



Central Peninsula Church

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Colossians 1:1-8
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A Church That Makes You Thankful

As a physician, Sigmund Freud was trained to believe that people were merely biological and chemical organisms. He concluded that problems like anxiety, depression and fear were simply physical disorders and treatable through medical intervention. But then Freud made a life changing discovery. He discovered that by just talking to his patients he could help them. At first he was totally puzzled by this. How could words (conversation) have such amazing power? Over time this discovery became the basis for his theory of psychoanalysis and much of the therapy that goes on today works off this assumption.

Now we might not agree with everything that Freud stood for, but Freud was on to something. If he had only consulted the Scriptures he would have seen that his discovery was already well-documented. Listen to what the writer of Proverbs wrote about the healing power of words:

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Prov. 18:21).
Good words can make an anxious heart glad (Prov. 12:25).
A soothing tongue is a tree of life (Prov. 15:4).
Pleasant words are sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Prov. 16:24).
Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances (Prov. 25:11).

We say things like, "Well, those are just words," but these verses show us words are important. They have power. They can bring life and peace and even healing to broken and defeated people. There are many ways to encourage one another - making a meal, showing up at the hospital, inviting a new family in town to dinner. But there is nothing like the capacity of words to bring encouragement.

The apostle Paul knew this. Raised a strict Jew, he knew how God created the world through his Word. He commanded, "Let there be light," and there was light. Paul had a high regard for the power of words. Maybe this was why he was such a prolific writer. He wrote much of what we call the New Testament. He wrote letters to churches which were designed to instruct and sometimes correct young churches in the truth. But more than anything else, these letters were designed to bring encouragement to discouraged and anxious believers in small communities peppered throughout the vast Roman Empire.

One of those letters was written to a church in the city of Colosse. Today we begin a new study on Paul's letter to the church at Colosse.

I. Background

The town of Colosse was located about eighty miles inland from the city of Ephesus, in the Lycus River Valley. Today, this is the western part of Turkey. At one time it was a prominent town, but by the time Paul wrote this letter in 60 AD it was overshadowed by Laodicea and Hieropolis. Scholars believe the Colossian church came into existence while Paul ministered in Ephesus for two years. Acts 19:10 says that during this time "all who lived in the province of Asia (which included Colosse) heard the word of the Lord." It appears that while in Ephesus two visitors from Colosse heard Paul's message and became followers of Christ. One of these men was Philemon who later hosted the Colossian church. The other was Epaphras, who became Paul's chief emissary in bringing the Gospel to the Lycus Valley. Though Paul himself had never visited there, soon there was a small but thriving group of Christ-followers in Colosse. Paul, of course had a deep interest in them.

On one occasion, Epaphras made a trip to Rome where Paul was in prison. Epaphras needed advice. False teachers had come into the church and began propagating some ideas that didn't seem consistent with the simple message of the Gospel. Scholars believe it was some mixture of Christianity and an ancient religion called Gnosticism. Gnostics believed they had secret knowledge without which Christians could never attain a deeper spirituality. Gnostics considered themselves to be "people in the know," the spiritual elite with all the answers. They taught that matter (anything physical or created) was evil and that only spirit was good. Based on that, they reasoned that God could never dirty his hands with created matter. Instead, he sent out thousands of emanations (lesser gods), each more distant from himself, to deal with created matter. This presented a problem when it came to the person of Christ. God could never have taken on a human body; he could never defile himself with creation. So the Gnostics taught that Christ was some kind of ghost-like phantom. He was not God in the flesh. He was a distant emanation from God. So knowing Christ and trusting Christ was not enough to attain true spirituality. Christ was just the first rung on the ladder which eventually led to God. The only way to climb the ladder was to live a very strict life where you denied yourself all the pleasures of creation, and where you learned the secret knowledge, which in fact was a mixture of Eastern mysticism, astrology and Jewish legalism.

You can imagine how shaken the young believers at Colosse were. They had been taught that Christ was everything; that if you had Christ, if you trusted the Christ the Apostles had seen and heard and touched, you had it all. But now Christ wasn't enough; he was just the first rung on a long ladder that led to God. All of a sudden peace and joy were replaced with fear and

discouragement.

I'm afraid most believers today live in a fairly constant state of discouragement and fear and even doubt as to their real standing with God. At some point in their past they have received Christ into their lives and that made a real difference. They began to grow and change, but because growth and change come slowly and sometimes imperceptively, they get discouraged. They look at other Christians who seem to have it all together; so much joy, so much certainty; so much passion. They begin to think they're missing something. Maybe simple faith in Christ and obedience to him isn't enough. Maybe they need more to really experience the deeper life. They go to seminars. They read the latest books. They start to read their horoscope. They might even be Christian seminars and Christian books, but the idea is that we're incomplete without what they teach us and we need more than simple dependence on Christ.

Many of you have read Bruce Wilkinson's little bestseller, *The Prayer of Jabez*. Now I think there are so many good things in that book and I respect the author. I might even recommend that book to you. But I have a problem when people make what's in that book the secret to the Christian life; that if you just pray the prayer of Jabez every day you will begin to experience and enjoy greater blessings that otherwise would not be yours. Scripture says we're already complete in Christ and have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Whatever happened to the prayer of Jesus? If I'm going to pray any prayer every day, it's going to be HIS prayer. Don't get me wrong - I like the book. I like the author. But I don't like some of the reasons people are reading it and some of the conclusions people are making.

This was the problem in Colosse. All of a sudden, it was as if Christ wasn't enough. Paul heard about all of this from Epaphras and you can imagine the steamed look on Paul's face. Nobody was more passionate about Christ and his church than Paul. No doubt he thought and prayed about this and the result was a letter (words) he sent back to the church at Colosse. In this letter, Paul presents Christ in the sublimest terms found anywhere in Scripture, and he says to the Colossians, if you have Christ, you have it all; you are complete, you have reached the last rung on the ladder. That's what believers need to hear today.

You can even see that in the simple greeting he gives at the start of the letter,

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father."

Notice Paul calls them "saints and faithful brethren in Christ." If you are following Christ, he would say the same thing to you. You are holy ones, set apart for him, faithful members of a family. Best of all, you are "in Christ." What

does that mean? It means that we share (partake in) all that Christ has done; all that he was and all that he is. For Paul, to be in Christ is to be complete.

The question is, if people are discouraged, if people are feeling like they need more, how can we bolster them to take heart and continue on with Christ? Paul gives us an answer in vv. 3-8. He encourages them by telling them he thanks God for them, and by telling them WHY he thanks God for them; how he sees God at work in their lives. That's what we need, isn't it? We need to hear that God is at work in us, because often we don't see it. Most of us thank God for people. But how many of us tell them we thank God for them, and how many of us tell them why we thank God for them? In these verses Paul tells them he thanks God for several things.

II. Thanksgiving for the evidence of the Gospel in their lives

First, he thanks God for the evidence of the Gospel in their lives. Look at vv. 3-5,

"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,"

It's clear that as Paul heard from Epaphras what had taken place in their lives, he was thrilled. He saw concrete evidence of the Gospel.

A. The evidence of faith: He saw the evidence of "faith in Christ Jesus." Mark Twain said "faith is believing what you know ain't so." But faith is so much more than belief. Faith in the Bible has the idea of personal trust and commitment; of total involvement. A missionary had a conversation with an African tribesman, a Masai elder, about how the word "faith" should be translated into his language. The missionary had used a word that meant "to agree to" and the elder didn't like it. He said "it was too similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and fingers took part in the act. We should find another word. He said for a man to really believe is like a lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in his arms, pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way the lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is."

I like that. That's what biblical faith looks like. But there is something else about biblical faith. People today say, "You gotta have faith." We've heard that a lot the last four weeks or so. People today see faith as another charm on the bracelet of their life. But the truth is, faith has no intrinsic value in itself. Faith only derives its value from its object. That's why Paul is careful to say "faith in Christ Jesus." When Christ is the object of our faith, our life begins to change.

B. The evidence of love: We begin to love. Notice Paul also saw the evidence of their “love for all the saints.” One of the ways faith proves its reality is by love. Love is the mark of a Christian, but we’ve all met so-called Christians who are upstanding, honest and LOVELESS! They have a loveless goodness. One writer said of a man like that: “He is a good man - in the worst sort of way.”

Of course this is another idea that everyone likes but few really understand. Love is not an emotion. Love is an active thing. Love is taking action to help and serve another person. Christian love is best seen in the cross where an innocent man gave his life for the guilty. And notice that Paul does not speak of love in general. There is a sense in which we are to love all humanity, but that’s not why he thanks God here. Here he thanks God for their “love for all the saints.” He’s talking about a family kind of love between brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a unique love, a unique commitment that believers have towards one another, just as there is within families.

Years ago when our kids were much younger we were at a retreat. Lynn and I were watching our two daughters play by a stream and there were some boys who were kind of kidding around and throwing some rocks that were coming just a bit too close to our older daughter. We watched as our younger daughter, who couldn’t have been more than three years old, and who could have passed for linebacker, marched towards them with a wicked look on her face and yelled at the top of her lungs, “That’s my sister and you’d better leave her alone!” My friends, that’s love! That’s the kind of protectiveness we are to have, not just towards a few close Christian friends, but as Paul says, towards “all the saints.” When you see it in others, thank God for it, and tell them you thank God for it.

C. The evidence of hope: Finally, he saw the evidence of their hope. As a matter of fact, the hope laid up in heaven is seen as the thing that causes faith and love to spring forth. Hope is foundational. When the Gospel is heard and grasped, hope bursts forth. What is hope? We use that word today as if it were nothing more than wishful thinking. In the Bible, hope is more solid than that. Hope is an eager, confident expectation that God will deliver on what he’s promised. For believers, our hope is laid up in heaven. Though we’re complete in Christ now in that we can’t add any blessings to what we already have, some of those blessings won’t be fully realized until we get to heaven. So we wait and we hope and as Paul says in another place we even groan to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling (2 Cor. 5:4). I like the way C.S. Lewis put it, “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak.” Isn’t that true! It’s not that our desires are too strong, they are too weak. We should desire more, not less. If we did we wouldn’t be content with what this world could offer. We would know that only heaven could satisfy such outrageous, undomesticated desires!

Faith, love and hope. This is how the Gospel shows itself in people’s lives. This is what we should look for. When we see

people living like that, we should thank God for them, and we should tell them we thank God for them, and we should tell them why we thank God for them.

III. Thanksgiving for the explosion of the Gospel

But that’s not all. The second thing Paul thanks God for is the explosion of this Gospel of hope. Look at v. 6,

“...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;”

A. A universal explosion: Notice that it was a universal explosion. Not only had it come to the Colossians, but it had spread across the known world. Paul is using hyperbole here. The Gospel hadn’t spread through the whole world as we know it, but it was well on its way and it was reaching beyond the geographic and racial boundaries of the Jews. The Gospel is not just for a few so-called Christian nations in the West. The Gospel is for the whole world. It speaks to the universal condition of all mankind. There is a lot of talk these days about the Islamic world. There’s a great deal of fear and suspicion that Americans have right now towards Islamic people. But they are just like us. Do you know what they need? They need the Gospel, not westernized Christianity, but the wonderful hope that the Gospel can bring to their lives.

B. A powerful explosion: Because, you see, the Gospel is powerful. Notice Paul says it is “constantly bearing fruit and increasing.” The idea is that the Gospel has this intrinsic potency that can’t be stopped. It has within it the power of reproduction. I think of all these babies being born in our church. You put a man and a woman together and that’s what happens. You plant the seed of the Gospel in a community and that’s what happens - it reproduces. And it does so wherever we plant it. This is one of the greatest proofs for truth of the Gospel - it works; it changes lives; it reproduces. It doesn’t happen by the slick methods of man. Technology may help get the word out, but if the word has no power, what good would it do?

A few weeks ago after one of our services a woman came up to me for prayer. She was raised a Muslim, living in this community, but recently she had a dream in which she was told to come to this church. I’m always a bit skeptical about that stuff, But she came, and she heard the Gospel, and she gave her life to Christ. She has since moved away. That’s the power of the Gospel.

C. A truthful explosion: The reason for that power is that it’s the truth. Dorothy Sayers, the great Christian philosopher, said, “The test of any religion is not whether it pleases us or is comfortable, but whether it’s true.” Notice at the end of v. 5 Paul talks about how they had heard the “word of truth, the Gospel.” And then at the end of v. 6 he talks about “the grace of God in truth.” The Gospel is truth centered in the grace of God, the good news that forgiveness and hope are found as a

ee gift from God through Jesus Christ. That's the truth that changes lives.

There is nothing more encouraging to a person than to say to them, "I see that you are part of this great work that God is doing. It touched you and now it's spreading all over." That's what Paul does and that's what we can do. When you see that truth at work in someone, thank God for it, and you should tell them you thank God for it.

IV. Thanksgiving for the emissary of the Gospel

The last thing Paul is thankful for is the emissary of the Gospel. Though the Gospel is potent in itself, it always comes through a messenger. Look at v. 7-8,

"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."

A. The emissaries' teaching: It's clear that Epaphras had come to Colosse and spent some time explaining the truth to them. Paul says they heard it and they understood it and they learned it. This wasn't a hit and run job.

B. The emissaries' faithfulness: Epaphras was a faithful servant of Christ. What's great about this is he wasn't some kind of ordained minister. He wasn't a religious professional. He was a layman whose life had been transformed and he just said to the Lord, "Lord, would you use me. Here is my life." Some of you may think that if you only knew the Bible like one of the pastors you could really have a impact. If you could just speak better in front of people or sing or if you were more outgoing. But God uses people like you who are rubbing shoulders with folks who have no hope. He wants you to love them, and sit down with for coffee and hear their sad stories and share with them the grace of God in truth. That's what Epaphras did.

C. The emissaries' report: Paul ends by adding one more thing about Epaphras. Paul says Epaphras told him about their love in the Spirit. What an encouraging way to end. I call this positive hearsay. So much hearsay is negative. Paul could have said, "Epaphras told me all about how you guys have let these false teachers come in and how you are about to fall away." But isn't it wonderful when someone comes to you and says, "So-and-so told me something great about you." I had a guy call me on Friday all the way from Germany just to tell me he's heard that God is doing great things in this church. That was encouraging. That's what Paul does. He says, "Epaphras told me something great about you. He told me that your love for one another is so great only the Holy Spirit could do it." That's encouragement. Tell them you thank God for them, tell them what you thank God for, and tell them what cool things others are saying about them!

I'm going to end this morning on a very practical note. I want to give you an assignment. I want you to make a list of a few people in your life that need encouragement. I want you write down next to their names what you see God doing in their lives. How do you see him at work. Maybe it's faith or love or hope. Maybe you heard something good about them. Write that down. And then I want you to spend some time thanking God for them. That's the easy part. Here's the hard part. I want you to meet with them (or write them if you live too far away) and I want you to tell them you thank God for them, and tell them what you thank God for. And by all means, don't tell them I told you to do it! That will ruin it. Just do it, and God will use your words to bring encouragement and hope to an anxious heart.

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