

ROMANCING THE SAINTS AT COLOSSAE

Studies in the Book of Colossians

*“If Ephesians can be labeled the epistle portraying the ‘church of Christ,’
then Colossians must surely be labeled ‘the Christ of the church’”*
unknown

Text

Colossians 1:3-8

Topic

Paul rejoiced in what he had heard from Epaphras
about the believers at Colossae

Title

“Can You Hear Me Now?”

Introduction

I tried to get into Grad School but was rejected.

It was a program in the Psych Department at Cal State San Bernardino to train counselors. They only took a few candidates each semester.

I remember the panel of interviewers asking me why I wanted to be in the program. I said it was because I wanted to help people.

I don't know why they rejected me... **But I know why I would have rejected me!** My own marriage was dysfunctional, I was abusing alcohol and drugs, and I had no real concern for others. Some counselor I would have been.

Someone needed to help me. In February of 1979 I met that person. It was Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor. He did what I could not: He changed me from within. Only then, having been changed by God's power, could I hope to help others.

Our text reminds the Colossians (and us) of how the Gospel has changed us to bring change to others.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Listen To What God Has Done In You By The Hearing Of The Gospel, and #2 Listen To What God Is Doing Through You By The Hearing Of The Gospel.

#1 Listen To What God Has Done In You
By The Hearing Of The Gospel
(v3-5)

There is something you must keep in mind as we read the letter to the Colossians. Certain false teachers were undermining their confidence in their experience of salvation. We'll get into the specifics of the false teachings later in the book. Regardless the particulars, the effect of it was to suggest that they were falling short in their knowledge and practice.

The reasoning went like this. Epaphras had brought back to Colossae the Gospel he had heard from Paul in Ephesus. He shared what he knew and that was a great start. But there must be more, some deeper, secret, mysterious knowledge that you could only attain through the ideas and practices of these false teachers.

Every sentence in this letter is thus carefully worded to emphasize to Christians that we are complete in Christ. Yes, we can and should grow toward maturity. But there is no secret knowledge or radical techniques to discover other than to grow closer to Jesus and realize how much He has done for us.

What has He done for us as Christians? Paul tells us in verses three through eight which, by the way, are one sentence in the Greek. What He's done is to produce faith, love, and hope in our hearts.

Colossians 1:3 We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

The language-guys say that "always" describes the giving of thanks, not "praying." Whenever Paul did pray for the believers in Colossae, which I'm

sure was often, he gave thanks to God because of the radical changes that God had effected in their lives after they heard and received the Gospel.

No matter your needs and your circumstances, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ you can be thankful in them because of what God has done for you. He's saved you! It makes all the difference in the world and in the world to come.

The particular words used for his praying could be translated "prayed around," as if to indicate Paul's prayers surrounded them. I like that! Your prayers for people surround them in the spiritual realm.

Paul identifies "God" as the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He mentioned both God and Jesus in verse two in such a way that makes them equal. The supernatural resources of "grace and peace" come from them both.

Why does he then in verse three speak the way he does? I'll tell you why. The heretics in Colossae were teaching that Jesus was a mere created being, not God in human flesh. By emphasizing that God was and is the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" Paul was establishing that Jesus is intimately related to God in a unique relationship. He is not some created being. He is God.

If you ever doubt that Jesus claimed to be God while on the earth just look in the gospels at the reaction of the Jews. They wanted to kill Him for claiming to be equal with God.

Paul next launches into what he was thankful for and we'll see that it was what God had done in them through the Gospel.

Colossians 1:4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...

Faith "in" Jesus indicates a union with Him. Think of a branch united with a vine; that's the idea here. Paul wasn't commending a few of them for having great faith. He wasn't challenging them to greater faith. He was pointing out that since they were saved they were united to Jesus as branches to a vine.

Here's the way I understand what he was saying. Before I was saved I trusted in things like possessions or position or power. Those things all prove to be fleeting and disappointing. Now when I find myself in any difficulty, though I may have normal doubts and human fears, I am aware of the Lord Jesus Christ and know that He is working all things together for my good and His glory. It is a supernatural "faith" produced simply by being in relation to Him.

I can let my doubts and fears overwhelm me. Or I can rest in the Lord. But the idea is that He has produced this "faith" through the Gospel.

Colossians 1:4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints;

Before I was saved I only loved myself. I may have thought I loved a few others but it was a very selfish love at best. After being born-again I found myself loving others, especially other "saints," even though I had never met them before. I knew they were my brothers and sisters in Christ. I wanted to do good to them and for them.

Again you must understand this is not natural but supernatural. It is produced in us by the hearing of the Gospel. It is God's love shed in our human hearts.

Colossians 1:5 because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven...

A Christian has a sure confidence in a glorious future. You know exactly what is going to happen after you take your last breath on earth. In fact, you know that you may not even have to die because Jesus has promised to return to rapture living believers.

You are a citizen of Heaven with full privileges there. Whatever rewards you are accruing through serving the Lord on the earth are "laid up" safe in Heaven. They can't rust or be stolen or decay.

Instead of wondering what is going to happen when you die you understand the wonder of living on earth in light of eternity.

The faith, love, and hope Paul was talking about are produced in every Christian the moment they believe the Gospel.

Colossians 1:5 ... of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel,

The verb tense of “heard” is *heard before*. It’s a very deliberate choice of verb tense. It undermines any heretical notion that the believers were deficient in their walk with the Lord. In other words, they had in the past “heard” the Gospel and it had already produced these supernatural qualities in their hearts. Faith, love, and hope weren’t things to discover through secret knowledge or by adopting certain practices. No, they present qualities of their spiritual lives to simply acknowledge and enjoy.

All of us struggle in this sinful, ungodly world. The flesh and the devil too often best us. We have doubts and fears. But there is nothing ‘out there’ that we are missing. There isn’t some new teaching. There isn’t some new or even ancient practice. Since you are a Christian who has received the Gospel, faith, love, and hope sufficient for your life are already yours to experience.

If you want to experience first hand the difference God has made in you, go to a funeral and listen to the eulogies. The folks that are not saved say all manner of things to try to encourage themselves about life and death. They say desperate things, stupid things. Not so the Christians! We know the truth about life, death, and life after death. Our faith, love, and hope are on display.

Listen to Paul. Listen to what God has done in you by the hearing of the Gospel.

#2 Listen To What God Is Doing Through You By The Hearing Of The Gospel (v6-8)

What is the Gospel? Paul defined it when he wrote to the church at Corinth saying,

1 Corinthians 15:1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

1 Corinthians 15:2 by which also you are saved...

1 Corinthians 15:3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

You're a sinner. You need a Savior. Jesus came as God in human flesh to die as your substitute on the Cross. He rose from the dead validating His ability to save you for eternity.

In addition to what God does *in* you through the Gospel, He does things *through* you once you're saved. Using Epaphras as an example Paul shows what God does through you and every other believer.

Colossians 1:6 which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;

Paul took them back to the day they got saved. An ordinary man, Epaphras, returned from Ephesus having been changed, radically changed, by the "the grace of God in truth." He had believed the truth that salvation was God's gift of grace.

He began to share what had happened to him and in him. People in Colossae began to get saved. The Gospel of God's grace thus was "bringing forth fruit."

But not just locally, in Colossae. Epaphras had brought it to that city, but others were spreading the 'good news' to every city in the known "world." Wherever the message was sent by God it was sufficient to save people.

Colossians 1:7 as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf,

I mentioned last week that Epaphras is sometimes known as Epaphroditus. He is not, however, the same Epaphroditus mentioned in the Book of Philippians.

The word "learned" indicates he disciplined them. He simply taught them what he knew. Even an average 'Joe' like Epaphras could effect amazing changes in the lives of others. It's the message, not the messenger, that is

important. This was a slap in the face to the false teachers who felt they were superior in knowledge and practice to everyone else.

Understand that Epaphras was just a guy who God changed through the Gospel. The Colossians were just like him and vice-versa. Thus his description is what the Gospel can do through each of us and every other believer.

What can it do? What does it do?

It makes you a “fellow servant.” The particular words mean a *joint slave*. You are God’s slave but so is every other believer. Though we have different gifts and are called to various ministries, we are all equal as slaves; we are jointly slaves in God’s great household of faith.

The Gospel makes you a “minister.” It is an interesting word. It’s where we get the word “deacon” from but it is from two words that mean “through” and “dust.” The idea seems to be that you serve with such zeal and enthusiasm that you create dust in your wake!

All of us are capable of kicking up dust in our serving. Epaphras did and was “faithful.” It’s a commendation, but it’s one we can all be happy about. You see, God doesn’t expect me to be great, or to accomplish great things. All He asks is that I be faithful and that is something definitely within my reach.

Paul qualifies Epaphras’ serving by saying it was “on [their] behalf.” The Gospel had made Epaphras like His Master. It’s effect was to cause him to want to serve rather than be served.

One of the great effects of the grace of God is to overcome selfishness. When Christ rules rather than self, marriages, families, relationships, and everything else is redeemed and restored.

Do you realize that once you are saved you are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus? God has begun a good work in you and promises to complete it.

The closing words of this sentence are insightful:

Colossians 1:8 who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

It appears that Epaphras journeyed to see Paul, who was under house arrest, to get wisdom on how to deal with the heresies plaguing the believers in Colossae. His report to Paul about these Christians included their “love in the Spirit.”

The idea is that their “love” has been produced by, or given to them by, the Holy “Spirit.” It seems to summarize everything Paul was saying. The things that had been done in them and were being done through them were a result of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Since your body, and our ‘body’ of believers, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, what secret knowledge do we need to discover? Is the Holy Spirit like a genie in the bottle of our hearts that has to be released by certain mystery words or concepts?

Is He waiting to be awoken by some new technique or practice? Do we need to walk through a labyrinth or engage in contemplative prayer to get Him excited?

Of course not! Yet false teachers continue to suggest you are deficient in your relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

You are not deficient. You have the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

Listen to what God has done in you and through you. If anything, you might need to repent and return to a simpler understanding of the Gospel.

