

SERIES Reading Paul's Mail: Colossians
 SERMON **Grateful for the Unmet (Col 1.1–12)**
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INTRODUCTION

The city of Colossae, c.100 miles east of Ephesus, rests in the Lycus Valley along a major trade route connecting Ephesus and the Euphrates River. Colossae was known for its deep history, likely originating with the Hittites in the 17th century BC, then re-made by the Phrygians in the 12th century BC, followed by the Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans. But Colossae was also known as a prosperous commercial and trade venue—largely due to its location and natural resources. However, its appeal and renown began to wane when, in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, the cities of Laodicea Hierapolis were established—about 10–12 miles west of Colossae. Both quickly became known for their commerce, trade, entertainment, “modern” architecture, public marvels and pleasures, and their lofty devotion to and celebration of the Greek and Roman pantheon. They were the popular, trending cities in the region; Colossae was out of touch with the times and old-hat.

And to illustrate something of the difference between the new and old cities: the Lycus Valley was known for frequent earthquakes. The ancient historian, Strabo gave the region a snarky nickname that means: “it’s good for earthquakes.”¹ In 17 AD, one earthquake rocked the area, which essentially leveled both Laodicea and Hierapolis and severely damaged Colossae, but both Laodicea and Hierapolis were quickly rebuilt (*paid for from their own pockets*), while Colossae struggled for years to complete basic repairs. **[CORRECTION:]**² Then, c.60 AD, another earthquake struck and destroyed Laodicea, though we’re not told what happened to its neighbors.³ And as before, Laodicea turned down financial help from the Empire and rebuilt itself from its own resources. In near record time. But then, c.63 or 64 AD, yet another earthquake rocked the region—this time destroying all three cities.⁴ And while the others were able to pull themselves out of the rubble, many historians see this as the period of Colossae’s slow and quiet demise—one hardly noticed or felt by surrounding cities.

Today, Colossae remains untouched and virtually unseen. Almost forgotten. It’s just a large mound covered with grass and other plant-life. For years, archeologists have tried to gain access to the site, but little headway has been made. And so what lies beneath the surface, which could tell us so much about the people and city, will remain a mystery. But there is something we can know about the city, and we can know it because of something given to the city and later preserved by a certain group of its citizens. And that something, that gives us a glimpse of at least one part of the city, is Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae. A letter written shortly before 60 AD, and one that reveals Paul’s deep pastoral heart, his rich theological mind, and his ability to blend both to encourage the believers in that city as they face some difficult challenges. Challenges more dangerous than earthquakes.

¹ See Strabo, *Geography* 12.8.16.

² On a post-preaching suspicion of misspeaking, I went back to check the details on this point and discovered that I did in fact misspeak. My deepest apologies. What follows is the corrected information.

³ See Tacitus, *Annals* 14.27.

⁴ See Eusebius, as quoted in Jerome, *Chronicle* 210.4; Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* 7.7.12; cf. Pliny, *Natural History* 2.86.

For the next few weeks, we're going "read Paul's mail" to the Colossians and see not only what he said to them but also how what he said speaks volumes to us as the church today. Because even though we're separated by nearly 2000 years, we face similar challenges. And the God-inspired and God-given message Paul gave to the Colossians is instructive for us.

—PRAY—

1. BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

NT letter-openings are easily glossed over, but they shouldn't be. They contain rich insights about the people involved and the nature of the letter. So, let's consider the opening to Colossians: "From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother" (1.1).⁵ Here we see two senders, and each is identified in a certain way. Paul is "an apostle of Christ Jesus," which means a called and commissioned representative of Christ. Specifically: he's is a divinely appointed herald of the gospel, who speaks to and corrects churches with the authority Christ entrusts to him. (*And we'll see him do that in chapter 2, which we'll cover in a couple of weeks*). Thus, Paul's not some average Joe with some beginning-to-trend YouTube channel where he offers his personal opinions about spirituality.

Instead, Paul is "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." This calls to mind Acts 9, where the risen Christ confronted Paul and called him to be a God-appointed apostle, who will carry the name of Christ "before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel" (Acts 9.15). He will declare and defend the gospel wherever he goes and to whomever he meets. And we know Paul never sees this calling and appointment as his own doing, given to him by a fellow human being, or something he downloaded from the internet so he can call himself an expert. In the letter to the Galatians, he opens by saying: "From Paul, an apostle (not from men, nor by human agency, but by Christ and God the Father who raise Him from the dead)" (Gal 1.1). Paul knows he's one who's been chosen and sent by God to declare the establishment of the new covenant of redemption in Christ Jesus.

Thus, Paul's not simply joining the ranks of a select few heralds of the gospel, who take that message to various parts of the Roman Empire, hoping to make a small difference in small towns. There's a much bigger picture involved. Paul knows he's a part of God's exceedingly larger salvation plan for the entire world. A plan that was known by God before the creation of all things—thus, it wasn't something God had to come up with on the fly when humanity suddenly decided it could do a better job at being God than God could. (*All because they were tempted and dupped by Satan, the greatest liar*). And God revealed this plan implicitly in the Garden of Eden, but explicitly when He called and commissioned Abraham to become the father of a new nation of people. One that would be blessed by God and the one through whom God promised to bless the rest of the world.

And from his Damascus-road encounter, along with his restored understanding of Scripture (*i.e., he was in the wrong, Scripture never was*), Paul knows God's promise to Abraham has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ—the only one through whom humanity can be saved, forgiven, restored, and made eternally new. Thus, Paul, as an apostle, is not tootling around the country peddling some life-coach-type plan or some healthy habits in order to feel happy. Instead, Paul, as an apostle, is purposefully marching across the Roman Empire with a life-

⁵ The term "from" is added in translation to help clarify the reading. The Greek reads: Παύλος ἀπόστολος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός (Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God and Timothy the brother).

altering message from the one true King who brings salvation.... And while the apostolic line ended when the last one died,⁶ a similar commission is given to all who belong to Christ. The great commission of Jesus for faithful disciples to make faithful disciples of all nations, in God’s name, for His kingdom and glory alone. Thus, the calling for all Christians is to be proclaimers and defenders of the truth of God’s redemption of all things in the saving work of Christ—a message that not only changes our lives, but is intended to change the entire world.

After Paul comes Timothy, who’s identified in a seeming lackluster way. He’s simply called, “brother.” Now, Paul didn’t use this description because nothing else came to mind. We know from other letters that Paul held Timothy in high regard. And calling Timothy “brother” does not cheapen that regard. Here’s what I mean. The Greek term for “brother” is ἀδελφός, which, throughout the NT, nearly always functions as a generic term for believers—i.e., the church. It occasionally refers to biological siblings, but those are rare by comparison. (*And, just to be clear: as a generic term, when used of the church, ἀδελφός includes male and female believers—hence, some translations will rightly render the plural form as “brothers and sisters”*). But notice what ἀδελφός does. It stresses kinship among the members of God’s household. Thus, for those who belong to Christ, there is a familial closeness that can’t be beat. A reminder for all of us today: we’re a church family, so let’s be family.

But what’s vital for us to catch is the specific designation: “our brother.”⁷ Why is this vital to catch? Glad you asked. It’s vital because neither Paul nor Timothy had ever been to the church at Colossae, which means they didn’t establish that church, and it also means (*with the exception of one individual*) they didn’t know anyone there personally. In fact, Paul later says the same thing about the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis (cf. Col 2.1; 4.12–13). But despite all of that, Paul can still describe Timothy as “our brother.” Timothy and the believers in Colossae are family. And that also says something about Paul’s understanding of his own connection with the believers in Colossae. He recognizes his own familial relationship they have in Christ even though they’ve never met. And that brings us to a much bigger reality that we in the church today sometimes miss or forget.

Paul knows (*and so should we*) that it doesn’t matter if they’ve never personally met—or as he says: “seen my face in the flesh” (2.1, my translation). What matters is that they know they are united as one family because of Christ. Moreover, Paul knows (*and so should we*) that being a part of the body of Christ is more than simply being a member of a given congregation (*or local church*) in a particular community or city. Being a part of the body of Christ is ultimately about being united with other believers who are the faithful and adopted members of God’s household in His eternal kingdom. And when we have that understanding secured in our

⁶ Not only does the idea of “apostolic succession” not appear until at least two centuries after Christ (and not just because it’s nowhere found or taught in the NT), but it is also one that the so-called early Church Fathers did not fully, explicitly, and/or dogmatically teach as a foundational and necessary apostolic teaching to be upheld unquestionably throughout all of church history. Clement of Rome (c.35–99 AD), Ignatius of Antioch (c.35–c.140 AD), and Hippolytus of Rome (c.170–c.235 AD), are virtually silent about the idea of apostolic succession. In fact, while they’re not against the possibility of a formalized church governance, their arguments don’t allow support for an apostolic succession to fill and sustain that governance. And even as late as (and from the revered hand of) Jerome, we find arguments that reveal the incredibly weak grounds for attempting to make a case for apostolic succession from Scripture. And yet it is a requirement of belief for all in the Catholic Church (see John Paul II, *Declaration “Dominus Iesus” on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, June 16, 2000 §16—[found here](#)).

⁷ As seen in the previous note, the text reads: καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός (and Timothy **the** brother—*emphasis added*). The “our” rendering is admittedly an interpretative choice (found in the vast majority of English translation—exceptions are: CJB, CEV, DARBY, DRA, PHILLIPS, NLV, NMB, WYC, and YLT; cf. NTE, which has “my brother,” which loses the larger familial connection, and MSG, which has, “my friend,” which misses the emphasis). However, such a choice is not out of bounds either semantically or logically. It is one rooted securely to the functional use of a term like ἀδελφός—especially in a church-context.

minds and hearts, we will begin to see relationships within our local church-family grow in healthy and God-honoring ways. We take care of each other as God’s family.

But when that understanding is securely in place, we also realize that God’s family is much bigger than any particular church family in a given area, and those who faithfully live for Christ and serve in His name elsewhere are family and deserve our support, encouragement, and prayers. So, let us be family to and grateful for those whom we have not yet met. This could mean faithful churches in our city, in other states, or somewhere else in the world. It certainly means the missionaries who live and serve in dangerous locations, where their experiences with persecution are far more serious than an overly-opinionated Yelp or Google review, or because we wind up on some list-of-shame because we’re (*supposedly*) intolerant—which is itself an act of intolerance. Whatever the case, let us be thankful for their lives in Christ and how God is using them to bring about gospel-defined, Christ-centered, kingdom-focused, and Spirit-led change where they are. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We then come to the recipients and greeting, which says: “[to the saints, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, at Colossae. Grace and peace to you from God our Father!](#)” (1.2). In the Greek, “[brothers and sisters](#)” comes from the single term, ἀδελφοί—the plural form of ἀδελφός. With this description, the family connection is being explicitly declared. Paul’s calling them what they are to him (“[brothers and sisters](#)”) because of who they are in Christ. But it’s also here we see that they are more than “brothers and sisters.” Paul identifies them as “saints.” This term does not refer to a select few individuals who have died, and some religious authorities (*5 years after the person’s death*) got together and decided (*after a period of investigation*) the person should be classified as a “saint” because he or she posthumously passed some much later,⁸ man-made tests—e.g., blessings or miracles took place because someone prayed to the person to intercede on their behalf.⁹

Instead, as the NT reveals: “saint” (ἅγιος) refers to any living, breathing believer who has committed himself or herself to Christ, has been redeemed by His saving blood, and has entered into the holy and blessed new creation-life that only He can provide. A new life of blessed holiness that is distinctively separate from the ways and wisdom of the world. Or to

⁸ The “need” for a having a refined system or method determining (and conferring) sainthood did not come about until Pope Gregory IX (1227–41) said so. Prior to him, sainthood was typically granted to martyrs of the (Catholic) Church, and that bestowal was often done by the “voice of the people.” But that came to be seen as easily abused and, in some cases, unverifiable with any degree of certainty. So Gregory created the more formalized methods of investigation used to assess the candidate’s life and any miracles said to have happened in that person’s name. And while opening the door to include more than martyrs (in the usual sense of that term), this “new” process wound up only ushering into sainthood a selected few. Gregory’s approach remained in place for quite some time—with Pope Sixtus V, in 1588, turning the process of investigation and selection over to the Congregation of Rites. This done to help share the burden of the Pope having to read through, review, verify, and decide upon the growing flood of letters sent to him by nearly every Tom, Dick, and Jane wanting their friend or relative to be made a saint. Then, in 1634, Pope Urban VIII made changes and updates to the entire process, and a number of Popes after him have done the same. In 1917, a universal Code of Canon Law was established on how to carry out the canonization—a process that included 145 rules for deciding on who’s worthy of sainthood. And there’s been a more recent change coming from Pope Francis, in 2017, which he called, “one of the most significant changes in centuries to the Roman Catholic Church’s saint-making procedures” ([found here](#), which also provides the summary of what Francis puts in place). It’s interesting (if not damaging at the same time) that the Pope is defining things as “one of the most significant changes in centuries to the Roman Catholic [Church],” when one of the primary claims for the authority and legitimacy of the Roman Catholic Church is that it holds a consistent and unchanging teaching, message, and system of belief.

⁹ To be slightly less generalizing, the (post-Gregory and pre-Francis) process for determining sainthood (i.e., canonization) involves a deceased individual moving through the categories of “Venerable,” “Blessed,” and finally “Saint.” This determination is discovered through the formal investigation process, which begins 5 years after the person’s death, and goes through multiple steps and hands along the way, before being publicly declared by the (Catholic) Church. “Venerable” means the person lived a heroic, virtuous life or they offered themselves as a martyr. “Blessed” means, along with their heroic, virtuous life and/or martyrdom, the person is believed to have performed one posthumous miracle after a (living) believer prayed to the Venerable individual for intercession. When a person obtains “Blessed” status, they are considered to have been “Beatified” by the (Catholic) Church. “Saint” means, along with their heroic, virtuous life and/or martyrdom and being Beatified because a miracle is attributed to their name, the person is believed to have performed at least one additional posthumous miracle after a (living) believer prayed to the Blessed individual for intercession.

be less wordy: in God-breathed Scripture, a “saint” is true, faithful disciple who belongs to Christ. Sainthood is not defined by what men say after we die. It’s defined by what Christ declares us to be at rebirth. And based on how the language works in this passage, Paul makes that connection clear when he says: the “[saints in Colossae](#)” are “[the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ](#).” And those faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae share in the larger familial relationship with all the saints in all the cities throughout the Roman Empire where churches of God’s kingdom people reside.

That’s the shared relationship that Paul and Timothy have with the believers in Colossae, despite never having met each other. And they have (*and celebrate*) the living reality of that relationship because they know they’ve all met and now belong to the redeeming Savior and Lord who unites them in one name, to become citizens in one Kingdom, and rightful members of one household. And it to such a vast and wonderful family that Paul and Timothy call for God’s grace and peace to be upon them. The very things God gives without fail to those who belong to Him, and the very things He knows they need in order to live and endure life in this world of non-grace and non-peace.... I wasn’t kidding when I said letter-openings in the NT carry rich meaning and insights. So, the next time we read one, let’s be sure not to gloss over it because it seems like a mere formality. Because it’s not. And we’ve just seen a glimpse of what such openings provide.... Now, back on track.

After this letter-opening, Paul does what he normally does (*except in Galatians*), and that is launch into a word of praise and/or thanksgiving. (*In Galatians, he gives the opening and then just lays right into the churches because of their bad theology*). Here, in Colossians, Paul offers two distinct yet connected prayers—and we know they’re distinctive because, in Greek, each one is a single sentence. This is often missed because nearly all English translations break up Paul’s serious lung-capacity into shorter segments to make it readable. The first prayer runs from v.3 to v.8, and the second prayer likely runs from v.9 all the way down to the first half v.23. That will be helpful to remember for next week.

2. PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

For now, let’s focus on the two kinds of prayers that Paul and Timothy pray, and pay close attention to the substance of what’s said specifically in vv.3–12. The first kind of prayer is one of thanksgiving—identified by the way it begins: “[We always give thanks](#) [εὐχαριστοῦμεν] [to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you](#)” (1.3). Let’s not simply read this as a nice thing to say, or a routine pleasantry that’s expected near the start of a letter. We need to see how this otherwise simple claim is filled with profundity.

To start at the end: in saying, “[when we pray for you](#),” Paul and Timothy are stating their commitment to pray for believers in a church they didn’t establish, and whom they don’t know personally (*with the exception of one*). Moreover, in this commitment to pray, there’s not a single hint of jealousy or discontent that someone other than Paul established Colossian church. (*As discerned from Col 4.12–13, that someone else also likely established the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis*). Instead, we see a heart rejoicing and bursting with praise because another church has been established. A new community of gospel-defined change-agents exists in another city. Three new cities, in fact. That’s cause for thanksgiving.

And this reveals the loving, pastoral side of Paul, which is missed by those who prefer to focus on and criticize his seemingly harsher or heavy-handed tone. But we must remember:

on the one hand, like Jesus, the strong words only come out when God's truth is being altered or corrupted—especially by those who should know better. And on the other hand, also like Jesus, the pastoral words come out when God's truth is being revealed to those who don't know it, have been excluded from it by those who should know better, are struggling with what it means, or are facing ridicule and persecution because they believe it. As we'll see in a couple of weeks, some of that struggle and opposition is what the Colossian believers are experiencing. So, it's no wonder that Paul and Timothy pray for them.

While that can be discerned by reading the whole letter, the explicit focus here is something else. When Paul and Timothy pray for the Colossians, they “[always give thanks.](#)” This is the automatic response and substance of their ongoing prayers. A response and substance that easily emerge when they think about who the Colossian believers are, all they have done, and what they continue to do in the name of Christ. And because of such things, Paul and Timothy cannot help but “[always](#)” pray and give thanks. Just imagine what would happen if we did the same thing. Where, when we thought about other believers in other cities, who are living the new life in Christ with steadfast faithfulness; we not only pray for them but also give thanks for them and the kingdom ministry they do where they are. In fact, let's not simply imagine that. Like Paul and Timothy, let's commit to making it a part of our daily prayers.

Now, notice the specific recipient: “[we always give thanks to God.](#)” Paul and Timothy know there is only One who truly deserves the recognition and thanksgiving: God, and no one else—either in heaven or on earth. Moreover, it's only to God that prayers are directed—especially prayers of thanksgiving—for there's only One who's truly worthy of our prayers and only One who can truly fulfill them: God, and no one else—either in heaven or on earth. Let's not misunderstand this: giving praise-filled thanks to God alone does not mean we cannot voice gratitude for the lives and witness of other believers. Instead, it means: in recognizing and being grateful for the faithful lives and witness of other believers, we know that it's because God is truly at work in their lives and witness. For it is only through Him that they can do His good. And that's what Paul and Timothy are doing with their prayer of thanks to God.

Before moving on, notice a central detail in what's said. To avoid the possibility of confusion that can emerge from the otherwise generic term “god” (θεός)—and that confusion exists today: Paul makes it abundantly clear which “God” he has in mind. He says, “[we always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.](#)” And if we know anything about Paul, and certainly about the Bible, there is only one God who fits that description: the God who, as found in His revealed Scripture, presents and declares Himself to be the only God there is and ever will be. (*Sorry Joseph Smith*). It is this God who clearly says: “[I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God](#)” (Isa 45.5, NASB) and “[understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me](#)” (Isa 43.10, NASB).

And since God is eternal, there is no chance of anything after Him because there is no possibility of a time without Him. Thus, by definition, and upsetting culture's preferences, the God of the Bible is not the god of any other religion. (*Such an exclusive claim was viewed as offensive in the past just as it is today. But being offended by truth is not grounds for altering truth so that it becomes less offensive and more appeasing to the self*). More to the point: as God Himself reveals, all other so-called gods are false because they do not truly exist, and because they do not exist, they do not have the ability, power, and authority to save anyone—let alone hear the prayers of humanity and fulfill them.

It is to the one and only God who truly and eternally exists that Paul and Timothy pray and give thanks when they think about those in Colossae who are committed to that one and only God. The only one who has the ability, power, and authority to save and give eternal life—and has in fact done so in Christ Jesus. And we know that’s the focus of the prayer because of what’s said next: “since we heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the saints” (1.4). This shows that the cause of thanksgiving is not just the Colossians’ new life in Christ (*which is certainly a big deal and something worth celebrating*), but also the new love for others in Christ (*i.e., all the saints*). When the self-sacrificing love of Jesus changes everything about us, we begin to see and love others with a similar self-sacrificing love. Something illustrated early on, as seen in Acts 2.42–47.

Paul elsewhere makes this point clear when he says doing such self-sacrificing good for others is how believers ought to treat others in the world, but especially those who are of the household of faith—i.e., the church (cf. Gal 6.10; Eph 5.1–2). And if we think about it, we can see how this is an expanded application of Jesus’ life-defining charge to the disciples: “I give you a new commandment—to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. Everyone [*the term here, πάντες, means all people*] will know by this that you are My disciples—if you have love for one another” (Jn 13.34–35). Always bearing mind the understanding that the kind of love Jesus expects is completely other-than what’s found in the world (*which, according to Jn 15.18–19, amounts to contingent-tolerance for self-interest*), and it’s one that must be authentically and consistently revealed to all people.

And as we can see from other Bible passages, we know that this authentic, consistent, other-than love must be made real in the household of God first before seeking to make it real in the world. And we also know: when that happens, there is a living testimony that spreads the life-changing truth of the gospel. A love-saturated truth that does not waver, but instead rests securely on a foundation of eternal hope, and thus is able to withstand all things in this life. Thus, as Peter says: “if you happen to suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. But do not be terrified of them or be shaken. But set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess” (1 Pt 3.15).

Such a living-testimony is where Paul and Timothy go next when describing the cause and substance of their prayers of thanksgiving: “Your faith and love have arisen from the hope laid up for you in heaven, which you have heard about in the message of truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as in the entire world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, so it has also been bearing fruit and growing among you from the first day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth” (1.5–6). If you’re familiar with Paul’s writings, you’ll certainly recognize the threefold theme of faith, hope, and love—though he mixes things up a bit here, by putting love in the middle. But let’s be sure we catch two other details about this passage.

First of all: faith in Christ and the love for the saints are the result of the heavenly hope. It’s because of who Christ is and what He’s promised that true disciples endure all things with hope and remain united in the hope that Christ has already overcome all things. And nothing in this world will ever separate us from Him or His faithful love. Thus, believers know (*and prove with their lives*): their identity in Christ surpasses any other identity—self- or worldly-given. That means: it’s not who we think we are or what we make ourselves to be. Instead, it’s who Christ knows us to be because of how He has remade us. Moreover, believers know (*and prove with their lives*): their place with Christ surpasses any property, community, or

geographic location found anywhere in this world. We remain with Christ no matter where we are, because the one who is Lord over all things has promised to be with us at all times.

And that leads to a second thing. Faith, love, and hope are not tied to or appealing to certain personal feelings, emotions, sentiments, or even some humanly defined idea of some happy-utopia. Instead, they're anchored securely to (as Paul says) the ["message of truth, the gospel,"](#) which the Colossian believers ["heard"](#) and ["understood."](#) At the very least, the explicit stress on truth and understanding stands at odds with the idea that faith in Christ involves jettisoning rationality and filling the void with superstitious ideas that have no place in a Woke—I mean, Enlightened mind. (Sorry, but when one ideology is nothing but a rehash of an older one, it's hard not to identify them as the same). In fact, a similar type of criticism was leveled against Christians in the first few centuries. So truly nothing new under the sun.

But such criticism is not evidence of truth, and it operates on ignorance of Scripture. Hebrews says: ["faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see"](#) (11.1). The term for "being sure" (ὑπόστασις) also means firmly established or a secured assurance that something is true. And the term for "convinced" (ἔλεγχος) refers to something that is tested and proven to be true. And the same reality about faith is found throughout Scripture. All told: not once is faith (or belief) in God ever portrayed as either irrational or requiring one to check his or her mind at the door. Faith (and belief) in God is founded upon informed, revealed truth. To say (or accuse) otherwise is to engage in logical fallacies and to bear false witness against Scripture. And let's not forget that the biblical picture of faithlessness is a heart and mind disconnected from God and His revealed truth. Thus, jettisoning the mind and filling the void with superstitious ideas is not a reflection of belief in God. It's one of rebellion against God and His truth.... Back to Colossians.

There's something more to this word about foundation truth. Similar to the earlier stress on only one true God, here we see the stress on only one true gospel. Meaning: there is only one message about God's salvation, with Christ—who is God-incarnate—being the only means by which salvation is possible and made real for those who believe and submit to His lordship. Or to borrow from Peter: ["There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among people by which we must be saved"](#) (Acts 4.12). It's Jesus and no one else. It's never Jesus plus someone (or something) else. To say or believe otherwise is to create and give allegiance to an un-revealed-by-God and false gospel. Hence, Paul's strong words to the Galatians: ["if we \(or an angel of heaven\) should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be condemned to hell"](#) (Gal 1.8).

That's how serious all of this truly is, and Paul upholds what he knows to be true—especially as it relates to God's revelation of redemption. And Paul knows: he could preach a worldly gospel that makes people feel good and even powerful, because it allows people to downplay the seriousness of sin (or even redefine it) and be the lords of their own lives. However, he also knows that gospel cannot save and will only bring about separation from God. But Paul preaches the true gospel that, while it disrupts everything about our lives, declares that we have been made good by the power of the one true Savior and Lord who reconciles us with God. This true gospel is the one the Colossian saints readily accepted and believed, as well as the one that continues to redefine everything about who they are and how they live for Christ. An identity and lifestyle characterized by faithfulness and steadfast love. And because of that, Paul and Timothy always give thanks to the One who makes that possible and real.

With that in mind, we come to the final detail within this thanksgiving-prayer. At first blush, it might seem to be a bit random, but it's tied to everything that's been said: *"You learned the gospel from Epaphras, our dear fellow slave—a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf—who also told us of your love in the Spirit"* (1.7–8). Paul and Timothy are not only grateful for the Colossians' faithfulness to Christ and their enduring love for all of the saints (*both within their particular congregation and those elsewhere*), but they're also grateful for faithful gospel-heralds who minister in God's kingdom-on-earth with an infectious love for Christ and others. Specifically, Epaphras—the one who brought the truth of the gospel to Colossae and taught them over a period of time, which bore the fruit of belief and the establishment of a church.

Once again, there's no hint of jealousy or discontent that Epaphras established the church in Colossae (*as well as Laodicea and Hierapolis*) and Paul didn't. Contrary to popular opinion: Paul's not territorial when it comes to establishing churches or who proclaims the true gospel. In fact, it's only when false¹⁰ teachers offer a false gospel as though it's the real one, or when self-identified prophets¹¹ offer their own personal revelations as not only from God but also necessary to know God better; that's when Paul steps in and says: *"You're wrong, and you need to repent and then start preaching God's truth."* But when faithful heralds of the one, true gospel proclaim it in the name of Christ and for His glory alone, Paul celebrates it and encourages believers to thank God for such teachers. For it is only in the true gospel that people can know God's salvation and from it have the faithful, hope-filled ability to stand firm when the unbelieving world seeks to shame and silence the gospel and its heralds.

3. PRAYER FOR GROWTH

Paul and Timothy then move into the second kind of prayer: that God would bless the saints in Colossae with continued growth. They have already proven themselves to be maturing in their faith in Christ and their love for others. (*And comparatively speaking, they're a fairly young church—maybe just a handful of years old, if that*). All of that is good. But as mentioned in the discipleship series—and especially seen elsewhere in Scripture: there is always room for growth in love, development of character, building up in truth, strengthening of faith, and expanding in service to others. In fact, those things are expectations for all churches in all places. For Christ did not call us to a life of solitude, dormancy, or being passive recipients. Instead, He called us to a life of faithful community (*both in the church and outside of it*), enthusiasm (*for the truth of the gospel and the life it declares*), and actively serving others (*in the name of Christ and entirely for His glory*).

And for this life to be faithfully, authentically, and consistently lived out by God's people, there must be a complete and unwavering reliance upon the only One who makes it possible and real. That necessity for that purpose is what forms the substance of Paul and Timothy's prayer for the Colossians' growth. Look with me at what they say, and we'll begin to close down with this: *"For this reason we also, from the day we heard about you, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding"* (1.9). Much of this echoes the earlier prayer of thanksgiving—e.g., constantly praying for them, and being grateful to God for their faithful acceptance of the

¹⁰ The slide here shows (in order): Rob Bell, Kenneth Copeland, Paul Crouch, Creflo Dollar, Jessie Duplantis, Steve Furtick, John Hagee, Kenneth Hagin, Benny Hinn, T.D. Jakes, Bill Johnson, Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen, Rod Parsley, Fredrick K.C. Price, Brandon Robertson, Robert Schuller, Robert Tilton, Paula White, and Andrew Wommack. We could easily add others—e.g., Brian Simmons,

¹¹ The slide here shows: *The Book of Mormon, The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, The Passion Translation, and Jesus Calling*. We could even add Neil Walsh's, *Conversations with God*, but he doesn't necessary present his work as equal with Scripture.

gospel and their new life in Christ. But here we find an additional focus to their prayers—one that ought to be a part of our ongoing prayers today.

And that added focus is: not remaining content with the early excitement of belief and new life, but being ready and open to receive God’s blessing that ensures continued growth in faith and life. The blessing of being filled with the knowledge of God’s will—a knowledge that is defined or characterized by “[spiritual wisdom and understanding](#).” And that does not mean believers will only be concerned about abstract, theological ideas that exist only in the mind or heart (*or both*), but have no real application to everyday life. Instead, and building on the similar theme near the end of **1 Cor 2**, the “[spiritual wisdom and understand](#)” refers to the kind of wisdom and ability to reason that comes from the Holy Spirit, who gives believers “[the mind of Christ](#)”—the mind that is able to know the will of God, especially as it relates to holiness of faith and new life. Thus, the truth of the gospel and the knowledge of God’s will that comes with it necessarily has an effect on or application to everyday life. A life that is defined by God’s will proves itself to be wholly other than life defined by worldly wisdom.

In fact, that’s where Paul and Timothy go next: “[so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please Him in all respects](#)” (1.10a). Notice the expectation that the new life lived is one that is worthy of the Lord and it desires to please Him in all things. That means: our new life in Christ can never be about what we think is worthy or about pursuing our desires because they please us. To say that it contradicts God’s revelation and His expectations for His people, and it upholds and celebrates a false gospel. God’s Scripture is clear: when we come to Christ, the old self—along with all of its passions—must be crucified, and life is no longer about how we want to live but how we submit to Christ’s way of living within and through us. Thus, we are not called to continue living in the sinful and God-rebelling life from which we needed to be rescued. Instead, we are called to continue the holy and God-honoring life that was provided for us by our Mighty Rescuer. An other-than life that is changed by God and leaves nothing “off limits” to His redeeming work within us.

And that brings us to what Paul and Timothy do next—where they list particular results that come from living a life worthy of God and one that desires to please Him alone. The results of: “[bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness, joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light](#)” (1.10b–12). Once again, we see the real-life applications of the knowledge of God’s will defining hearts and minds. And we see how the blessings themselves and their effects are dependent upon God and the work He does in and through His faithful people. And also notice how—implicit within this listing of blessed works and results—there is an understanding that this blessed life from God, when faithfully lived, will be a blessing to others. One that God will mightily fulfill not just in the places where His faithful people live and serve, but ultimately throughout the entire world.

[close]