

**Series:** The Letter to the Colossians

**Title:** Strong in Christ

**Text:** Colossians 1:3-5

**Date:** April 30, 2023

### Verse 3

Paul continued the greeting of his letter by saying, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you” (Colossians 1:3). Hellenistic letters often contained expressions of thanks toward readers.<sup>1</sup> Paul used such a cultural convention, but he flipped the direction of his thanksgiving. Instead of expressing gratitude toward his readers, he told of the way in which he gave thanks to God.<sup>2</sup>

In speaking of his gratitude, Paul spoke of “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” His language was meant to elevate the person of Jesus. Contrary to Gnostic pundits, Jesus was more than a mere spirit emanation from a higher source. Jesus was a co-equal with “God, the Father.” In addition, Jesus was “Lord” and “Christ.” The Greek word for “Lord” (kúrios) functioned as a synonym for the Old Testament “Yahweh.” Paul’s use of the term in relation to Jesus indicated that he viewed Jesus as being God. The title “Christ” was the Jewish term for the Messiah. It meant “Anointed One.” Coupled together, the labels “Lord” and “Christ,” revealed that Paul’s conception of Jesus was radically different than the Gnostic one. For the apostle, Jesus was the God-Man who came to Earth to provide deliverance from sin.

Because of Christ’s work, the apostle was prone to regular expressions of gratitude. In the original language of the New Testament, Paul’s language depicted habitual and repeated acts of thanksgiving.<sup>3</sup> In his letters, He regularly expressed his own commitment to gratitude (Romans 1:8 and 16:4; 1 Corinthians 1:4; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 1:16; Philippians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2 and 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:3 and 2:13; and Philemon 4). He also explicitly encouraged gratitude from his Christian readers. In his letter to the Philippians, he said, “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with *thanksgiving*, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). He encouraged the Ephesians to be ones known for “... giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). When writing to Timothy, He said, “First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone” (1 Timothy 2:1).

God’s people should be marked by gratitude. In the end, a practice of thanksgiving is beneficial to the human soul; however, it also gives great glory to God. From reading between the lines of Paul’s letter, it seems the people at Colossae were faltering in this area. On two other occasions, the apostle admonished them to be grateful (Colossians 1:12; 3:17). Perhaps the Gnostic heresy had made many lose

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 459.

<sup>2</sup> Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 459.

sight of the grandeur of Christ. The problem amongst the Colossians reveals that a clear conception of Christ is the wellspring from which godly gratitude flows. When one is gripped by Christ, the one who is the believer's life (Colossians 3:4), one will be more prone to thanksgiving.

Paul's gratitude was expressed through the vehicle of prayer. At the end of verse 3, he made mention of his intercession on behalf of the church — "when we pray for you." The Greek word for prayer (*proseúchomai*) was one that was used in the ancient world for "approaching a deity." In reading the New Testament, we discover several different words used in reference to prayer — "praise," "supplication," "requests," "petitions," "confession," and more. The word in our text is the most used word for prayer in the Bible. It speaks of generalized prayer. In the ancient world, most everyone worshipped some type of deity. It was common for one to fearfully approach his or her local gods for help.

The Gnostics had their own approach to prayer. They taught people to pray through angels (Colossians 2:18). Consequently, Paul used the greeting of his letter to model the right type of prayer for his readers. God's people pray to "God, the Father" (Matthew 6:9) through "our Lord Jesus Christ" (John 14:13). Because Jesus died for sin, separation from the Father has been erased (Matthew 27:46, 51). Through Jesus' resurrection, believer's have new life that enables them to interact with God (Romans 6:4). When Jesus ascended (Acts 1:9), He poured out the Holy Spirit who yearns within us, assisting us in prayer (Acts 2:33; Romans 8:26). Now, Jesus is at the right hand of God, interceding on our behalf (Hebrews 1:3). Christians have a special privilege in prayer because of the person and work of Christ. In sending greetings to his readers, Paul provided a reminder of such things. The Colossians need to reject Gnostic conception of prayer.

#### **Verse 4**

In Colossians 1:4, Paul said, "... for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints." Through means unknown to us, Paul had received word of the Colossians "faith in Christ." Colossians 4:12 indicates that Epaphras was with Paul when the apostle composed his letter. Additionally, it indicates that Epaphras was "one of" the Colossians. Colossians 1:7 reveals that he was the pastor of the church at Colossae. Quite possibly, the man had visited Paul in prison at Rome. As he did, he updated Paul on the condition of all the churches in the Lycus Valley — the churches at Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae (Colossians 4:13).

Paul had never been to Colossae. He had only preached in neighboring areas. Consequently, his knowledge of the church was limited to what he heard from others. When Epaphras visited, he surely told Paul of the way the insidious doctrine of the Gnostics was making inroads into the church. However, he also told of the Christian virtue that was present amongst God's children. In particular, he mentioned three virtues — "faith" (1:4), "love" (1:5), and "hope" (1:5-6). Together, the three are held up by Paul as the triumvirate of Christian virtues in 1 Corinthians 13:13 — "Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love."

In verse 4, Paul made mention of the Colossians' faith. Though Gnostic teaching was sowing seeds of confusion, many had a strong faith in Christ. The Greek word for "faith" (*pístis*) is one that referred to a confidence, trust, or reliance in a

person, place, or thing. Contrary to the opinion of some, Christian faith is more than a mere belief in God or Jesus. Even demons believe in the Lord (James 2:19)!

Certain members at Colossae knew what was involved in real faith. According to Paul, such individuals had trust in a definite source or object. He spoke of their “faith *in Christ Jesus*.” The faithful at Colossae lived with a trust in the Son of God. Unlike the Gnostics, they didn’t rely on legalistic teachings, mystical experiences, or supposed secret knowledge. The source of security for their souls was the person and work of Christ. With Paul, they could testify, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Believers in all generations should seek to live lives marked by an ongoing trust in Christ. Yes, salvation involves faith (Ephesians 2:8), but the entire experience of the Christian life is to be built on faith as well. It is for this reason that the most repeated verse in all of Scripture says, “The righteous will live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). All believers could benefit from adopting the perspective of an importunate father who is mentioned in Mark’s gospel. When the Lord asked the father if he had faith that his son could be healed, the man replied, “I do believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Paul also remarked on the “love” of some at Colossae. Though the apostle listed the virtue third in his triumvirate of Christian virtue in 1 Corinthians 13:13, he listed it second in his letter to the Colossians. Too much should not be made of the order of the three virtues in Colossians 1:4-5. However, we do know from our Lord that love is the chief of all virtue (Matthew 22:37-40). In all of God’s dealing with humanity (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), love for God is of foremost concern. Jesus revealed that love is the means of fulfilling God’s Law (Matthew 22:40). When we deny ourselves (Mark 8:34) and set our hearts on loving God and loving others through the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), God’s Spirit will do a work in our lives to empower us to fulfill all God’s Law requires (Galatians 5:22-23; Romans 13:9-10; Galatians 5:14).

It is important to note that Paul’s words in Colossians 1:4 were specifically in reference to love “for all the saints.” The apostle’s focus was on the second half of the Great Commandment — love for one’s neighbor (Matthew 22:39). Though loving God is of first importance (Matthew 22:38), Paul had heard that there was a special presence of brotherly love amongst the Colossians. Such love surely led them to fulfill God’s Law toward one another. The sins found in the second half of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:12-17) were likely little heard of amongst such loving brothers and sisters. Christian love led them to fulfill God’s Moral Law, just as Jesus had said (Matthew 22:40). Though the Gnostics were a discouragement for many, faithful brothers and sisters stood strong in their commitment to Jesus’ Great Commandment.

## **Verse 5**

Paul’s commendation of Christian virtue continued in verse 5 with him giving attention to the third virtue in Paul’s triumvirate — “...because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. You have already heard about this hope in the word of truth, the gospel” (Colossians 1:5). The word “because” at the beginning of verse 5 linked the virtue of hope with the virtue of love. The Colossians’ love for others was rooted and grounded in the hope they had in Christ. Because they were confident in the promises of God,

their souls were free to love others. They didn't have undue expectations of others because all of their expectations were focused on Christ.

In modern society, some don't see the virtue of hope as having the luster it enjoyed in first-century society. For most modern people, hope is often regarded as a desire marked by a degree of doubt (e.g. "I hope it doesn't rain," "I hope she isn't mad at me," etc...). In first-century Hellenistic society, the Greek word for "hope" (*elpís*) carried a much stronger meaning. It spoke of confident expectation. More specifically, it spoke of "expectation of a divinely provided future."<sup>4</sup> Though the seeds of Gnostic teaching were yielding a crop of uncertainty for some, the faithful at Colossae were standing strong. They were marked by hope.

It is important to point out that the Colossians' hope had a firm basis. They had hope "in heaven" because of what they had "heard" "in the word of truth, the gospel." Paul's language in verse 5 was pregnant with meaning. Through numerous terms and intentional verbiage, he held up the message of Christ as being the source of the Colossians' spiritual security.

The words "you have already heard" were written in the aorist tense of the Koine Greek language. Paul intended to evoke memories of the specific moment in which the Colossians heard the gospel and received it as the Word of God. His intent was to portray the teaching of the Gnostics as a Johnny-come-lately false doctrine. The gospel had preceded the teaching of the false teachers. The good news of Jesus, was the basis of soul-saving hope, not the new-fangled claims of the heretics.

Along with his strong verbiage, Paul emphasized the primacy of the gospel by calling it "the word of truth." The Greek word for "truth" was *alétheia*. It spoke of reality. One could render the word as meaning "the real state of affairs." At Jesus' trial, Pilate cynically asked, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). In the gospel, one finds total truth for all of life. The gospel reveals the purpose of human life, what's gone wrong with the world, how one can be made right with God, and what will happen at the end of time.

The faithful at Colossae had hope because of the truth of the gospel. They had confidence concerning the future because of their knowledge of Jesus. The teaching of the Gnostics had no ability to provide hope. Instead of entertaining the claims of such heretics, the faithful needed to stay strong and cling to Christ.

Like the Colossians, we can have hope in a world of error. We have truth in Christ. He is the truth (John 14:6)! By His Spirit, He leads us to truth (John 16:13). His truth makes us strong in Him (John 17:17).

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<sup>4</sup> Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 145.