

"A FRUITFUL GOSPEL"

I. Introduction

- A. Tonight we begin a new evening sermon series through Paul's epistle to the Colossians.
1. Colossae was a city in the province known in Paul's day as Asia Minor (in our day, this region is the nation of Turkey).
 2. Like the other cities in Asia Minor, Colossae was religiously syncretistic.
 3. That is, the prominent religious influences in the city were a blend of the old Greek cults and the more contemporary mystery-religions of the Greco-Roman world.
 4. Colossae also had a Jewish synagogue with a substantial number of adherents.
 5. All in all, there was a significant amount of religious diversity in Colossae and, as we will see in our study of this letter, this was creating a particular set of challenges for the church there.
- B. The church in Colossae was not begun by Paul himself, but by a man named Epaphras, who was one of Paul's ministry associates and probably one of Paul's converts.
1. As we learn in verses 7-8, Paul wrote this letter in response to a report that Epaphras had conveyed to him about the church in Colossae.
 2. Paul wanted to address the problems that were being experienced by this church, and particularly to confront some of the false teachings to which it was being exposed.

3. While it is difficult for us to know the exact nature of this false teaching, it seems to have included both Jewish and pagan elements.
 4. It focused on the promise of a deeper experience and knowledge of God.
 5. Because of this, Paul's key theme throughout this letter is the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ.
- C. The epistle begins with the conventional greeting used in first century letters.
1. Paul identifies himself as an apostle, thus establishing his credentials with the church in Colossae, a church that he had never visited and which did not know him personally.
 2. He specifies that he is an apostle "by the will of God," which reminds us that the apostles had a special kind of authority in the church.
 3. They were Jesus's personally authorized agents to lay the foundation for his church as the heralds of his gospel.
- D. Next, Paul names the recipients of his letter, describing them as "the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae."
1. This tells us several fundamental things about our identity as Christians.
 2. First, every Christian is a saint because every Christian has been set apart as holy to the Lord.
 3. Second, we are called to be faithful to Christ and his gospel.
 4. Third, we are a part of a spiritual brotherhood as members of the body of Christ.

5. Fourth, we are no longer in Adam and the covenant of works but are in Christ and the covenant of grace.
 6. And fifth, every Christian is expected to be a part of a particular Christian community, whether it is in Colossae, Laconia, or some other locale.
- E. The final part of Paul's greeting is the salutation, which says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father."
1. We should not read over this and assume that it is just a standard boilerplate that functions as a mere formality.
 2. There is rich meaning in these words.
 3. Grace is God's favor to those who deserve judgment.
 4. As J.I. Packer explains so well in his classic book *Knowing God*, "The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity, and had no reason to expect anything but severity." [120]
 5. For a Jewish Christian like Paul, the notion of peace was shaped by the Hebrew term for "peace," which is *shalom*.
 6. This term occurs over 250 times in the Hebrew Bible.
 7. *Shalom* refers to the state of well-being that is enjoyed by those who live under God's blessing.
 8. It hearkens back to God's pronouncement of the goodness of the created order in the opening chapter of Genesis.
 9. *Shalom* is about God's restoration of the world to the way things ought to be.
 10. Paul can declare this peace upon the Colossian Christians because through the gospel they have been reconciled to God and have

been made members of the new creation that is being brought about in Jesus Christ.

11. And then the last part of the salutation tells us that our Father in heaven is the source of his grace and peace.
12. God is our Father because he has embraced us as his children in Christ.

II. Faith in Christ

- A. As we turn now to the main body of our text, verses 3-8, we find another customary feature of Paul's letters, a prayer of thanksgiving.
 1. We should take note of Paul's dedication to praying for these believers whom he had never met.
 2. Here was a man who truly loved Christ's church.
 3. His gratitude to God is not only focused on the things that God has done for him personally, but also for the things that he is doing in the lives of others.
- B. Paul refers to God as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."
 1. This calls our attention to the fact that God has manifested himself to us in his Son.
 2. It could be that Paul chose to use this name for God because of how it underscores the theme of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.
- C. In his prayer of gratitude, Paul thanks God for three things in the lives of these believers: their faith, their love, and their hope.
 1. This triad frequently appears together in Paul's letters, seven times in all (see Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6; Eph. 4:2-5; and 1 Thess. 1:3 and 5:8).

2. This is an indication that Paul viewed faith, love and hope as a basic grid for understanding the Christian life.
 3. As Paul expresses in this passage, Christian faith, love, and hope call for a response of thanksgiving to God, because they are the evidence that the gospel is bearing fruit.
- D. It is appropriate that Paul would mention faith first, because there would be no Christian life without faith.
1. Faith is the means by which we receive God's grace in Christ.
 2. Christ is the object of our faith.
 3. This is why the Shorter Catechism defines faith as "a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon [Christ] alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel." [WSC 86]
 4. Notice how that definition tells us that faith is the mode in which we live the Christian life.
 5. We continue to rest upon Christ for all our days.
 6. This definition also refers to faith as a "grace," which means that it is something that God confers upon us.
 7. This point is implicitly made in our text, because the fact that Paul gives thanks to God for the Colossians' faith indicates that this faith was not produced by them but by God.

III. Love for the Saints

- A. The second thing that Paul thanks God for here is the Colossians' love for all the saints.
1. Christians love their fellow believers because this is one of the key ways that we show our love for God.

2. Because the Christian life is a corporate life, love for one another is to be the hallmark of the church.
 3. The gospel creates a new community, where people are bound to one another, loving those with whom they previously may have had nothing in common.
- B. It is important to remember that our love for our fellow saints is not extended because they are particularly lovable.
1. Sometimes they are not all that lovable.
 2. Sometimes they are difficult to love.
 3. But we love our fellow believers because Christ has first loved us.
 4. We have a bond with our brothers and sisters in Christ that transcends all other human bonds.
 5. In the most important sense, we are closer to saints even of other times and other cultures than we are to our own family and friends who do not know the Lord.
 6. Let us strive to be a people who can honestly say these words from Psalm 16: "As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight."

IV. Hope Laid Up in Heaven

- A. The third thing for which Paul gives thanks in his prayer for these Christians is the hope that is laid up for them in heaven.
1. In the Bible, hope is not a subjective feeling or a wish.
 2. It is not like saying, 'Oh, I hope that I get an official Red Ryder B.B. gun for Christmas this year.'
 3. Christian hope is an objective reality and a matter of certainty.

4. It is “the hope laid up for [us] in heaven,” which has been secured for us by Christ’s finished work.
5. This hope enables us to live lives that are marked by faith and love.
6. Our hope is grounded upon the fact that Jesus Christ has been risen from the dead and is even now reigning at God’s right hand.
7. This is why Paul can write these words in chapter 3 of Colossians: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (Col. 3:1-4)
8. As Christians, we are no longer a part of this fallen world, not in the ultimate sense.
9. Even though we still live in the world, we do so as members of God’s new creation in Jesus Christ.
10. Our lives are hidden with Christ.
11. This is our hope, and it radically affects the way we live in this world, because it helps us to see this life from a heavenly perspective.

V. The Word of Truth

- A. In the last part of our text, Paul talks about where this message of hope comes from.
 1. The Colossians heard about it through the word of truth, the gospel.
 2. It is called the word of truth because it sets forth God’s good news in Jesus Christ.

3. Christian faith, hope, and love are brought about by hearing and understanding the gospel.
 4. This is how Christ's kingdom is advancing in this present age.
- B. In verse 6, Paul says that the gospel is "bearing fruit and growing," both in the church at Colossae and throughout the whole world.
1. Paul's choice of wording in this verse ties in with an overarching biblical theme.
 2. The mention of fruitfulness recalls one aspect of the creation account in the opening chapters of Genesis.
 3. When God created our first parents, he gave them the following instructions: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."
 4. This was not just about population growth.
 5. This command immediately followed God's pronouncement that man was made in his own image.
 6. Adam and Eve were being commissioned as God's representative rulers over all the earth.
 7. They were being commanded to subdue the earth for God by filling it with people who reflect God's image.
- C. While our first parents' sin rendered them and their posterity incapable of fulfilling this command, God's purpose could not be thwarted.
1. This is why the mandate that God gave to Adam and Eve is repeated throughout the Pentateuch, except that it is no longer a command for man to keep but a pronouncement given by God.
 2. When God made his covenant with Abraham, he said: "I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers... I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations

of you, and kings will come from you...The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." (Gen. 17:2, 6, 8)

3. During the time of Joseph, we read: "Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number." (Gen. 47:27)
 4. And at the beginning of Exodus, we read that "the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them." (Ex. 1:7)
 5. The repetition of this theme reveals that the idea of being fruitful and increasing is intimately linked to the establishment of Israel as the covenant people of God.
 6. After the Fall, man did not subdue the earth in God's name, because sin estranged him from God.
 7. But in Christ God is creating a renewed humanity, redeemed by him and called by his name, and they will fill the earth with his glory.
- D. In our passage, when Paul says that the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing all over the world, he is saying that the Genesis mandate given to Adam and Eve as the first parents of humanity is being fulfilled by Christ through the spread of his gospel.
1. The church is the community that has its identity in the last Adam, Jesus Christ, whom Paul describes in Colossians 1:15 as the perfect "image of the invisible God."
 2. Through our union with Christ, we are being renewed as God's image bearers, as Paul writes in Colossians 3:10.
 3. We are a part of the new creation, and we already participate in the life of the world to come.

4. In the words of David VanDrunen, "Because of the obedience of the last Adam, a human being has already attained the life of the world-to-come, and believers, united to Christ, already participate in its life and have a share in its rights and privileges, without any need to earn them by their own obedience." [*Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, 61-2]

VI. Conclusion

- A. When Paul received the report about the Colossians from Epaphras, he interpreted what was happening through the lenses of the biblical storyline.
- B. Here was an instance of God's new creation breaking forth in this world.
- C. The church at Colossae was far from perfect, but this did not detract from the fact that they were a testimony to the power of the gospel.
- D. The faith, love and hope that they exhibited caused Paul to burst forth in thanks to God.
- E. In like manner, the faith, love and hope that we see in the church, both past and present, should cause us to give thanks to our Lord.
- F. The church will never attain perfection in this age, but it is a testimony to the power of the gospel bearing fruit all over the world.