Pennsylvania, had snuck in. There was one of Christ's own there. You just can't keep it out. There's a certain unstoppable about it. It keeps on bearing fruit and growing. The universal vitality of the Gospel.

And that ought to be an encouragement to you because within our family connections, you know, there are various folk, not all of them are converted, sometimes just an unconverted spouse, isn't it? Sometimes it's a son or daughter that stiff-arms the Gospel. Sometimes it's an indifferent parent. And sometimes there's some hostility from these folks and you need to understand not in all cases but some cases there's a reason for that hostility, it's fear, because sometimes they sense that if you're living under the Gospel, it might get them as well. You never know whom the Gospel is going to grab next and that can scare the liver out of some folks. I'm not saying that's the reason for all hostility but you have to understand that sometimes with those who are close to you, that can be a factor. I mean, if Jesus can crash Caesar's household and bring some of them to faith, who is safe? That's the universal vitality of the Gospel and you ought to be thankful for that because that gives hope for some of the people you're praying for.

Notice, fourthly, you notice that Paul refers to the particular servants of the Gospel, verses 7 and 8. Well, let's look at verse 7, particular servants of the Gospel and now he refers to the grace of God in truth at the last of verse 6, and the grace of God there is Paul's synonym for the Gospel, "you came to know the grace of God in truth just as you learned it from Epaphras, our dearly loved fellow slave who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf." There's a compliment Paul pays Epaphras, he's our fellow slave. Paul's a slave of Christ. Epaphras is right beside me. He's a fellow slave. And he says he's a faithful servant on our behalf. I know some of your translations read "your behalf" but the

better reading is "our behalf." Paul's speaking of Epaphras' work in Colossae that, in a sense, was done on behalf of Paul.

Now how did the Colossians learn the Gospel? From Epaphras who was from Colossae. What seems to be the scenario is that Epaphras may have heard the Gospel when Paul was in Ephesus and he was preaching and teaching there and Epaphras heard the Gospel there and then determined that he would take the Gospel back to his hometown of Colossae over 100 miles east of Ephesus and see if it would establish itself there. And so they heard the Gospel from Epaphras, so it's as if Paul is saying to the Colossians, "How did you hear of Jesus crucified and risen, who takes away all your guilt and your fears? Well, you learned it from Epaphras. He's the one who told you."

You see, the Gospel may be in all the world as verse 6 says, but it has to come as Al Roker says when he's talking about the weather, to your neck of the woods. It has to come in this case to Colossae or Columbia or whatever, and who knows who your Epaphrases have been. I wonder if you've thought about who has been your Epaphras? Sometimes many of us have several Epaphras types, don't we? Some Christian friend that we had at university. Some associate we had at work. Perhaps a mentor. Perhaps a father or a mother that taught us patiently over the years the word of God and the Gospel and never, never got to reap the benefit of being able to personally lead us to a confession of faith in Christ but they provided all the groundwork and all the stuff that we needed until the point where maybe someone else reaped the benefit, you might say, of seeing us come actually to make a confession of faith. But there may be lots of Epaphrases but there are these particular servants of Christ that bring the Gospel to us and Paul's so thankful that Epaphras took it to these people in Colossae. Oftentimes these people are little recognized and generally unheralded but how thankful we need to be for them.

Well, there was a fellow by the name of Anthony Cooper in England. He later became in 1851 Lord Shaftesbury. He was a Christian who put his faith to work in what is sometimes called the public square, child labor reform and so on. He poured himself into these things. He was a bit eccentric as well, but a Christian who put his faith to work in the public square to be sure. It didn't look, though, like there would be much in store for Anthony Cooper, though, if you looked at his home life. His mother and father didn't really like their children. In fact, one fellow said that his parents heartily disliked their children and they had nine of them. You would think they would have wised up but they didn't like their kids. His mother, Anthony's mother was a socialite and a butterfly, you know, going all over, all the glitter and glitz and so on. And Anthony's father, well, he was pretty cruel. He would knock Anthony down to try to, I suppose teach him a lesson or something, and he told Anthony's tutor at school that he should knock Anthony down. That's the way you treat him. That's the way you get results. That's the kind of home life he grew up with.

Ah, yes, but there was a woman by the name of Maria Millis. Nobody knows about her but she happened to be a servant and a house servant of Anthony Cooper's mother and Maria Millis loved Anthony Cooper with a love his mother never gave him. Maria Millis doesn't sound or didn't sound to me like a terribly brilliant woman but she had been the

member of an evangelical parish, probably an evangelical Anglican parish, and she had come to have a simple, warm, Gospel faith and she taught Anthony Bible stories and she taught him how to pray and Lord Shaftesbury later in life said, "She was the best friend I ever had in this life." Maria Millis died when Anthony Cooper was eight years old but she had left her mark. She was an Epaphras in skirts. She was a particular servant of the Gospel who was the human reason why Lord Shaftesbury ended up in the kingdom of God, and you can probably look back and you can think about your Epaphrases tonight and perhaps you need to spend a little time giving thanks and remembering them.

So the Gospel came to town, as the first part of verse 6 says, but it's a little more important than just the Gospel coming to town, isn't it? What matters has the Gospel come experientially to you? Paul, of course, in this epistle wants to stir up these Colossian Christians to grasp the supremacy and the splendor of Jesus but first you must know the grace of God in truth. That's Paul's term for the Gospel. There's not much value about understanding more about Jesus if you've never come to know Jesus. What is that grace of God, that Gospel? Well, of course, it's about Jesus who lived a life you fail to live and so he offers you his righteousness and takes your raunchiness. It's about the Jesus who's died the death you should have died so that he can offer you his pardon and take your penalty. But it's no use moving on, you see, unless we've really tasted and seen that the Lord is good. The Gospel has come to town, has it come to you?

Now our Father, many of us know something of what that's like to, as it were, live in two worlds so we pray that this week we would be faithful in Christ and in Columbia. We pray that You would grant that we might be faithful exhibits of the Gospel we've received. In Jesus' name. Amen.