

Gratitude, Gospel And Grace

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Date: 15 March 2020

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[0 : 0 0] If you could turn again with me then to Paul's letter to the Colossians chapter 1, and we're going to explore verses 3 to 8.

And we're going to draw three themes out of those verses that we're going to explore. And the three themes that I would like to draw out from these introductory comments in verses 3 to 8 of Paul's letter to the Colossians are firstly, gratitude or thanksgiving, secondly, gospel, and thirdly, grace.

Now, we began our studies in Colossians last Sunday, and we were looking at Paul's first comments and noting that he used the conventions of his day to a great extent in his letter writing, so that it wasn't terribly different from any conventional non-religious letter that was written in Paul's day.

He states who he is, and he states who he's sending the letter to, to the saints, and he includes a greeting.

We might even send, well, maybe most of us don't send any letters now. I have a friend in Spain, and he was very good at one time at sending me handwritten letters, and there was something special, I think, about them.

[1 : 5 2] We tend to send emails now, don't we, or messages on our phone, and phone messages, depending who it is, can have its own notation and language.

Anyway, so Paul was using the conventions of his day in writing his letters, and he's still doing that with these opening introductory comments, because if you looked at the letters of Paul's day, you would also see maybe a note of thanks for either a letter that the person had received, or for something other than that.

So Paul is still using the same sort of convention, but as we noted last week, he brings his Christianity and his faith and his work as an apostle into these aspects of his letter.

Somebody actually has wondered if the structure of Paul's letters as a whole are deliberately structured for worship, because they note that in all of Paul's letters, it's really the same structure, and it's true, it is.

You've got these introductory comments, and you've got then the doctrine, or the teaching, then you've got the application, and then you've got the doxology, or the benediction.

[3 : 4 3] And these aspects are indeed in, if we look carefully enough, in all of Paul's letters.

So as I say, I'd like to explore these three areas of Paul. You know, he begins with these introductory comments after he has introduced himself with these wonderful words.

We always thank God. These are wonderful words. We always thank God.

Now, thanksgiving or gratitude is something that is very important in the scripture. You remember, of course, the ten lepers that were cleansed, and only one returned, and Jesus said, has only one returned to give thanks.

I was talking to the children, you'll remember, this morning, and I was asking them, can they remember a time when they gave thanks this week?

[5 : 03] And I'm sure there would have been times when they gave thanks this week, but none of them seem to recall it. But, you know, I asked the same question to myself, and I'm going to ask you this question tonight as well.

This week, have you given thanks to God? Because Paul says we always thank God.

There was a thank offering in the Old Testament, and that thank offering, interestingly enough, was voluntary.

And of course, if thanks is squeezed and forced out of you, it's not really worth very much. But if you're saying thanks in deep sincerity, that's a good thing, isn't it not?

Because people feel appreciated. And I feel, I'm sure, but I do try to remember to say thanks.

[6 : 19] To say thanks to my wife, to say thanks to my children, to say thanks to my grandchildren, to say thanks to people that I meet.

I remember, I'm sure I read this somewhere, a GP was suggesting to people that are perhaps a little downcast, not with any severe depression or anything like that, but feeling a little down.

Perhaps if you count your blessings, you might find that that might just help just a little as you refresh your memory about causes that you have for giving thanks.

The Psalms are littered with thanksgiving. I mentioned to you about the different genre of the Psalms, and one of the big ones is thanksgiving Psalms.

The Eucharist, which is variously known as the Communion or the Lord's Supper, that Eucharist means thanks.

[7 : 39] And when we come to a Communion, basically to a Eucharist, we are coming, hopefully, to say thanks.

In Hebrews, the writer towards the end of Hebrews says, those of us that are receiving a Kingdom that cannot be moved, let us be thankful.

Let us have gratitude. When I was a minister in Lockinver, North West, Sutherland, we had a lady that was, when I first went there, which is in 1995, yeah, 1995.

And she was certainly over her 70s, even then. And she lived. You come out of the village of Lockinver, went along a single track road for about four or five miles, and you turned left into another single track road called Achmelvik.

And there was Achmelvik Beach there. And as you turned into that other road, then there was another single track road that you turned left into. And when you turned left into that third single track road, the road came to an end.

[9 : 11] At the end of that road was a food path, which was half a mile up to Elmer's house. Elmer never missed a meeting.

I would go for her every week and collect Elmer and return her to that path to food path where she would walk up to her house.

Winter torch, little, I don't know what you call it, locker at the bottom of the food path where she had different things in, like different footwear and so on.

Where am I going with this? Anytime you said to Elmer, Elmer, how are you? She would answer in one word. Thankful.

Now, in this letter, what does Paul give thanks for? Or rather, if I can ask this question, first of all, to whom is his thanks addressed and directed?

[10 : 25] Even before we ask what it is that he gives thanks for? Well, your answer is there, isn't it? I've already repeated it. We always thank God.

Now, if you're a Christian this evening, if Jesus Christ is your saviour, if your sins are forgiven, if the hope of the Gospel is something that you have, have you not got cause, like Paul, to give thanks to God?

Every single day. But what does he give thanks for? Well, there it is there in verse 3. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints. Notice he brings those two things together. They're not really separate in his mind.

They're together. They're two parts, one might say, of a single experience. Calvin once said that every person who has God for their Father has the church for their mother.

[12 : 00] And it is inconceivable that anyone who has authentic faith in Jesus Christ as their saviour could not feel, shall I put it this way, some love for their brothers and sisters in Christ.

And this is why Paul, what can I say, is so excited, is so thrilled. Although he did not found the church at Colossae, and although he's in prison right now, he's heard from the person that did help to found that church, Apathras.

And Apathras has told them about these people. Paul, brilliant news. They've come to faith in Jesus Christ.

The founder of the free church, Thomas Chambers, once says, who cares for the free church, as opposed to the good of the people of Scotland finding Jesus Christ as their saviour.

Notice, by the way, that phrase, love for all the saints. There are some saints, let's be honest, let's be frank, that we got on better with the others.

[13 : 46] Indeed, there are some saints that perhaps annoy us. There are some saints where the chemistry doesn't fit, it doesn't work.

Yes, that's absolutely true. And it's there as a reality, it's the real world. But the point is this, we have to love all the saints. And you know something, in loving them, we will pray for them, and in praying for them, we might even like them a bit more.

So Paul gives thanks for the faith that those people have in Jesus Christ. What a wonderful thing to give thanks for, isn't it?

Imagine we had caused to give thanks for people in Carlyway that have come to faith. And that started having a love for the people of God, expressed in joining with us in worship and fellowship.

But there's something else that Paul gives thanks here for. Notice that in verse 5. Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

[15 : 24] And notice that he goes on to develop his thoughts on this hope that is laid up for you in heaven. He says, of this, the word isn't there but I'm putting it there, of this hope you have heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel which has come to you as indeed in the whole world.

And in verse 23, Paul uses this phrase, the hope of the gospel that you heard which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.

And Paul also uses this phrase in verse 27 of this chapter. I'll just read from the beginning of the verse.

To then God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery which is in Christ, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Let me just read another comment from the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. And just to give you another flavour of Paul's idea about this great concept of hope.

[16 : 55] Paul says this in chapter 8 verse 24, for in this hope we were saved. Now hope says Paul that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees says Paul.

But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. You see there is a past and there is a present and there is a future dimension to the gospel.

And particularly the future dimension is the great hope of this gospel and the great hope of Jesus Christ and his return.

That is the burden I mentioned this in another sermon I think, didn't I? That was the atmosphere, the oxygen in which the early church existed, in which it ate and slept and worked.

But notice how Paul puts it back to those verses in 3-8 again. Notice how he puts it. I'll tell you why my heart is pumping with thanksgiving because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

[18 : 36] Wow. Now it's human to hope every single human being hopes. We hope that we won't get the coronavirus. We hope that we will be happy. We hope that we will find a relationship.

We hope that we will get this job or another. We hope that we will have enough food or we can get this holiday. We hope to go to university, it's in the DNA.

There's not a human being that doesn't hope and those of you that have heard me sharing with you how I used to work in the children's hospice for five years and in an adult hospice and in a children's hospital, you know that I've shared with you the astonishing hope that some of those people exhibited who didn't even have any faith.

No wonder Jesus once said to his disciples, what do you more than others, even sinners love sinners. But human hopes ain't guaranteed. Human hopes are not certain.

But what Paul is saying here is, here is a hope that is laid up, stored up, absolutely unassailable in heaven.

[20 : 14] Let me ask you, have you got that hope stored up there? Is it your hope? Is your name included in that hope that is laid up and stored in heaven?

Okay so Paul gives thanks always to God and he gives thanks for the faith of those people in Christ and of the love that they have for all the saints and for the great hope that is laid up for them in heaven.

But then Paul makes some very interesting, I hope you will agree with me, some comments on the gospel. What comes to your mind by the way when you think of this word and this concept, gospel?

What springs to your mind? Perhaps you would say good news and you would be spot on.

And because the word gospel really arose in the New Testament, it really arose out of heralds that would come to a town heralding good news.

[21 : 54] But that good news was probably something to do with a battle that had been won. Well you could say that the gospel is good news about a battle that has been won.

Perhaps you might think it means the gospel preaching about Jesus Christ, I tell you you would be spot on again.

And we will see that as we go through this second aspect of Mark's message tonight on gospel. But let's look at the kind of things that Paul brings into these introductory comments which are still under that kind of thanksgiving that he's been talking about in verse 3.

For instance in verse 5 of this hope you have heard before in the word of the truth. Is that not a good phrase folks?

In the word of the truth. Just another phrase for the gospel. We are living in a day and age we're told that it's becoming more difficult to distinguish the truth.

- [23 : 28] We're living in a day and age where it's almost as if sometimes truth doesn't matter but truth always matters and it always matters to people really.
- But there's so much fake news out there isn't there? And so much ways of communicating now via the internet and all the social media that it is indeed more complex.
- But here's what Paul is very thankful about. This word about Jesus Christ, about his death for you and me, about his resurrection, about his exultation and his second coming.
- Paul is saying I'll tell you one thing that makes me feel so thankful and excited. It is the truth.
- And then notice in connection with the gospel in verse 6 which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing as it also does among you since the day you heard it.
- [24 : 53] And I was talking about the gospel, you can see that yourself, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God.
- When I think of the gospel says Paul, I think of the word of truth. When I think of the gospel says Paul, I think of grace and boy you're right Paul.
- Because if we trace the strings and the origins of this proclamation of this herald, its origins are nothing to do with human genius.
- It's not a Mozart nor a Einstein but there to do with the grace of God. Okay Paul anything else? Yes, the power of the gospel. Where does that come out? It comes out in verse 6.
- This gospel notices language which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing.
- [26 : 13] There is something organically powerful about this gospel. It's not just a series of propositions, it's not just theoretical statements.
- This is why Paul said in Romans chapter 1, I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God and to salvation.
- Another thing he says about the gospel, instead of waiting for people to come in to hear it, it's to be taken to them.
- This is 6 and 7. Which has come to you, they didn't come to it, it went to them.
- As indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God and truth.
- [27 : 28] A path for us, a path for us took it to them. What is the great mission and responsibility of the people of God? It's to go, it's to tell.
- And then not only in Paul's head is gospel truth and grace and power and is it to be taken to people but there is something else that is really important here in verse 7.
- Just as you learned it from Apathras, our beloved fellow servant, wonderful words, he, Apathras, is a faithful minister of Christ.
- And if I can just read also in verses 28 and 29 of this same chapter, and this is what Paul says later on in the chapter, him, we proclaim.
- Warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all energy that he powerfully works within me.
- [29 : 22] I wonder if we've got too complicated in our proclamation. I wonder if there is not enough of the evangel in our proclamation.
- And Paul knows what he's doing as we know, he's not exactly daft. Some of the issues that Paul will address later in this letter are issues that potentially threaten to undermine Solar Christus by Christ alone.

Issues that threaten to undermine the all sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

Just one more thing about the Gospel and then I'll hurry on to the final one. Paul calls it the mystery. Look at this in verse 26.

The mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints. To them that is to God saints, to the people of God, God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

[31 : 11] I would love all of us to capture the length and breadth and depth and height of the Gospel and to recognize that it is that which was eternally purposed by God which he is unfolding throughout history.

Finally, grace.

We've seen Paul's thanksgiving and his attitude to that and what he give thanks for. We've seen some of the ideas that spring into his head as he thinks of the Gospel and then thirdly grace.

Because he had said, didn't he, at the end I think of verse 6 there, as it also does among you since the day you heard it, speaking of then hearing the Gospel in Colossae, and understood the grace of God in truth.

I want you to notice just a couple of things before I talk further on this aspect of grace. I want you to notice how he puts it, and understood the grace of God in truth.

[32 : 45] But that could be translated, understood the grace of God fully. And I also want you to notice that what he's been giving thanks for is not just their faith in Christ.

And remember I said the two things are together and should not be separated. They're a single experience. And the love that they have for all the saints.

Here is a virtue that they're expressing, that they're practicing. And I want you also to notice verse 9, because as we come down to verse 9, we actually are coming near to the heart beat where all of his introductory comments are zoning into.

What are they? Here they are then. And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will, and all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

So as or so that, you might walk or live in a manner worthy of the Lord. That's the burden of Paul in every single let Pauling letter.

[34 : 14] His great burden is that people might live in a manner that is worthy of their great saviour.

OK. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor in Germany, got involved in opposing the rise of Nazism and Hitler.

And he was part of a group that planned to kill Hitler. And it wasn't successful. And he was caught and he was executed in 1945.

One of his first books was The Cost of the Cypleship. And that book opens with the following words. I've not written them down, I've just got them in my head here because when I was at university I studied just a little of them.

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church of God. We are fighting today, says Bonhoeffer, for cheap grace.

[35 : 55] Paul tells us this in another place, that God has a danger talking about the people of God to good works.

We may not be saved by good works, but we are most certainly saved for good works.

And if any group of human beings should be at the forefront of those good works, surely it is the people of God.

Bonhoeffer on cheap grace. It's not only Bonhoeffer that's worried about cheap grace though. Let's have a look at a couple of comments from Paul, shall we?

Romans chapter 6. Now we reform people, we are absolute experts in Romans chapter 5. Justified freely by grace.

[37 : 17] Maybe we're not experts at chapter 6. But Paul says this in chapter 6 verse 1. What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? He adds by no means.

In other words, Paul is recognising there's a possibility of cheap grace.

In relations chapter 5.

In relations chapter 5 and verse 13. For you were called to freedom brothers, freedom from the guilt of sin, freedom from the penalty of sin, these things are wonderful and beautiful.

For you were called to freedom brothers, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.

[38 : 40] And then in 2 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 1.

We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. Our so thankful said Paul for a paphras.

Because he made you fully understand grace. Because you see, grace is not simply a legal fiction.

Because when a person is truly born again, they are born of the Spirit, they are instantly united to Christ. And of course, the ground of that is grace. But the evidence of that is in fruits that emerge from that union and that united to Christ.

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church of God.

[40 : 10] And of course, grace isn't really in a sense an end in itself.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, now I would remind you brothers of the Gospel I preached to you. Which you received, in which you stand and by which you are being saved.

If you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you have believed in vain.

And then again Paul in Romans chapter 12, he says this. And this is what I've been saying, this is his burden in every single letter.

Now of course, the letter to the Romans is a bit longer than some of his other letters. And because he never has been in Rome and also there are people perhaps questioning why he hadn't bothered to come to Rome.

[41 : 28] There are a lot of issues that he seeks to try and address during that letter. And then he addresses the spirit in chapter 8.

And then he addresses the Israel situation in chapters 9 to 11. Then when he gets to 12, he's given them, if you like, all the theology, all the history of salvation.

What the problem, the human problem was in how God addressed that problem in Christ. And then he says this in chapter 12. I appeal to you therefore, on the basis of chapters 1 to 11, by the mercies of God.

And that's how I sum up everything that I've been talking about. The mercies of God present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

Have we fully understood grace? As we finish, sorry for going on so long this evening. I didn't intend to. I'm sorry.

[42 : 51] I just want to ask these questions. Are we thankful to God if we got something to be thankful to him for? Do we have the apathist spirit?

Are we faithful ministers of Christ? Notice the way I've phrased that. Are we faithful ministers of Christ?

Do we have a full understanding of the purpose of the grace of God in our lives? And finally, have we got some grasp of the glory and the greatness of the gospel?

Christ in you, the hope of glory. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us for His glory and for our eternal good.

Amen.